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11 groups study Mt. Vernon violence

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MOUNT VERNON - The city's clergy last night reconvened planning for an ambitious new anti-violence initiative, sharing ideas for community policing, hiring more officers, reaching out to parents about their responsibilities, working closer with the justice system, changing the image of the city, and other goals.

"We have to put our egos aside because the enemy is doing us in while we're looking for recognition," said the Rev. W. Franklyn Richardson, pastor of Grace Baptist Church, which hosted dozens of community leaders and more than 250 residents. "We are going to stay on this."

The clergy of Mount Vernon committed themselves in February to organizing an all-out, long-term effort to address the root causes of violence in their city. Their catalyst was a string of 15 homicides in Mount Vernon during the last 15 months - now 16.

Eleven newly appointed task forces last night reviewed their initial meetings and made quick recommendations, seeking to give momentum to an initiative - known as "SOS" or "Save Our Seeds" - that promises to be long and hard.

Residents applauded small bits of progress and statements of commitment, but also voiced concerns on a range of subjects. Richardson repeatedly urged residents to join the task forces and grow the movement.

Law enforcement, not surprisingly, was a subject of much debate. Organizers urged the city to seek federal stimulus dollars to put another 50 police officers on the street for three years, with the city having to absorb the costs in year four.

But residents demanded more local cops and better relations between police and the community, with several decrying the use of police dogs outside city schools and the difficulty of filing complaints against police.

Police Chief Barbara Duncan said that the department will soon begin "Operation Protect," a form of high-intensity community policing developed by police in Baltimore. The department will focus on one neighborhood for six weeks, trying to establish new relations with residents as it fights crime and lowers overall tensions.

Clergy applauded the arrests of 31 "drug pushers" in recent weeks.

Mayor Clinton Young talked about the "painful" meetings of a task force on families, which concluded that some parents are failing their children and the community by not setting standards, leaving their homes, or by looking the other way at illegal acts.

Referring to the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child," he said: "You have to get the family in order before you get the village in place."