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## **From the West Coast, advice on dealing with gangs**

Written by Jaime Clavarró – Staff Writer  
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“Homies” from California who have worked with gang members for more than two decades say that prevention, not suppression, will help officials get to the root of the gang problem.

For teens to give up their gangs, they said, there has to be something—after school activities, mentors or an intervention group—that will replace that sense of belonging.

Jail, they said, is not one of the options.

“You have to meet kids on their level,” said Susan Cruz of Sin Fronteras, a Los Angeles nonprofit that works with Latino families. “The minute you start judging them, they’ll walk away.”

The former drug users, felons and gang members, who are now leading groups that work with at-risk Latino youth across California, stopped by Gaithersburg Tuesday to tell their stories to about 40 social service, county government and police representatives.

The umbrella nonprofit, Barrios Unidos, translated to United Neighborhoods, has worked with hundreds of gang members since 1977 in California, where large Hispanic gangs, like MS-13, have existed in neighborhoods for generations.

Gang activity shocked Montgomery County this summer as stabbings, attributed to MS-13, rocked a Silver Spring high school and Wheaton shopping plaza.

County leaders who have tried to address the issue for years are now striving to be more involved.

But while the four visitors shared their efforts, they offered few specifics.

Each community, they said, must assess how to attack the problem, and which resources in that area would work best.

To find out what programs would help, leaders should directly ask teens what they’d like to see, said Daniel “Nane” Alejandrez, founder of Barrios Unidos.

‘ ‘The only way you’ll solve problems is with them working at your side,” he said. And while law enforcement has a place in the issue, he said, he’d like to see more resources going into prevention programs and activities to keep teens out of gangs.

While the visitors’ stories and efforts could not translate directly to Montgomery County, the message that came out of the meeting is the same: more needs to be done to reach out to Latino youth, said Candace Kattar, executive director of Identity, a Gaithersburg non-profit that works in 10 county schools with at-risk Latino youth.

“This community is not the same community it was 20 years ago,” Kattar said. “We need to redirect our resources enough so that the foundation is there.”

“We want to develop the dialogue about what would fit in Montgomery County,” she said.

Kattar invited Barrios Unidos to speak at Identity’s offices.

Representatives are in the metropolitan area this week to receive a human rights award from the Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington think tank that focuses on policy, academics and activists.

Representatives for County Council President Thomas E. Perez and County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, as well as social service agencies and county schools, attended the two-hour forum at Identity’s headquarters in Olde Towne.

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