

Community Groups get funds to steer local kids from crime

San Fernando Valley coalition distributes \$50,000 in grant money

By Sue Doyle, Staff Writer

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Ten community groups snapped up \$5,000 each in grants Thursday from the San Fernando Valley Coalition on Gangs to help suppress the 80 gangs roaming the Valley and steer local kids in productive directions.

Distributing the \$50,000 the coalition raised during a Children's Day fundraiser in November, members said these local groups help save kids' lives through after-school homework programs, sports and empowerment classes.

"The goal is the day that we don't have innocents killed by the hands of guns and gangs," Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa said during the presentation at Church on the Way in Van Nuys.

The presentation was made before coalition members including law enforcement, probation officers, faith-based and education groups along with local nonprofits.

Officials credited the collaboration of these groups for a steep drop in gang-related violence over the years.

Last year, the region had 10 gang-related homicides — a 68 percent decline from 2002, when the coalition was formed.

"We still have more work ahead of us," said Deputy Chief Michel Moore, head of the Los Angeles Police Department's Valley operations.

Among the grant recipients was Lanark Recreation Center, which helps about 75 kids each week with preschool, homework, sports and a teen club.

Recreation coordinator Elisa White said some children who attend programs at the Lanark Center are from families with ties to the Mexican Mafia and

other deadly gangs and want to change the course of their future.

Another grant recipient was Forward Step: The Learning Coalition, which teaches teens to handle stress and conflict without resorting to drugs or alcohol.

The organization works with the Los Angeles Unified School District, prisons, recovery facilities and with people entering the work force.

"You're putting up a mirror to people to get them to look at themselves and giving them skills to deal with life better," said Bibi Caspari, the group's executive director.

Money raised for the community grants came from donations made at the Children's Day event, which debuted in November 2008 with a day of carnival rides, a petting zoo, exhibits and entertainment.



Mayor Villaraigosa with local Councilmembers and representatives of the ten non-profits organizations receiving award. [photo: La Opinión]

The San Fernando Valley Coalition on Gangs has planned a second Children's Day for Nov. 21 at Woodley Park.

Other groups that received grant money Thursday include: Ark Family Foundation, Casa Esperanza, Communities in Schools, El Centro de Amistad, Grant/Van Nuys Community Based School Safety Collaborative, Mid-Valley YMCA, Sylmar Recreation Center and Youth Speak Collective.

Youth Speak Collective (YSC), a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization, is a youth-driven initiative empowering low-income communities in the Northeast San Fernando Valley with the skills necessary to pursue higher education and create strong communities. www.youthspeakcollective.org