

County seeks funding for gang suppression initiatives

■ Money would support upcounty youth center and create a second police gang unit

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Montgomery County officials are seeking federal money for an upcounty center that would provide teens with after-school activities and keep them away from gangs, following the model of a successful project in the downcounty.

The county's fiscal 2009 federal request package asks for \$690,000 in funding.

The youth center is the prevention and outreach prong of the county's two-pronged approach to combating gangs. Also included in the federal request is \$2 million to launch a second "gang suppression unit" in the police department, consisting of three years' salary and benefits for four gang investigators and a supervisor, according to the request. The \$2 million also includes \$450,000 in overtime pay.

The center would have mental health counseling, post-incarceration support, job training and placement, legal assistance, tattoo removal services and educational programs, along the lines of what is offered at the downcounty version, which the county established in 2006, according to the request.

Serving 300 youths in the Takoma Park/Langley Park area, the downcounty center boasts of positive responses for issues like self-confidence, communicating with others, anger management, drug use and arrests, according to data in the request.

"With the youth we're working with, we're seeing positive outcomes," said Kate Garvey, spokeswoman for the county's Department of Health and Human Services. "It's been an effective approach, of course, when done in concert with suppression activities."

The center would be a key step toward improving the county's "amazingly disjointed" approach to youth resources, said County Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

"We don't have a strategy, we don't know how many kids we're reaching ... we don't know how many slots we have out there," he said. "Every time we ask for that, we hear, 'Well, that's a hard number to get.' Well, then how do we know that we're doing? How do we know if it's working?"

It may take investment on the front end, but it will pay off over the next 30 years, Knapp said, with those youths being more likely to go to college.

"There's tremendous opportunity," he said. "We have to get them actively engaged, show them positive things ... rather

than hoping that they stumble into the right program, or right friend, or right mentor."

County officials do not yet know where the upcounty center will be located, but it will be in Gaithersburg or Germantown, Garvey said.

County officials have also begun discussion with the City of Gaithersburg about a possible partnership with a youth center coming to Olde Towne, she said.

The requests are part of \$140 million the county called for in

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fiscal 2009, which begins Oct. 1 for the federal government. Of that request, \$190 million is for consolidation of the Food and

Drug Administration in eastern Montgomery and \$16 million is for Base Realignment and Closure infrastructure needs.

"We do aggressively pursue federal earmarks. We're different than other counties in Maryland in that regard," said Melanie Wenger of the county's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs.

If the federal funding does not come through, the plan is to look for a partnership with private entities.

"We're going to keep looking for private dollars. But in this budget situation, we don't anticipate being funded by the county," Garvey said.