

Youth PROMISE Act & Summer Heatwave

By Radha Selvester, CDS Family & Behavioral Health Services

Rather than telling kids what NOT to do, the City of Gainesville, in partnership with the Gainesville Police Department and State Attorney's Office, took the pro-active approach to juvenile crime and created Summer Heatwave in 2008. That year, there had been a huge increase in unrest among teens. Law enforcement was concerned that youth would have too much idle time over summer vacation to get involved in violence. Instead of waiting for kids to start fighting, Gainesville Police Chief Tony Jones, also an active member of the Juvenile Justice Council, pushed for the creation of Summer Heatwave – positive engagement for at-risk youth. It's been growing ever since. The 2014 season was the biggest and the best with over 1000 youth participating, learning life skills while enjoying sports, movies, and pool parties.

Summer Heatwave is a great example of what local community members can do when they identify a problem, work together, and pool resources. The Youth PROMISE Act is legislation that would encourage and support projects like these all over the country. (youthpromiseaction.org) PROMISE stands for Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support, and Education. Many experts have realized that we can't incarcerate our way out of juvenile issues like gang involvement, substance use, theft, and violence. In fact, the more we arrest youth, the GREATER is the likelihood that they will become adult criminals!

The Youth PROMISE Act would access under-utilized funds that would be used for local jurisdictions to create programs uniquely suited for their population. Part of the success of Summer Heatwave is that it was designed with the needs of our Gainesville youth in mind. The kids themselves were asked for their input into the program which brought greater buy-in. They developed positive relationships with local law enforcement and others who taught the life skills classes.

Summer Heatwave utilized crowd-funding to raise the \$20,000 it needed to serve 1000 youth. Imagine if we could also bring in federal funds to help with programs like these. What if every at-risk youth in our community were afforded the opportunity to have positive wholesome engagement leaving no time for mischief? If you are interested in promoting more programs like these and the Youth PROMISE Act, please contact our local Peace Alliance (peacealliance.org) action team leader, Cheryl Kaplan at chayasarah@cox.net.

As parents we know telling kids what NOT to do often backfires. Better to show them what they CAN do, and praise them for making good choices. CDS offers free counseling for youth age 6-17 and a residential program for youth age 10-17. www.cdsfl.org (352) 244-0628. Better to strengthen families now than to have acting out end up as incarceration.

