

Youth media campaign targets city violence

Effort to focus on their peers

By James Vaznis
GLOBE STAFF

City youths armed with digital cameras and audio recorders will capture images and words and use them to try to persuade their peers to shun violence, under a new city program announced yesterday.

The youths will work on developing this new media campaign this fall and winter with city workers and members of **SEIU** Local 1199 United Healthcare Workers East, many of whom work at Boston Medical Center, treating victims of violence.

"Young people know how to speak to young people," Veronica Turner, vice president of Local 1199, said at a media conference yesterday at a public health fair at Franklin Park in Dorchester.

The young people will work out of community centers and the union's Dorchester headquarters, creating artwork, music, T-shirts, rap, and poetry to spread messages of peace and the dangers of resorting to knives, guns and other weapons to resolve conflicts.

Boston public health officials are recruiting dozens of young people ages 9 to 18 through community centers and other local programs to participate, focusing much effort on youths who live in neighborhoods hit hard by violence: Grove Hall and Orchard Gardens, along with the areas

around Bowdoin Street, Geneva Avenue, and Mildred Avenue.

City public health officials expect the resulting media campaign to run in newspapers and on television, radio, and social networking Internet sites, such as MySpace next spring or summer.

Some of the work on the media campaign began this summer in a pilot program, involving about 40 youths at the Cleveland Community Center in Dorchester.

With help from the local group For Peace, the youngsters have been creating a T-shirt bearing antigun violence message. Others, like 17-year-old Jamal and 19-year-old Jermaine Hamilton, put messages to rap music. They performed yesterday at Franklin Park, telling listeners to "stop the killing of the youth as our generation's test."

"Kids are taking each other's lives over street signs," said Jermaine Hamilton as he reflected on neighborhood turf wars. "Kids need to find another way of expressing themselves."

Said Jamal Hamilton: "Violence puts a damper on bigger plans in life."

The union is providing the city with \$200,000 to help develop the media campaign.

"We are going to tackle violence for what it is — a public health issue," Turner said.

The media campaign is the latest endeavor by the city's Violence Intervention Prevention Initiative, which the mayor and the Boston Public Health Commission launched last November.

Since then, the city has expanded recreational and educational opportunities for children and their families, developed neighborhood peace councils in communities hit hard by violence, and undertaken two extensive door-knocking efforts to survey residents and help connect them to city programs and services.

While the city appears to be making some progress in curbing violence, officials remain concerned. From Jan. 1 to Aug 10, the 38 homicides and 171 shootings represented eight fewer than each of those numbers at that same time last year, according to the most recent comparison data available from Boston police.

At yesterday's event, young children crowded on a small stage while holding hand-written signs that read "Love Peace" and "Stop violence."

"Young people are smart, talented, and have great potential," said Mayor Thomas M. Menino, as he surveyed the young people around him. "We need you to work with us to have safe events like this."

