

Monterey County
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East Salinas program touts youth safety

Residents hear results of state initiative

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 Alisal community members have been meeting since March to identify priorities to target with a multimillion-dollar initiative, and by Wednesday the issue at the top of the list was the lack of safety in East Salinas.

"This program could benefit us," said José Hernandez, an Alisal resident and father of four children. "Not with more law enforcement, but with (programs) like how to educate our children, how to give them tools."

More than 150 community leaders, residents and directors of nonprofit groups gathered at the Martin Luther King Jr. Academy on Wednesday to hear preliminary results for Building Healthy Communities, a 10-year, multimillion initiative sponsored by the California Endowment aimed at fostering a safe environment for youths.

The Alisal neighborhood is one of 14 communities across the state selected by the endowment to benefit from money for new programs. The amount of money the endowment would give is not set, but is expected to be millions of dollars.

That violence in East Salinas topped the list "didn't surprise me," said Pastor Frank Gomez, a member of the group's steering committee. "Even in the little group I was, it didn't surprise anyone. We had 29

homicides last year."

Respondents also said they wanted children to have health coverage, to have human services with a focus on prevention, and to have communities that support healthy youth development.

For Gomez, this means giving young Alisal residents the tools to finish high school and become productive members of society.

"It's creating opportunities for them, recognizing their leadership abilities and creating a healthy environment for them," Gomez said.

In the current economic climate, when Salinas city officials are contemplating budget cuts that could affect after-school programs and youth services, the promise from the California Endowment is a hopeful sign.

"Hopefully, the collaboration leads to long-term changes and stability," said Councilman Sergio Sanchez, who represents the Alisal. "It doesn't help for people to come in if the changes are not permanent."

The next step is a community retreat Feb. 6 to fine tune an action plan, which is due at the California Endowment by March.

"We still have a lot of work to do," Ruth Rodriguez, a member of the local steering committee for the initiative and community service coordinator with the nonprofit Community Housing Improvement Systems and Planning Association, told the participants at the end of the meeting.

"We need everyone here to help us, to become involved. Come to the meeting so together we can

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