

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Youth Gangs in Western Massachusetts

Our local television news has been full of stories about them. Newspapers have run features on them. Even the New England Cable News network carried a story last weekend about youth gang activities in the Springfield area. And today I am bringing the story to the Longmeadow News, writing about the countermeasures we are taking to reverse the trend of increasing crime by gang members.

First, a little background about today's gangs. These organizations bear no resemblance to the neighborhood groups we might have known years ago. Four distinct Hispanic organizations are recruiting in the region. They are national in scope and often international in their reach. They first received publicity several years ago when a Springfield teen was gunned down in what was determined to be a contract killing ordered by the Latin Kings, carried out by Hartford members. That Hartford connection demonstrated a special vulnerability for our region. Hartford followed New Haven as a target for recruitment, and Springfield is the next urban center on Interstate 91.

Activity has increased since that first killing, with the press reporting drive-by shootings and occasional murders with veiled references to rival gangs. Then last month the violence suddenly escalated to a new level. Three young men were killed on the streets of Springfield within 6 days. All three shootings were gang-related.

A gang suppression unit has been working quietly but purposefully to combat gang activities, working so effectively that arrests have been made in all three killings. But the shootings were so brazen that they led to a parallel escalation in law enforcement response. Here are some of the measures being implemented to protect our region, our city and our neighborhoods.

FBI personnel are working with local police officials to combat the interstate activity of the various gangs. Local officials can learn from the experience of federal investigators and build on that experience. Other cities in Massachusetts are also sharing their strategies in fending off the recruitment methods and criminal activities of gangs.

Organized gangs do not confine their activity to city limits, so police forces in the cities of Chicopee, Holyoke, West Springfield and Springfield will continue the operation of their inter-departmental gang task force. Police presence on the streets will be increased as both a deterrent and a response to gang activity. State troopers have been introduced to augment that show of force, and prosecution staffing will be expanded.

Mayor Markel, District Attorney Bennett and Sheriff Ashe have met with me and other legislators to ask for help in funding an adequate response to the immediate threat posed by organized gangs. All area representatives and senators are working to provide the monetary relief that can allow them to assign additional personnel to the task. We all share the knowledge that our city requires an extraordinary effort to protect it from the threat of gangs and the belief that it is worth that effort.