

South Shore criminals keep cops busy

By Kathryn Reed

Gangs, drugs, the threat of violence at schools, parents who are not engaged, and a crime rate that is increasing.

Those were some of the topics South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler, El Dorado County sheriff's Lt. Pete Van Arnum, and Steve Heggen with county probation touched on during this month's Lake Tahoe Collaborative meeting.

(Lake Tahoe Collaborative was founded in 1992. It is leaders of primarily social service agencies who meet monthly to discuss issues pertaining to the South Shore.)



Steve Heggen (probation), Pete Van Arnum (EDSO), and Brian Uhler (SLTPD) talk crime on the South Shore.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

On Friday, law enforcement used South Tahoe High School as a staging ground for a mock school takeover. This was done while students were on spring break so as not to disrupt classes, but some drama students got to participate.

"We are trying to change the mindset of school administration

and teachers (to be more proactive)," Van Arnum said of the meetings he and others have been having with Lake Tahoe Unified School District personnel. "You look at school shootings across the country and most of the kids talked to someone and they didn't come forward. We need good relationships with students because they'll give us information before it happens."

SLTPD and probation have armed officers at South Tahoe High at various times. But law enforcement does not favor arming school staff. They relayed how as first responders they are going after the person on campus with a gun, and if a teacher or administrator is armed, that person may inadvertently become a victim of law enforcement.

Van Arnum said his experience is that the middle school is where the attention needs to be placed because that age group is most impressionable.

This is evident with the Norteno and Sureno gangs in town tapping into the younger age group.

"One of the more disturbing trends we are noting is those gang bangers are recruiting mentally challenged kids," Uhler said.

Heggen said parents need to be watching and listening to their kids. He told a story of a mom he knows who didn't allow her son to buy red shoes because of potential gang affiliation.

"What are we doing to model behavior we want them to model?" Heggen asked.

He sees kids who behave well in the Juvenile Treatment Center, but once released are back in the environment that contributed to their incarceration and the destructive behavior resumes.

Police K-9 units on occasion go to STHS. Uhler said while arrests have been made, this type of action is more preventative in nature. "Leave it alone or leave it at home,"

Uhler said is the message officers try to convey.

Throughout the community marijuana and alcohol are the most abused drugs, with more locals being arrested than tourists. Uhler said 90 percent of the arrests his officers make are locals.

He will be making a presentation to the City Council this spring about crime stats from 2012.

"The total number of arrests is down, but we are seeing an increase in crime," Uhler said. He said the bad guys are getting away with more because of staffing issues. "We are seeing alarming trends. Sexual assault numbers are up and aggravated assault."