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Workshop takes aim at reducing crime

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By Tony Judnich

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VIERA - More state and federal money to help fight crime, more support of mentoring programs for children and higher conviction rates of suspects charged with felony crimes.

These were a few of the goals Brevard County Commissioners discussed during their Oct. 27 crime prevention workshop.

"We all know there's a crime problem, not only in our area but in the state and the nation," said District 1 Commissioner Robin Fisher, of Titusville, who chaired the workshop. "We have to come out of here today with solutions" to help make the community safer.

The workshop included remarks from officials of several local police departments and the county Sheriff's Office, residents who lost loved ones to violent crime, court officials, victim advocates and others.

Some of the law enforcement officials talked about how a small number of criminals commit the majority of crime - particularly violent crime - in the county. Officials presented examples of arrest records of the top offenders in their respective jurisdictions.

For example, Palm Bay Police Chief Bill Berger gave information on the late 23-year-old Steven Terry, who was involved in 15 criminal cases and arrested nine times before he was murdered in Melbourne last July after being released from jail.

Before his death, Mr. Terry was involved in numerous shootings, allegedly received a number of assault rifles and reportedly aimed rifles at on-duty officers, Chief Berger said.

He also gave details on other residents who have long criminal records: 26-year-old Kenney Gordon, who has been involved in 23 cases, arrested 18 times and is in the county jail; 21-year-old Steven Jackson, who has been involved in 23 cases, arrested 11 times and also is in jail; and a 17-year-old juvenile identified as "J.P.," who has been involved in 26 cases, arrested 15 times and is currently out of jail.

"Once a criminal turns 20, they're lost," Chief Berger said. "They'll continue being a criminal."

Commissioners also heard an in-depth report on 34-year-old Terence T. Oliver.

Last July, the Titusville Police Department charged Mr. Oliver with two counts of first-degree murder, as well as firearm violations. One of the victims in this case was his ex-girlfriend, Krystal Pinson.

When he was arrested on the murder charges, Mr. Oliver was serving probation for having choked Ms. Pinson last January.

Mr. Oliver's overall criminal record lists 32 felony charges with one felony conviction and 15 misdemeanor charges with 13 misdemeanor convictions, Titusville Police Department Assistant Chief John Lau said. He said Mr. Oliver is waiting to go to trial on the murder charges.

Ms. Pinson's father, Ken Pinson, said Mr. Oliver had been arrested 29 times before his arrest on the murder charges. Mr. Pinson questioned what conditions would allow someone with this type of criminal record to walk the streets.

"We must fix our society, because I don't see it getting any better," Mr. Pinson said.

County Sheriff's Office Lt. James Woolsey said violent offenders "should stay in jail, and not be allowed back out."

Budget cuts for many municipalities "are here to stay for the next few years," he said, "so we need to prioritize the violent offenders."

Assistant State Attorney Wayne Holmes said a common problem in trying to prosecute suspected violent criminals is the lack of support from witnesses.

"We have to gain the trust of the community," he said. "Many times, the witnesses do not want to cooperate" out of fear of retaliation.

Officials must prosecute and sentence to the fullest degree the small amount of criminals who commit the majority of crime, Sheriff Jack Parker said. He complained that many legislative efforts that reportedly aim to rehabilitate criminals and keep them out of jail really are methods of decreasing funding for correctional institutions.

And Chief Berger said there is a disconnect between legislators and local law enforcement officials.

For example, some state and federal lawmakers "think drug use is down, but (the fact is) pharmaceutical drug use is up," he said.

Protecting children

Many people at the workshop agreed that keeping children in school and providing them with mentors is vital in the battle against crime.

More parental supervision of children would help, said District 5 Commissioner Andy Anderson, of Palm Bay.

County public defender J.R. Russo said unfortunately, his office sees "entirely too many" people who have no high school education, "kids who had kids," single mothers and families with absent fathers.

But Sheriff Parker said he is amazed at the number of children who do not get in trouble, even though they might not have a father, come from troubled homes or face other difficulties.

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Officials must support churches, schools and mentoring programs that help keep children from turning to crime, he said.

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Also, "the kids have to know the cops aren't their enemies," said Larry Lawton, founder of the Reality Check Program that aims to keep children from making poor choices.