

Don't miss March 1 forum at PEEC on gangs, bias

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Northeast Pennsylvania is perhaps one of the most beautiful and peaceful places in the entire country. It's easy to understand why so many people come here to visit or live.

The population in Monroe County has increased 19.5 percent since 2000 and is at 165,685, based on U.S. Census estimates in 2006. Pike County is the fastest growing county in the state and ranks 92nd in percent growth in the country. The population in Pike County has increased 25.7 percent since 2000 and is 58,195. Unfortunately, as with any community, some people disturb the beauty and peace that surrounds us. The rapid growth of our region affords many challenges including those related to discrimination and gang activity.

The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission annual report for 2006-07 was just published and there were a total of 19 and eight bias incidences reported for Monroe and Pike Counties, respectively. This was equal to or the highest number of incidents reported annually for these counties. The bias incidents are those that have caused tension in the community. The PHRC is mandated to enforce the Commonwealth's laws that prohibit discrimination and their jurisdiction covers employment, housing, and commercial real estate, public accommodations, education, refusal or willingness to participate in abortion procedures, and monitoring racial tension situations.

The number of discrimination cases docketed also includes those that are not known to the public and are reported separately. In Monroe and Pike Counties there were a total of 27 and 10 bias cases, respectively, docketed for 2006-07. The Tri-State Unity Coalition also monitors bias incidents in Pike County. It is a local non-profit and volunteer organization that promotes community harmony and addresses diversity issues. It reports 44 incidents in Pike County since the organization was formed in 2000 and 12 of these incidents were from 2007. All of these figures are useful for trend analysis and community awareness but they are very under-represented since only a fraction of the incidents are actually reported.

Gang activity is also increasing in our region. There have been a few featured articles in the news about incidents in Monroe County. Gang-related graffiti was also found at a public place in Matamoras (Pike). It has been known to occur there for at least a few years. Gangs are a business and like any business they are looking to expand their territory to increase their profit and bottom line. Their business is criminal activity such as drugs, prostitution and robbery. Hate-based gangs also exist and they are in the business of prompting their hate message using criminal activity to fund their "promotional campaigns": Gangs are looking to recruit more members and they are targeting our youth.

Hate and gangs look for communities that think they don't happen there. They also flourish in communities that are not prepared or organized to deal with them. The rapid growth of our region makes us a prime area for such activities. Furthermore, the limited police and other resources in our region hamper our ability to address and combat these problems. How can we as a community and as individuals address these issues?

Several local community organizations and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission are hosting a forum to address discrimination and gang activity in Pike County. The forum will be open to the public and is on Saturday, March 1 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Pocono Environmental Education Center in Dingmans Ferry off Route 209 (signs between mile markers 8 and 9). Refreshments will be provided.

Speakers include representatives from the Tri-State Unity Coalition, Unity Coalition of the Poconos and Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. The Rallying Youth Organized Together Against Rape from Safe Haven will put on a socio-drama. Also speaking will be Michael Leonard Sr., a criminal justice consultant and gang expert (www.gangsrreal.com) and Dr. Letitia Lladoc, a multicultural instructor and educator. As communities become more aware of bias and gang activity they are more empowered to address it. Please attend the forum to learn how you can help protect and take back your community. For more information, contact the Tri-State Unity Coalition at (570) 686-5555 or www.tristateunity.org and tristateunity@gmail.com.

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