

NEWS

Fort Pierce residents at Call to Action forum discuss best ways to address gun violence | Photo gall



Credit: Treasure Coast Newspapers

The Rev. William F. Richardson III, of Grace Baptist Church in Port St. Lucie, speaks to a panel of local community leaders during the Community Call to Action: Restoring the Village forum at Lincoln Park Academy on July 31, 2013. The meeting allowed members of the community to come together and discuss what could be done to curb the violence that has been happening in Fort Pierce and St. Lucie County.

By [Laurie K. Blandford](#) of TCPalm

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STAND YOUR GROUND LAW

During the community forum, Rep. Larry Lee Jr. pledged to repeal or modify the Stand Your Ground self-defense law during the next legislative session. "It has flaws," he said.

FORT PIERCE ? It takes a village to raise a child.

That saying took new meaning Wednesday night as it was repeated by several of the about 800 people who attended the Community Call to Action forum at the Lincoln Park Academy auditorium and realized it would take everyone to address area crime.

State Rep. Larry Lee Jr. organized gathering in response to recent shootings and killings in the city. This year alone, 35 people have been shot in the city, resulting in five deaths.

"I believe that we could stop this," Lee said. "It's up to you all to keep this (effort) going.

Most of the recent shootings have been in Fort Pierce Commissioner Reggie Sessions's district. He set the tone for the discussion by saying everyone knows the problems, but now it's time to come up with solutions.

"It's hit our streets in a rapid epidemic," Sessions said. "We are trying to take back our streets."

Lee, who grew up on Avenue O in the north side of the city, remembered when neighbors used to know everybody on their blocks. Now, he said they don't.

Many people from the panel and audience offered to knock on doors and talk to residents to get them more involved. Others suggested establishing crime watches, creating jobs, organizing youth activities ? even putting mobile police stations in the streets ? as possible solutions.

As a first step, Lee wanted community members to learn more about organizations involved with children and families so they would know where they could seek help and develop solutions to curbing area crime.

Each of the more than 20 forum panelists introduced themselves and described what they had to offer or were trying to do to help the community. These panelists included:

St. Lucie County Sheriff Ken Mascara: He said 99.9 percent of community members are good people and want a police presence in their communities, but .1 percent have intimidated the rest. He wants legislation protecting witnesses of acts of violence. Also, he believes there aren't enough activities, mentors and jobs for men ages 10 to 17. New drugs are more

powerful, especially on their young developing mind. He plans to assign a handful of inmates every week to clean up the streets because trash attracts trash.

Fort Pierce Police Chief Sean Baldwin: He said it's difficult to celebrate a drop by 70 percent in violence crime since 1997 with this year's shootings. He challenged people not to be afraid and to get rid of the 'stop-snitching' mentality. He wants the trash in the city to be picked up because crime and blight are related. He also wants an end to generational poverty because it's warping community values. He plans to continue bike and foot patrols through the streets every day. He is creating a new task force with the FBI to combat the crime. He has dedicated an analyst to gang and shooting problems. He assigned an officer to public nuisance issues. He plans to deliver letters to parents of gang members to let them know what their kids are doing.

Ed Massey, president of Indian River State College: He stressed the importance of education, training and jobs. At the college, people can get their GEDs, take adult education, apply for financial aid and be eligible for a scholarship for being the first in the family to go to college.

Linda Cox, president of the St. Lucie County Chamber of Commerce: She said the business community is concerned about the crime. "People don't want to come and do business where we have a crime problem."

Sean Boyle, executive director of Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County: The organization's 54 community programs will reach 30,000 kids this year. It's the primary afterschool program for kids. "We need to utilize the existing resources that we have."

Nancy Brown, executive director of The Parent Academy: She said the organization supports parents and is building a parent lending library for those who said they don't have the tools. It also helps parents with their credit scores.

Donna Mills, St. Lucie County school board member: Her son was murdered and she is forming a women's group to talk to mothers whose sons have been murdered. She also is recruiting young black men to become mentors at Samuel S. Gaines Academy K-8.

Lee said he plans to compile all the information he received from the community into a plan for future forums.

"We need all of you," Lee said.

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