

# JACKSONVILLE CITY COUNCIL

**RESEARCH DIVISION**

**Task Force on Safety and Crime Reduction**

**Meeting Minutes**

**June 14, 2019**

**9:00 am**

**Council Chambers**

**First Floor, City Hall**

**117 W. Duval Street**

**Topic:** Task Force on Safety and Crime Reduction

**Attendance:** Council Members Newby and Boyer; Colleen Hampsey – Council Research; Crystal Shemwell, Melanie Wilkes, Jessica Smith and Carol Owens – Legislative Services

For all Task Force Members and other attendees please see the sign in sheet

**Meeting Convened:** 9:09 am

The Task Force Chair, Pastor Mark Griffin, called the meeting to order, welcomed the group and announced that it would be the last meeting of the summer. Chairperson Griffin reviewed the agenda and called for the first presentation from Amy Donofrio -Task Force Member and high school teacher.

Ms. Donofrio is a teacher at Robert E. Lee High School and the creator of the EVAC Movement. EVAC is a grassroots movement of predominantly African-American young men who have channeled personal trauma, such as losing siblings to murder, having family members incarcerated and witnessing shootings, into positive life changes. EVAC (which is a reference to Plato’s Allegory of the Cave with ‘cave’ spelled backwards) has attracted the attention of news media beyond Jacksonville. A student from the class was featured on the front page of The New York Times. Students have gone to Washington, D.C., multiple times to speak at Senate committee hearings, a White House roundtable and meet with members of Congress. They met President Barack Obama when he made a stop in Jacksonville, and routinely talked with State Attorney Melissa Nelson and her top assistants. The EVAC students have also worked on juvenile-justice advocacy and successfully fought for a classmate to return to juvenile court after direct-filing with a 10 year original sentence.

The EVAC leadership class is comprised of young men who have experienced various levels of trauma. The first cohort was divided at first, but later bonded due to their shared life experiences. Out of the 13 students in the original cohort, 12 said they have had a family member spend a significant amount of time in jail. Eleven said they have been detained by police three times or more. Seven said they have been arrested. 11 had a close family member who had been murdered. Nine said they have been shot at. Eleven had seen someone shot. They have all felt the need to provide for their family financially. Ms. Donofrio has cultivated relationships with the boys in the program and witnessed life changing behavior from them as a result. Almost all of the boys have graduated from high school, many have found gainful employment, and they have built an interdependent social support family structure and toured colleges. However, despite the success, the EVAC program will no longer be offered as a class option at Lee High School. Mr. Gentry made a motion to speak to someone at DCPA about continuing the EVAC program at Lee High School and possibly scale it out to other schools. All of the Task Force members affirmed the motion except one who was in opposition.

Chairperson Griffin spoke about how the EVAC program targets and impacts a portion of the youth population who most need it and who often do not access other services or programs. Pastor Griffin said that he would like to find a scalable way to replicate the EVAC class in other schools and train other teachers to follow Ms. Donofrio’s lead. Mr. Geismar expressed admiration and support for Ms. Donofrio’s work and asked questions about how to implement the program in more places. Mr. Griggs spoke about the EVAC movement made a difference in his life. Mr. Munz also spoke in support of EVAC and offered to work with Ms. Donofrio to ‘package’ the program to present to the business community to gain their sponsorship and support.

Dr. Blalock spoke in support of Ms. Donofrio and the students from the EVAC movement and talked about the harsh impact of a juvenile criminal record for future employment and how public transportation is insufficient to get many residents from where they live to where they might/could work. Ms. Donofrio mentioned that she believes all youth should get free bus passes to make travel to and from employment easier and more reliable (as from a financial standpoint, this subsidy is less expensive than incarceration). Joe Peppers spoke about the long term effect of trauma and how PTSD manifests in academic, social and behavior issues. KHA is receiving a grant this summer for expanded trauma training. Mr. Harris spoke about the urgency of summer programs to keep teens out of trouble and how jobs would also make a difference.

There was a discussion about Task Force procedures as it transitions into a permanent body. Each member may continue to serve if they choose to, will have staggered terms, and will have to be approved by the Rules Committee and full City Council. The permanent commission will meet quarterly, at minimum. The subcommittee chairs may meet over the summer to discuss the possibility of merging. Several Task Force members expressed interest in continuing to meet over the summer to keep working. Ms. Waytowich talked about the procedures for funding requests and said that any requests or recommendations need to be strongly based upon research and best practices. Mr. Peppers said that Task Force priorities are being considered in the KHA annual budget process.

Pastor Griffin spoke about asset mapping and the creation of a crime database to see geographic crime trends in the city and also gaps in services not being provided which could deter those committing crimes. Ms. Burton, Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, and KHA said they will assist with the data gathering. Mr. Cockrell reminded the group that while children are hugely important, there needs to be also a focus on adults in regards to diversion, services and employment.

Several members of the audience offered public comment about safety in public housing, food for kids during the summer, social media and criminal activity, effective city leadership, and the struggles with employment and housing associated with re-entry. With no further business, the Chair adjourned the meeting.

**Meeting Adjourned:** 11:16 am

Minutes: Colleen Hampsey, Council Research

CHampsey @coj.net (904) 630-1498

Posted 6.19.19 5:00 pm

Tape: Task Force on Safety and Crime Reduction- Legislative Services Division

6.14.19