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Local leaders join forces with Liberty City community to thwart crime

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PARTNERS: Liberty City youth join forces with police and county leaders at Gwen Cherry Park to help prevent neighborhood crime.

More than 100 neighborhood kids in Liberty City poured into the gym at Gwen Cherry Park on Monday night to mingle with police officers who want them to be their eyes and ears on the street.

"The Youth Crime Watch has put this program together to stop the violence," Miami-Dade Police Director J.D. Patterson said as dozens of officers watched. "Each and every one of you — the children, parents, teachers and students — are important to our success."

Patterson summed up the key to fighting local crime with one word: partners.

The police got backup from local officials in hosting the "Stop the Violence" event, which included Mayor Carlos Gimenez, and Commissioners Audrey Edmonson and Jean Monestime.

"Mostly, we have to protect our children," said Gimenez, as nearly a dozen were seated near the podium to hear his message up close. "The young people sitting right in front of me represent our future."

Gimenez then implored the kids to get to know local police officers.

As part of the event's program, city, county and school police officers barbecued and served hundreds of hot dogs to the kids. To make sure they were all on the same channel, a DJ was brought in to get people moving. And move they did.

"I did the Harlem shake with the police, and she was my friend," said Shenika Thomas, 7, who joined in on a flash-mob simulation on the gym floor.

Officers shook toe-to-toe with wide-eyed grade-school kids in a friendly Harlem shake challenge, as their walkie-talkies and heavy belts dangled.

"Now that is cultural competence," said Renita Holmes, a Liberty City activist who applauds local officers for dancing and mixing it up with local kids. "That is how you do it."

Holmes recalled how a similar city-sponsored crime forum at Charles Hadley Park, in 2010, fizzled. The curfews, she added, were punitive.

Though crime has spiked in the area, Holmes said, this is the best move yet by leaders and police to deescalate tension.

“The trend is toward more collaboration,” said a county spokesperson.

City, county and other officials plan to work in harmony toward preventing crime.

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