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Sen. Boxer hails city's anti-crime program

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U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer on Tuesday praised a west Modesto program aimed at reducing neighborhood crime and touted a law she's trying to pass that could dedicate more federal resources to fighting gangs.

"Gangs are essentially stealing the innocence of our youth away," she said. "That's got to be stopped."

Boxer toured west Modesto's Maddux Youth Center and met with Modesto and Stanislaus County leaders, including Mayor Jim Ridenour and Supervisor Jeff Grover.

She held up the neighborhood's Weed and Seed program as an example of a comprehensive approach to deterring crime.

The program, backed by the U.S. Justice Department, uses a two-pronged approach to improving the neighborhood. It floods west Modesto with police officers who track gangs, and it sets up community activities to turn around blighted blocks.

Boxer is working with fellow California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein to pass the "Gang Abatement and Protection Act of 2007," which would allow officials from several federal agencies to coordinate anti-gang efforts.

It would complement law enforcement resources with inter-agency groups that could direct people to affordable housing, after-school programs and job training classes.

Boxer said it's likely that Modesto and Stanislaus County would continue to benefit from U.S. Justice Department programs that augment their gang-suppression efforts.

The Central Valley Gang Intelligence Task Force, for example, has two FBI officers in its detail of sheriff's deputies, probation officers and police officers from Modesto, Ceres and Turlock.

That group recently won two Justice Department grants.

One would provide \$123,000 to pay for two years of salary for the gang unit's police clerk.

The other gives the Modesto police \$100,000 to hire a "gang reduction strategic coordinator," who would look for opportunities to link the city's anti-gang activities. That task could involve tying Modesto's programs to private programs, Assistant Police Chief Mike Harden said at a Monday City Council committee meeting.

Ridenour, meanwhile, is refining a proposal he floated in his State of the City speech in January to fight gangs by drawing on resources outside the Police Department, such as nonprofits and church groups. He and others working on the project plan to visit Fresno next month to investigate anti-gang programs.

"I see us moving in a very strong way to attack the gang problem," Boxer said.

The senator also put a spotlight on Modesto's National Night Out activities, which took place Tuesday night. She noted that Modesto consistently holds more National Night Out block parties than any other city of a similar size.

The parties are held by Neighborhood Watch groups, and they're meant to demonstrate that people won't give up their communities to criminals.

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