

Midlands Voices

It's smarter to invest more in Sun Dawgs

BY THE REV. JASON EMERSON

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In January, after the Von Maur shootings, Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) and members of several congregations gathered more than 200 people from across Omaha at Lewis and Clark Middle School. We were from different organizations, of different denominations, faiths and races, gathered in prayer.

We read the names of all the Omaha homicide victims of 2007. The names of these victims, some as young as 1 year old, rang out in witness that we could no longer stand idly by while violence infected our city.

We continued to meet, inviting members of the Police Department, the Mayor's Office and eventually the mayor himself, seeking some action that could be taken to stem the violence. We walked neighborhoods, engaging the community with the question: "What can be done to end the violence in our dear city?"

Mayor Mike Fahey, specifically citing these actions, placed a \$24,000 increase in the budget of the Sun Dawgs program, a summer recreational program already functioning in several city parks, into the 2009 city budget. This would allow two of the most-used sites to extend their hours. In addition to recreation, Sun Dawgs staff would help children learn violence-prevention skills.

On Aug. 12, nearly 100 leaders from OTOC and other congregations attended the City Council public hearing on the 2009 budget in support of this increase. Only 12 people attended last year's hearing.

In an Aug. 13 news story about the budget hearing, a question was posed: Is the Sun Dawgs program an effective violence prevention program or merely "glorified baby-sitting"?

The Sun Dawgs program is not glorified baby-sitting. It is an investment in public safety.

According to researcher Margo Gardner of Columbia

University, "Studies suggest that participation in organized activities is associated with fewer problem behaviors, better academic performance and better psychosocial adjustment" in youths.

Her study, released this year in *Developmental Psychology* magazine, shows that more participation in out-of-school programming results in better educational and occupational achievement.

Lastly, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Juvenile Delinquency recommends out-of-school programming as a best practice in preventing youth violence.

This public-safety investment makes fiscal sense. It is exponentially cheaper to invest in the formation of a child than to pay for the arrest, conviction and incarceration of a criminal, not including the physical and emotional price that violence exacts from our community.

It saves the time and money of the Fire Department as well when there are fewer violent crimes requiring emergency rescue services. In addition, it saves time and money for the Parks and Recreation Department, because organized activities decrease vandalism and the need for repairs in public parks.

The total budget of the Sun Dawgs program, including the Mayor's proposed increase, is less than 0.1 percent of the city budget. Isn't less than one-tenth of 1 percent a small price to pay for safer neighborhoods?

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Editor's note: This essay was co-signed by the Rev. Norm Hunke, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church; the Rev. T. Michael Williams, pastor of Risen Son Baptist Church; the Rev. Frank Baumert, pastor of Holy Name and St. Richard Catholic Churches; Susan Kuhlmann, a Holy Name member; Brianne Ryba, a member of St. James Catholic Church; and Rabbi Aryeh Azriel of Temple Israel.