

Watkins Mill suspension program gets funding from County Council

■ Council allots another \$100,000 to be spread out among county's six other SHARP sites

BY SEBASTIAN MONTES
STAFF WRITER

The County Council has allocated \$55,000 in its version of this year's budget to establish a new site for the SHARP program for students suspended from Watkins Mill High School and boosted the program's existing total yearly budget by \$100,540.

SHARP, an acronym for "student help and academic resource program," was started in Sandy Spring in 1999.

Students suspended from school can choose to enroll in the program, which gives them a structured setting to keep up with schoolwork and get counseling and guidance from volunteer mentors.

Five other SHARP sites have since sprung up, run out of local churches, each site serving several schools.

The county currently funds SHARP's \$298,000 yearly budget. Kate Garvey, chief of children's youth and family services for the county's Department of Health and Human Services, said the additional \$100,000 will be used to increase the number of staff hours to 37.5 per week and create one "backup" position to cover shifts at any SHARP site.

Until the final plans are set, however, Garvey would not comment on whether Watkins Mill's SHARP program will be up and running in time for next school year.

"It is possible, but there is no time frame for when to get this started," she said.

But if it does come together in time, Watkins Mill principal Peter Cahall plans to offer the program to the parents of every child suspended next year from the 2,048-student school.

"I'm ecstatic to be getting the program," he said. "It provides that structure and supervision for kids that would normally be sitting at home, asleep, watching TV. This way, they can actually get their work done... I think it's going to pay major dividends."

In addition to a few highly publicized fights, Watkins Mill had a surge in suspensions, the numbers have settled down as the year has drawn on, having only 20 more suspensions through April this year as compared to the same period last year — 226 vs. 206.

"If I can get parents to buy into the program, which I think I can... I'm hoping that we can stop the bleeding."

The Watkins Mill SHARP program, which has so far been slotted for Christ the Servant Lutheran Church in Montgomery Village, was proposed by County Councilman Michael I. Knapp to serve only Watkins Mill High School.

Knapp, (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown, worked closely with the Montgomery Village Foundation last year to host a forum on gang awareness, and backed the foundation in its effort to establish a SHARP site in the Village. He sees the SHARP program as part of a larger strategy to address mounting concerns over gang activity.

"The kids who use this program are already the ones that are one the edge. We all talk a lot about gang prevention and gang awareness. This is really a way to make sure we have these resources in the community, to have them first-hand, so that these kids don't fall through the cracks."

STAY SHARP

The county runs six SHARP programs. Here is a look at their activity in 2005

Gaithersburg

■ Schools: Gaithersburg High School; Forest Oak and Gaithersburg middle schools

■ Students served: 137

Germantown

■ Schools: Northwest, Quince Orchard, Seneca Valley and Watkins Mill high schools

■ Students served: 86

Bethesda

■ Schools: Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Walter Johnson and Walt Whitman high schools; Westland, Pyle, North Bethesda, Cabin John and Tilden middle schools

■ Students served: 136

Burtonsville

■ Schools: Paint Branch and Springbrook high schools; Benjamin Banneker and Briggs Chaney middle schools

■ Students served: 144

Silver Spring

■ Schools: Montgomery Blair and JFK high schools; Francis Scott Key, Colonel E. Brook Lee, Newport, Takoma Park, White Oak, Sligo and Silver Spring inter-annual middle schools

■ Students served: 266

Sandy Spring

■ Schools: Sherwood, Blake and Magruder high schools; Farquhar, Redland and Rosa Parks middle schools

■ Students served: 86