



# WHAT'S WORKING

A Message From DJJ Director Andy Block

Oct. 18, 2016

## NoVa Has GRIT To Divert Youth From Gangs

### *Six Jurisdictions Share Resources To Keep Gang Influence At A Minimum*

As some communities across the Commonwealth grapple with spikes in gun violence and youth involvement in gangs, it seems timely to highlight the multi-jurisdictional work being done in Northern Virginia to prevent youth violence and gang activity.

Specifically, six jurisdictions in Northern Virginia succeed in keeping gang-related crime to a minimum, thanks largely to what has evolved into one of the Commonwealth's most effective partnerships: The Northern Virginia Gang Response Intervention Team (GRIT).

With the assistance of Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS) as a common thread, the gang prevention coordinators in the cities of Alexandria and Falls Church, and the counties of Loudoun, Fairfax, Prince William and Arlington formed GRIT 10 years ago in an attempt to stem what could have become a festering gang problem, but instead has yielded spectacular results that showcase what a powerful partnership can accomplish.

"GRIT is not a 'gang program,' as it were," says Fairfax County Gang Prevention Coordinator Ed Ryan, who chairs the quarterly GRIT meetings. "It's a process. We're not program managers, we just design solutions



*The Northern Virginia Gang Response Intervention Team (GRIT), from left: Kate Reen, Program Supervisor, Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS); Meredith McKeen, Director of The Multicultural Center and Youth Initiatives, NVFS; Joseph Regotti, Gang Prevention and Intervention Coordinator, City of Alexandria; Robert "Tito" Vilchez, Gang Task Force Coordinator, Arlington County and the City of Falls Church; John Hetey, GRIT Coordinator, Loudoun County; Richard Buchholz, GRIT Coordinator, Prince William County; Ed Ryan, Fairfax County Gang Prevention Coordinator and GRIT Task Force chair.*

Among all at-risk youth who participated in GRIT/NVFS initiatives:

- 73% improved school performance
- 83% improved pro-social activities
- 76% improved family involvement/communication
- 99% remained non-gang involved

Of all crimes committed in the six jurisdictions:

- 2% are gang-related



*City of Alexandria GRIT representatives have visited El Salvador twice in an effort to stop violence and gang involvement at its source.*

out of existing programs that address the specific needs of individual kids. Many local faith-based organizations, agencies, schools and private businesses help us. Working together with regional law enforcement agencies who are always vigilant about suppressing gang-related activity, the partnership has really made a difference.”

Pooling ideas and resources has resulted in an array of creative ideas that has led to GRIT’s most remarkable statistic: Of the hundreds of at-risk youth served since the partnership formed, 99 percent of them have remained uninvolved in gangs. The team also has noted significant improvement in academics, social functioning, and family engagement (see above).

Following is a sampling of some of the most effective programs offered, all of which are available to youth in

any of the six participating areas:

**Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force Soccer Tournament** – The Task Force hosted its 6th annual tournament this year with the theme “Goals Not Gangs.” While the theme is different every year, volunteers always speak to participants about identifying champions in the community, leadership development, making healthy choices and learning about the different resources available to them in the NoVa region. Arlington County started the tournament 11 years ago, and it expanded in 2011 to include the NoVa region. The event in its present form has served about 600 youth, including 100 in 2016.

**Exchange To El Salvador** – The City of Alexandria, along with the International City & County Management Association (ICMA), in conjunction with the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Municipal Association for Violence Prevention in Central America, have twice participated in a three-phase exchange program that focused on exposing and educating Salvadoran and other Central American delegates and jurisdictions to the collaborative efforts government agencies and community partners in Alexandria have developed to address violence and crime prevention.

