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United States Attorney

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**STUDENTS AND PRINCIPALS JOIN U.S. ATTORNEY TO KICK-OFF  
VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAM**

PHILADELPHIA - Students from four Northwest Philadelphia High Schools joined United States Attorney Zane David Memeger today for the kickoff of a youth violence prevention program, "Voices of Youth." Deputy Director Stephen Robertson with The Philadelphia Center for Arts and Technology, Co-Chair of the Northwest Community Coalition for Youth Isabella Fitzgerald, representatives from the Village of Arts & Humanities and the Well Program, administrators and students from Hope Charter High School, Imhotep Institute Charter High School, Martin Luther King High School, and New Media Technology Charter School attended today's kickoff and orientation.

The "Voices of Youth" project is a curriculum-based after-school program with a focus on reducing crime and violence, improving the quality of life in communities within the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, and enhancing the relationships between the public and law enforcement. This eight week initiative is making its inaugural run in Northwest Philadelphia. The program provides up to 40 high school students with an opportunity to participate in a video project about violence, focusing on their life experiences while working as a team. The students will be working with Philadelphia's well-established Village of Arts and Humanities on "The Reel Life Video Project," or with Well Productions on "Voices of the Children: Listen & Learn." The end results will comprise a film festival in May. The program, a youth anti-violence project, is sponsored by the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.

"This project is our first major step toward fighting crime at a new level in Northwest Philadelphia," said Memeger. "While we are able to impact the quality of life in a community by vigorously pursuing our traditional role of investigating and prosecuting crime, it is also important to focus on prevention efforts to help our young people understand that there are alternatives to crime. It is also important for them to know that law enforcement is about more than arresting people, and that we want their futures to be as bright as possible. Having personally witnessed the negative and severe impact of bad decisions that some young people make, it is incumbent upon us to help guide our youth to make better choices that will improve their lives and the well-being of their community."

"It is said that 'children shall lead us'," said Co-Chair of the Northwest Community Coalition for Youth Isabella Fitzgerald. "We hope that this project will give everyone a chance to pause and listen to what they have to say, to allow their voices to be heard, and to make a difference in their lives and the lives of those around them."

Director of the Philadelphia Center for Arts and Technology Kasey Thompson said “The Philadelphia Center for Arts and Technology (PCAT) is excited to host this project, which reflects the goals of PCAT by bringing together a range of partners and using the arts and new media to engage youth in making a difference in their own lives and communities.”

“Violence is such an important topic and who better than our youth to address this topic and the need for change,” said Eric E. Worley, Principal HOPE Charter School. “Adding the natural talents of everyday students with the expertise of the professionals - involved with programs such as The Village and The Well Program - should amount to a great culminating project.”

“Martin Luther King High School is excited about participating in this project and we look forward to giving our students an opportunity to express themselves and share their thoughts through multimedia,” said Assistant Principal Charles Ireland of Martin Luther King High School. “We enthusiastically support the efforts of the United States Attorney’s Office in this unique and engaging project. As educators we remain focused on helping our students attain their full potential and this project will provide them that opportunity. We hope this project will also give students an opportunity to share their experiences with other students in an effort to help them make better decisions.”

“I can honestly say that video has changed my life,” said El Sawyer, film maker, educator and Programs Director at The Village of Arts and Humanities. “I can relate to being a teenager caught up in the system, so if there is anything, anything that I can do to help youth make better decisions and to learn skills that give them positive options, like video, I think it’s a blessing and an opportunity. I know that if given the support and training, these youth will have profound things to say about their communities and their futures, and I hope that we - the schools, parents, police, judges - all take the time to listen to what they have to say.”

“This is an exciting opportunity to get inside of the minds of these students, and to help them articulate their thoughts and feelings about creating the community that they'd like to see,” said Will Brock with the Well Program. “We're all going to learn something in this process. I can't wait!”

This program is part of the United States Attorney’s Office Northwest Philadelphia Violence Prevention Initiative to reduce crime and violence in the area of the city known as the Philadelphia Police Department’s Northwest Detective Division. Over the past year, in this area, shootings and homicides have spiked upwards by more than 25% and in 2010, the number of shootings (374) and homicides (72) in Northwest were the most of any of the six detective divisions.

In response to these trends in Northwest Philadelphia, the U.S. Attorney's Office recently formed the U.S. Attorney's Office Northwest Advisory Committee to plan a three-part strategy – law enforcement, prevention, and reentry – to reduce violence in the Northwest. The committee consists of members of the United States Attorney's Office, the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office, the Philadelphia Police Department, Philadelphia Probation and Parole (adult and juvenile), the Northwest Community Coalition for Youth, the Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice at Drexel University, the Tabernacle Baptist Church, The Village of Arts & Humanities and Well Productions, and the following Philadelphia schools: Hope Charter, Imhotep Charter, Martin Luther King High School, New Media Technology Charter, Philadelphia Center for Arts & Humanities.

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