

# Critics hit BPD on proposed home searches

BY MARTINE LOUIS  
REPORTER STAFF

The Boston Police Department defended their latest anti-gun initiative during a Monday afternoon hearing before city councilors, community activists and dozens of residents at City Hall's Iannella Chamber. At issue was the proposed Safe Home program, in which police officers would conduct voluntary searches of homes in which teens are thought to be secreting firearms.

Beginning in January, some residents of Grove Hall, Bowdoin-Geneva and Franklin Hill-Franklin Field may get a knock at their door that brings them face-to-face with a three-person team of police officers. Though police officials say they will seek permission to conduct searches and leave if access to the home is denied, City Councillor Chuck Turner says the surprise of having the police at your door can itself be coercive.

"I agree with the concept, but I am concerned with the way it is to be implemented," said Turner, who initiated the hearing. "If this program is going to happen it should be completely voluntary. There should be no hint of coercion and no rush to judgment."

"You need to consider what is going through these people's minds when you show up at their homes," Turner continued. "This is not a program designed to give people the opportunity to decide what is best for them — not while you're on their doorstep. Why use such an intimidating approach? Why not advertise or send out letters? Why knock on the door?"

Police Deputy Superintendent Gary French, who has been explaining the project at local community meetings in the

pilot areas, supported the tactic.

"To go door to door is about engaging parents and educating them on what to look for," French said.

For the families who do cooperate with Safe Home, BPD has promised their files will be isolated from the larger police database. In cases where guns are recovered, there will be no incident reports and no prosecutions — unless the firearm can be linked to previous crimes.

Thirty-six year-old Jamarhl Crawford of Roxbury testified that in order for the program to succeed it would have to be based on faith and trust. "That does not exist in Boston and for valid reasons," said Crawford, chairman of the New Black Panther Party in Boston. "Since 1995 there have been 16 murders at the hand of police — we are not an anti-police community. We are a community that is afraid of the police."

City councillor Michael Flaherty says while he believes in giving second chances to teens who are not yet impact players in city crime, he also worries about a lack of accountability.

"We must think about the victims," said Flaherty. "Certain aspects of this program jeopardize justice for those who have lost their lives and for their families. No prosecution? Who is going to deliver that message to grieving families? How does that conversation go? 'We've got the guy, but...'"

"Our city also has a drug epidemic and I would love to see us go door to door and remove drugs from households," Flaherty said. "If we are going to do it with guns, let's do it with drugs too."

Sam Yoon, at-large city councillor and former middle school teacher,

emphasized the importance of building trust between adults and youth. "If you don't have that relationship with a child that is crying out for help you will get nothing done in his or her life," said Yoon. "If there is not one iota of trust they will never let you in."

"I support any effort to promote community safety and I agree that community policing actually comes to your door. It has to be personal, otherwise it is a farce," said Yoon. "The next step after retrieving the guns is to have a dialogue with these families. Get them

thinking about what it means that this search was necessary in their homes, and why and how to prevent future troubles. If we don't get this right as a city then we simply cannot solve this problem."

Some at Monday's hearing wondered if such a program could lead to negative feelings towards the police department, as was the case when a Stop-and-Frisk program was implemented in the early 90s, allowing police to randomly search young people without cause.

Youth advocates dis-

cussed whether or not the program promoted a "false sense of security" by assuring no penalties.

"For individuals who are not lawyers or are not familiar with the system, this is a program that is quite hard to understand," said Rachel Fazzino, program coordinator for the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute in Fields Corner. "Many parents have no idea what consequences they may face. Immigration, possibly sending their children to prison or destroying their chance at an education. Even if

they are not arrested, a child can be excluded from school as a result of these searches."

"This is not a fair program," said Crawford. "Authorities have a degree in this field, but they are forgetting that they are dealing with a public that is legally unaware. We are being asked to waive our rights when many don't even understand their rights. If you are going to propose this idea then you should give us time to educate ourselves. Not just appear on our doorstep asking to be let in."

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