

Official from governor's office called gang problem in Oakland 'dire'

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OAKLAND -- It is agreed that if Oakland is to successfully combat its gang and violent crime problems, there must be a collaborative effort between law enforcement, schools, churches, community groups and others.

To that end, a two-day summit began Tuesday at the Oakland Zoo, where more than 60 people gathered to discuss ideas, strategies and successes and foster partnerships to try and make that goal a reality.

Those attending represented local, state and federal law enforcement, government officials, educators and school officials, clergy members, street outreach workers, and cultural and community organizations who participated in or listened to panel discussions about various issues involving gangs and violent crime.

The summit, called by Mayor Ron Dellums and Police Chief Anthony Batts, is modeled after successes in Salinas, where a collaborative effort similar to what Oakland wants to do saw gang-related killings fall from a total of 53 in 2008 and 2009 combined to four so far this year.

Oakland is thought to have more than 2,000 gang members. Gangs have been involved in killings and other acts of violence for years. Of the city's 110 homicides last year, 40 percent had some kind of gang connection, officials said. Even though the city's crime rate has been down the past two years, it is still considered one of the most crime-plagued communities in the state.

"The situation is dire," said Paul Seave, director of Gov.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's Gang and Youth Violence Policy before the panel discussions started. Media members are not being allowed to cover the actual presentations.

"We need to be comprehensive in what we do, and we need to be smart," he said. He said his hope is that the meeting "will serve as a mark in the life of the city."

Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O'Malley said "no one agency can do this alone. We have seen the success and power of collaboration. The common theme is that we all work together, show respect for each other and open communication lines. We must reflect on the successes and build on them. We are trying to prevent killings."

Batts said he was "humbled" by the turnout of the different agencies and others. He said he has seen the impact of gangs and violent crime growing up in South Central Los Angeles. He said he wants his officers to be seen not as "suppressive" but as "problem solvers and mentors" in the community to help young people grow up in a positive atmosphere "and make a difference."

He said the one thing that really affected him since he came to Oakland in October was the wounding earlier this year of a 5-year-old girl by a stray bullet as she sat on her grandmother's bed in West Oakland. That shooting is thought to be gang-related.

He said after seeing the successes in Salinas he decided to "put out a human cry (that) we need help, we need assistance," not just for him but for slaying victims "and that 5-year-old girl."