

Chicagoland

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Mentors join forces to reach city's youth

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Charlie Johnson won't forget the boy who slipped through the cracks.

The boy showed up at Pine Avenue United Church in Chicago's Austin neighborhood after church leaders decided to offer children a safe place to play and mentoring after school and on Saturdays.

The children's response was overwhelming, said Johnson, board chairman of the church's Positive Alternative Program for Youth: "You're talking about a flood tide, the church door coming off the hinges."

The boy Johnson remembers was always there, always willing to join in the games and classes, but he was always getting in trouble. Eventually, he said, the boy was accused of theft. Said Johnson, "We couldn't help him."

The reason goes to the heart of a problem that plagues those who try to mentor children throughout the city: "We had a lack of funding," Johnson said. "We could not get the necessary volunteers to cope with 80 kids."

It's a problem that organizers of a conference held Saturday hope to help solve with a new network linking youth mentor programs citywide. The idea: If mentors pool their knowledge and share their resources, perhaps fewer children will slip through society's cracks.

"We have a growing cycle of urban warfare, compounded by poverty and illiteracy, that right now is concentrated in our cities," said Daniel F. Bassill, president and chief executive officer of Cabrini Connections, a not-for-profit group organized in 1992 to support the development of after-school tutoring and mentoring programs throughout the city.

"If we can't mobilize the people and the resources to try to alleviate the problem now, then in one, two, three generations, it will be in all of our neighborhoods," Bassill said. "Mentoring and tu-

toring can help a child see the potential and opportunity that they have, and can give them a support system to reach their potential."

About 60 independent mentors such as Johnson attended Saturday's conference at Vincent Hall on Chicago's Near North Side, which Bassill's group organized and hopes to turn into at least an annual event.

They had a chance to share information, learn about funding sources and program ideas, and find out how they might improve their services.

In the last few years, Bassill said, many such programs have started in a cluster at the Chicago Housing Authority dwellings of Cabrini-Green. But in other areas of the city where the need is just as great, he said, such programs are less common.

Bassill said the new network is the first concerted effort in the city to put organizers of independent programs in touch with one another and to identify places where more help is needed.

"This network has been invaluable," said Johnson, who said his youth program has dwindled to about 25 participants. "It's putting me in touch with organizations that have a track record of performance."

The conference was part of Cabrini Connections' Tutor/Mentor Connection program. Cabrini Connections organizers have compiled a database of programs keyed to areas of the city, to determine which areas are underserved.

Organizers hope to help establish mentoring programs in those areas with volunteers, donors and corporate sponsors.

"People should look at this as an investment, not a charity," Bassill said. He said those who wish to help may call 312-467-2889.

Many children can have "as much as five hours a day with nothing to do," Bassill said, "and we wonder why they're getting shot, getting pregnant, and getting high?"