



State of New Jersey

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Hospital Staff Learn to Read Patients' Gang Tattoos

Parole Officers Give Secrets to Recognizing Gang Membership, Preventing Violence

TOMS RIVER – Nurses, Emergency Room staff and other medical professionals today learned aspects of violence prevention that are rarely thought about outside the medical field: How to determine if patients in a hospital may be gang members, and prevent an altercation by keeping rival gang members away from each other.

The lesson was provided by two Parole Officers from the New Jersey State Parole Board's Street Gang Unit, as part of Saint Barnabas Behavioral Health Network's Second Annual Psychiatric Nursing Symposium. About 75 medical professionals from within the Saint Barnabas Health Network and other hospitals attended lectures today on subjects including "Suicide Risk / Predicting Imminent Danger," "Psychiatric Advanced Directives," and "Assessment and Management of Difficult Behaviors."

The symposium was held at Saint Barnabas Behavioral Health Center in Toms River.

"We asked the State Parole Board to provide this lecture as a way to proactively address the growing street gang presence in New Jersey," said Deanna Sperling, Vice President of Behavioral Health Services at Saint Barnabas Health Care System. "Our medical staff are well aware that law enforcement officers are urging teachers, parents, hospital workers and other leaders in society to understand the risks and be ready to prevent them. Saint Barnabas Behavioral Health Network is proud to make this lecture available as part of our symposium."

The lecture, provided by Senior Parole Officers Mario Taboada and Raymond Vonderheide, centered on identifiers that medical staff are most likely to see while treating an injured patient: Tattoos.

"Tattoos can be completely innocent. I have tattoos and drive a motorcycle, but it wouldn't be fair for someone to assume I belong to a bike gang," Vonderheide said. "On the other hand if someone has a pit bull tattoo with the number '232' he is identifying himself as a member of the Brick City Brim set of the Bloods, and is placing himself in real danger from other gang members if that is not the case."

Taboada and Vonderheide said the key to recognizing gang-related tattoos is not in looking for particular images, but in looking for numbers. The Sex Money Murder set of the Bloods uses the number 252, for example. Certain gangs use the number 18, and a member may have a 1 on one arm and an 8 on the other.

"Two people may be rivals even if they belong to the same gang. Right now, groups of Bloods are considered the major source of violence against other groups of Bloods," Taboada said.

(more)

To avoid violence either in the hospital or after patients leave, Taboada and Vonderheide advised medical staff to keep any patients who may be gang members separate to the greatest extent possible. They suggested

hospitals talk with their ambulance providers, to notify the hospital before the arrival of patients who may have been injured in a gang-related incident.

Taboada, Vonderheide and the other officers in the State Parole Board's Street Gang Unit conduct gang education and recognition training for hospitals, universities, public schools and municipal police departments, based on up-to-the-minute information collected during their everyday duties.

The Parole Board's Street Gang Unit supervises about 500 parolees statewide who are self-admitted gang members, or are legally classified as gang members. The Officers' interaction with these parolees gives them a unique, street-level view of the ways gang membership affects individuals and communities, and the ways gangs attempt to lure young people.

This spring the Parole Board's Street Gang Unit taught the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) program to students at Copeland Elementary School in Rockaway Township, as part of the Rockaway Township Public School District's proactive commitment to student safety. GREAT, a federal program, helps students understand conflict resolution and responding to peer pressure, and reinforces positive attitudes toward law enforcement. The pilot program at Copeland Elementary School is believed to be the first use of GREAT in a suburban school in New Jersey.

Saint Barnabas Behavioral Health Center, along with Kimball Behavioral Health Services, is a 100-bed mental health and chemical dependency treatment facility providing inpatient, partial hospitalization and outpatient services for adults and older adults.

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