This year, Alexandria Police Chief Eddie Reyes and Gang Prevention and Intervention Coordinator Joe Regotti visited three cities in the state of Cuscatlán. Mayors, government officials, police officers, school principals, community activists, religious leaders and youth leaders were active participants in presentations that addressed community policing, mentoring, after-school programs and communication. The recurring theme: The entire community must collaborate to better address gang problems. As a result, the cities now have “school resource officers” to help protect their schools. Two cities have



*The annual NoVa Regional Gang Task Force Soccer Tournament provides a constructive outlet for thousands of at-risk youth.*

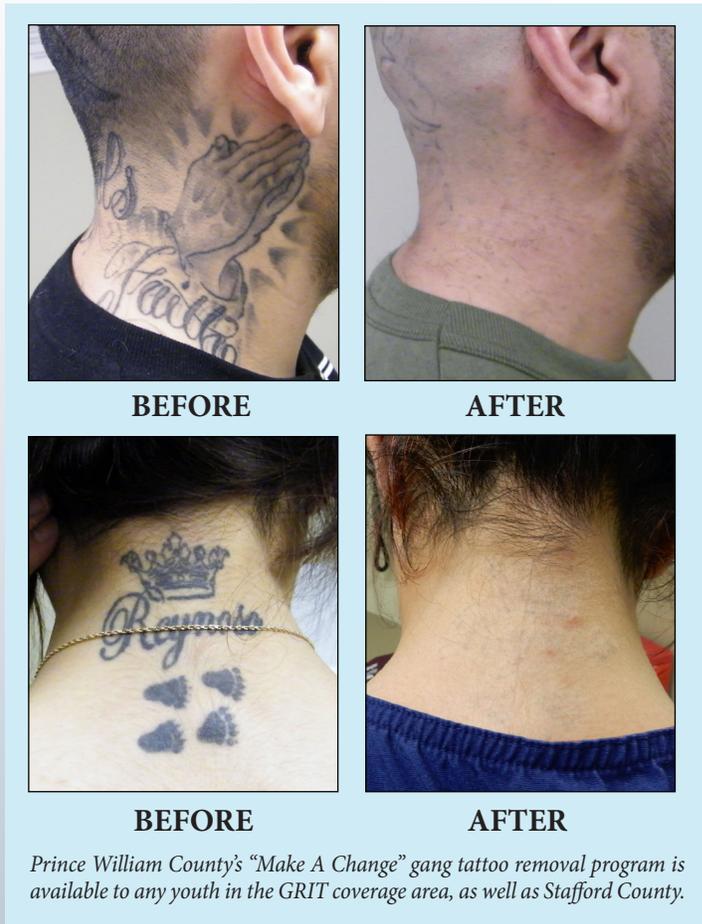
launched mentoring programs as a result of what they learned during their exchanges. Regotti notes that, while the exchange is an Alexandria-sponsored effort, the entire region benefits from the education eventual immigrants to NoVa receive.

**Padres en Accion (Parents In Action)** – This group, run in partnership with Alexandria City Public Schools’ Family and Community Engagement center, makes presentations on gangs, sex trafficking awareness, runaway prevention, parenting discipline strategies, bullying, internet safety, early pregnancy prevention and drugs, including the recent heroin epidemic and over-the-counter drug abuse.

**Families Reunited** – Initiated last year in Alexandria, this group is a short three-week psycho-educational support group grounded in restorative justice principles that served 10 families last year (parent and child) in which the child had recently immigrated from Central America to be reunited with parents after up to 14 years of separation. The group focuses on building communication, trust and parent/child relationship as well as accepting past life experiences and embracing the future. They teach families how to assimilate and how to use services available to them.

**Bilingual Home Visits** – This program, initiated in Arlington County, provides home visits in both English and Spanish for youth that are at risk for court involvement and currently on rules of probation/parole. The gang unit targets vulnerable youth that have been resistant to other programming and in the most need for prevention and intervention. They also educate families about the different resources, programs and services that are available in the county.

**“Don’t Lose Yourself In a Gang” Public Service Announcement** – The Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force created the campaign which includes a resource information phone number, (703) GET-HELP, and a website, [www.preventgangsnova.org](http://www.preventgangsnova.org). The posters,



Prince William County’s “Make A Change” gang tattoo removal program is available to any youth in the GRIT coverage area, as well as Stafford County.

flyers and brochures are in use throughout the NoVa region.

