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Program offers outlet for dealing with youth violence

By Sara Jean Green
Seattle Times staff reporter

Not yet 16, Caela Palmer has already attended more funerals than high-school dances. The last one was two Sundays ago for Pierre "Pete" LaPoint, a 15-year-old who was fatally shot earlier this month near a Rainier Valley bus stop.

Fourteen-year-old Kyle Mathews, who was also friends with LaPoint, said he can hear gunshots when he walks out his front door.

"It's life or death out there nowadays. People are getting killed every day and it makes me sad and angry," Mathews said. "All my friends are getting shot and killed."

Palmer and Mathews represent the young people of Seattle's inner-city neighborhoods who've been traumatized by escalating violence that has claimed at least six lives in recent months. Both attended a news conference Monday at the Yesler Way offices of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, where president James Kelly unveiled a two-phase program to mourn the losses and give young people creative outlets to express their rage, fear and heartbreak.

At a time when the city is enjoying its lowest crime rates in 40 years, gun and gang violence is disproportionately impacting young people, especially in Seattle's Central Area and Rainier Valley. Last week, the Seattle City Council released a 12-point initiative for reducing street crime that deals with everything from gang graffiti to aggressive panhandling.

Next month, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels is expected to announce his plan for curbing youth violence.

"We're not under the illusion that there are any simple answers," Nickels' spokesman Robert Mak said of the months-long effort by a team of experts and community members to address the growing violence. Though Mak said it is too early to release details, the mayor's plan — which is tied to the city budget — represents "a significant investment in our youth."

The Urban League's new program is meant to dovetail with the city's efforts while strengthening partnerships with local organizations already involved in getting guns out of kids' hands and getting kids off the street, Kelly said.

Called "Project Interruption," Kelly said the first step is to provide a forum for young people, their parents and others affected by violence to voice and acknowledge their grief. Those who need it can be connected with pastors, psychologists, grief counselors or — in the cases of those who need the most help — therapists with Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress.

"It is us stepping up and acknowledging the grief and the loss. It's kids killing kids; it's a loss of life," Kelly

said.

The second phase of Project Interruption is still being worked out but will include targeted outreach to schools in the Central Area and South Seattle. The vision is to provide workshops to help young people channel their emotions into writing projects, murals and other artistic expressions. It's also meant to provide families with resources and give kids a chance to picture healthy, positive futures for themselves.

City Councilmember Tim Burgess, who chairs the council's public-safety committee, attended Monday's news conference. Gangs, he said, are more sophisticated than ever — and are aggressively recruiting kids as young as 12 and forcing young women into prostitution.

"It's shocking," he said. And "after the recent deaths, people are emotionally wrung."

The Urban League's plan, Burgess said, "is one part of a total community response we need to have — and it's a good one."

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