

Panama City Commission denies LEAD Coalition funding request



Tuesday

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A local violence prevention and education group suffered a setback Tuesday when the Panama City Commission voted down LEAD Coalition's request for \$10,000 to bring 30 students to a conference about preventing crime in black communities.

By [KATIE LANDECK](#)
News Herald Reporter

PANAMA CITY — A local violence prevention and education group suffered a setback Tuesday when the Panama City Commission voted down LEAD Coalition's request for \$10,000 to bring 30 students to a conference about preventing crime in black communities.

“It's not the city's role to be financing that kind of thing,” Commissioner John Kady said.

The commissioners all said the conference, which will take place in Miami this May, would be a good experience for students but worried about the implication of giving money to one charity and not the myriad others in the city. Mayor Greg Brudnicki compared it “taking someone else’s dollars” to make a charitable donation, pointing out taxpayers might rather donate to other things.

The \$10,000 would have covered about half the trip, which is expected to cost \$22,000, and LEAD Coalition Director Janice Lucas is not giving up.

How to help

To make a donation to the LEAD Coalition, make a check out to "Gulf Coast State College" and mail to 5230 W. U.S. 98, Panama City. For more information, call 508-913-3263.

“We will have to work a little harder,” she said.

The commission immediately offered to help. Brudnicki and Commissioner Mike Nichols both promised to make personal donations on the spot. Commissioner Greg Brown, who sits on the coalition’s Board of Directors, and Brudnicki committed to helping with fundraising efforts.

“I will help you raise that money,” Brudnicki said.

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Lucas said that kind of support is as valuable as a check would have been.

“We got pledges to help us, and that has value,” she said.

Over the next few weeks, the coalition will send out letters to raise the \$22,000 necessary to make the trip a reality. There are not yet plans for a community event to raise funds, but Lucas said that is a possibility down the line.

The LEAD Coalition was started in December 2014 after nine black males ages 17 to 38 were shot in the summer. The hope was the group could address deeper, “systemic issues” in the black community to stop the violence.

Since then, Lucas said, things have started getting better, pointing to people who have found employment, a group working toward their GEDs and changes in the students who went to the conference last year. As an example, Journey Venible, a student at Rutherford, talked about her experiences last year.

“A lot of kids think they are too cool to do the right thing. ...” The conference “gave us this clarity,” she said. “We shouldn’t let anyone get in the way of our accomplishments and what we aspire to.”

Venible said she has used what she learned to help people in her neighborhood and family who are going down the “wrong path.”

Though all the commissioners expressed support for the coalition, one questioned its goal of addressing systemic problems.

“This idea that we have deep-seeded problems, I don’t think they exist,” Kady said, asking if the LEAD Coalition is celebrating and focusing on the right things.