**Gang Reporting Policy** – Fairfax County established a formal gang reporting policy in 2010 that outlines how it decides whether a youth is “gang involved,” and how that is coded within the local Court Service Unit. The policy ensures that each youth has a formal GMS profile, and that the list is sent monthly to the local Fairfax Gang Unit. This helps regional law enforcement better know which court-involved youth are displaying signs of gang activity. This model has since been adopted by many other DJJ Court Service Units.

**Camp R.E.A.L.** – GRIT partners with the Loudoun



## Supporting NoVa Youth Since 1924

Since it was established in 1924, Northern Virginia Family Service has evolved into a recognized regional leader that responds to the critical needs of more than 32,000 individuals and families each year. It has partnered with GRIT since 2008. Its **Intervention, Prevention and Education (IPE)** gang prevention program features unique intervention and treatment methods staffed by experts with the skills required

for effective outcomes. Youth completing the program consistently demonstrate positive changes in thinking and behavior, and are prepared to resist the negative influence of gangs. NVFS reports that the IPE program has served more than 2,150 individuals (750 referred youth and 1,400 family members) in the NoVa region. “I learned that being in a gang isn’t worth my time when I could be studying and getting good grades,” said one participant.



Above: Assisting with Loudoun County's "Hook A Kid On Golf" program, from left: Diversion Officer Lance Kelley, Supervised Release Coordinator Darryl Whiten, Westpark Golf Club pro Adam Harold, Loudoun GRIT Coordinator John Hetey, Post Disposition Officer Garry Brown. Right: Whiten gives a youth instruction on how to properly position the club for a golf swing.



County Department of Mental Health Services which conducts this six-week summer camp that targets at-risk middle- and high-schoolers. Camp R.E.A.L. (Raising Education, Achievement and Leadership) emphasizes community service which gives youth a unique opportunity to give back to their community while attending daily structured, therapeutic activities. Participants experience an increase in positive social involvement, neighborhood and school attachment, association with a positive peer group, while avoiding substance abuse, gang involvement and delinquency-related activities.

**"Hook A Kid On Golf" Program** – Made possible through a partnership with Loudoun County and the Westpark Golf Club, eligible youth are taught basic golfing techniques and course etiquette to emphasize sportsmanship, teamwork and social skills.

**Gang Warning Signs/Human Trafficking Warning Signs Trainings** – All jurisdictions regularly give hundreds of public presentations throughout the region about how parents and youth can identify gang activity and how to confidentially report it. Fairfax Public Schools has incorporated the training into its standard curriculum, making it the only public school system in the nation believed to have such an offering.

**"Make A Change" Gang Tattoo Removal**–Area doctors and nurses volunteer their time, using donated medical supplies and clinic space, to remove gang-related and human trafficking-related tattoos. In addition to serving the entire GRIT region, this Prince William County-sponsored program also is available to patients from Stafford County.

**Teen Summerquest** – GRIT collaborates with the CSU, Manassas police, Manassas Park Parks and Recreation Department and the local Boys and Girls Club to host Teen Summerquest, an eight-week program for at-risk kids that provides summer activities and to build life skills and resilience. Activities include a tour of James Madison University, the arts, career exploration, a Coast Guard visit, community service, and sports barbecues.

**Former Gang Members Speakers Pool** – GRIT facilitates a pool of former gang members or kids who had prior histories with the juvenile justice and adult systems who are available to address at-risk youth in various settings.

As DJJ strives to improve our work at every level during our transformation process, we must always keep in mind the importance of promoting public safety. As the data suggest, we can learn a great deal from the cross-jurisdictional approach GRIT takes to addressing youth violence through partnerships, prevention, education and intervention.



The Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force created the "Don't Lose Yourself in Gangs" public service announcements which now appear throughout Northern Virginia jurisdictions.