



Stockton College, N.J. Attorney General's Office Hold Conference on Youth Development

Community Partnerships Working to Curb Violence, Help Youth Succeed

For Immediate Release; photo attached, caption at end

Monday, June 09, 2014

**Contact: Maryjane Briant
News and Media Relations Director
Galloway Township, NJ 08205
Maryjane.Briant@stockton.edu**

Galloway Township, NJ - The mayors of Atlantic City and Pleasantville joined Acting Attorney Gen. John Hoffman, educators from The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and others today in outlining "what works and what doesn't work" in a statewide effort to help young people from areas of high unemployment and crime succeed.

"Building a Community of Learning and Practice" was co-sponsored by Stockton and the state Attorney General's Office. The forum drew over 200 participants from law enforcement, education and social service agencies.

"These are not problems that we can arrest our way out of," said Hoffman, referencing societal obstacles such as gang activity, lack of jobs and elevated high school dropout rates.

He said since 2009, the state has created six Municipal Planning Boards throughout New Jersey: Atlantic City-Pleasantville, Cumberland County (including Vineland, Millville and Bridgeton), Newark, Trenton, Camden and Asbury Park.

These groups "connect the dots" and help law enforcement, community groups and faith-based organizations, schools and other agencies come together to tackle these complex problems on a local level.

"Where there is a job, there is hope and there is promise," Hoffman said. But to get to that point, a multi-faceted, data-driven approach is needed to prevent truancy, delinquency, gangs and drugs, he said.

Atlantic City Mayor Don Guardian said simply, "We need to talk about the value of individual life and pass it on to our children." He praised Atlantic City Police Chief Henry White's efforts to reorganize the force, strengthening ties between law enforcement and the community.

"He looks like a cop...but he talks like a social worker," Guardian said of White, and in his multi-

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cultural city, he said, outreach is key.

Pleasantville Mayor Jesse Tweedle said the most frustrating part of his job is “seeing the potential in our youth and not being able to develop their god-given talent.”

He cited the Mayor’s Book Club program as an example of the kinds of partnerships that can have a big impact, by encouraging first graders to love reading. He said if children don’t learn how to read well by third grade, they often grow into teenage dropouts and become adults who are unable to get good jobs.

Stockton partnered with mayors in six South Jersey towns and their elementary schools including Pleasantville this year, to focus parents, students and their first grade teachers on reading more books. Pleasantville Elementary School is slated to receive \$1,000 from the League of Municipalities Education Foundation and local program sponsor Atlantic Electric on June 18, as the first graders read over 1,000 books this spring.

“This is just one initiative, like this conference,” Tweedle said, that draws together various parties to help youths succeed.

Stockton’s role in the Atlantic City-Pleasantville Municipal Planning Board includes providing data-driven research and analysis, so towns can target the right problems and develop solutions that are rooted in fact.

Dr. Israel Posner, executive director of Stockton’s Lloyd D. Levenson Institute of Gaming, Hospitality and Tourism, said it’s necessary to connect the “evidence-based approach and the faith-based approach,” focusing not only on “what to do,” and “how to do it”, but on “why.” Providing data without insight into the needs and hopes of people in the community will only go so far, he said.

“It’s the results,” he said, “it’s not the program” that’s most important.

The Stockton Center for Community Engagement (SCCE) has been helping towns obtain funds and rebuild after natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy, and also delivers nutritious meals door-to-door in partnership with Atlantic City schools, said Dr. Reva Curry, executive director.

SCCE provides help with homework, mentoring, SAT prep and anti-bullying programs, to support students’ development in Atlantic City and Pleasantville and build their aspirations.

And it’s working, Dr. Curry said. Attendance is up, lateness is down, math and reading skills are improving among students in the programs.

Dr. Marissa Levy, associate professor of Criminal Justice, said Stockton provided community leaders in Atlantic City and Pleasantville with statistics from the U.S. Census, the Uniform Crime Report, the Department of Education, the Atlantic City Police Department and other sources, to help them determine what each area’s biggest problems were and then develop solutions.

The Atlantic City group has held “Community Walks” to get local residents involved, and has developed programs such as community cookouts, National Night Out, and a photography program for Atlantic City students in fourth through eighth grades. Of those who took the photography class, taught by Stockton’s Art Professor Wendel White, “none have become involved in criminal behavior,” Dr. Levy said.

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Other speakers included Acting Atlantic County Prosecutor James McClain, Cumberland County Prosecutor Jennifer Webb-McRae, Tracy Swan and Gay Holden, of the Cumberland County Positive Youth Development Coalition, Eugene Schneeberg, of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the U.S. Justice Department and Kirk Lew from the New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission.

Dr. Harvey Kesselman, provost and executive vice president, opened the conference, which was coordinated by Alex Marino, assistant to the provost for Atlantic City instructional sites, who is also an Atlantic County freeholder.

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Photo - please credit: Photo by Susan Allen/The Richard/Stockton College of New Jersey

Caption:

From left, James McClain, acting Atlantic County prosecutor, John J. Hoffman, acting attorney general, Jennifer Webb-McRae, Cumberland County prosecutor, Mayor Don Guardian of Atlantic City, and Dr. Harvey Kesselman, provost and executive vice president of Stockton College.