

## FAST 2010 DRUGS AND CRIME ACTION COMMITTEE REPORT

### Crime Hot Spots

**THE PROBLEM:** Local residents are fed up with open-air drug sales, prostitution, loitering, and other crimes that plague their communities. So in 2008, FAST congregations launched a campaign to reduce crime at Hot Spots, where our kids were exposed to drug dealing near bus stops, and our elderly felt unsafe sitting in their own front yards. Chief Klein, Asst. Chief Williams, and Sheriff Coats investigated and took action on FAST's Hot Spot reports from Clearwater, St. Petersburg, and Largo, respectively. The results of this campaign reduced crime in 60 spots with over 200 arrests by the fall of 2008. However, since then, while areas of Largo have continued to see a reduction in criminal activity, neighborhoods in Clearwater and St. Petersburg have seen hot-spots of drugs and crime re-emerge.

**THE SOLUTION:** We have met with Asst. Chief of Police Luke Williams and Chief of Police Anthony Holloway about specific problem spots in St. Petersburg and Clearwater, respectively. Each committed to investigate and take action on these spots within 30 days, and to report back to FAST members in May. We expect to see a marked reduction in crime in each area.

### Repeat Offenders

**THE PROBLEM:** A major reason crimes incessantly occur in our communities is because offenders get trapped in a cycle of criminal behavior. In fact, the rate of repeat offenders in our Pinellas County jail is over 70%. That means that of the 50,000 inmates released each year, nearly 35,000 will return to jail for the same type of offence in one to two year's time.

**RESEARCH WE HAVE DONE:** We learned that the key to reducing crime is reducing the number of repeat offenders. Throughout the state and nation, programs that provide drug counseling, vocational training, and post-release counseling have shown that they successfully help inmates change their lives around and reduce the number of repeat offenders. In fact, the conventional wisdom of our law enforcement and political leadership statewide is that we can't arrest our way out of the crime problem. In a recent St. Petersburg Times article, the Florida Department of Corrections Secretary Walt McNeil said, "The lock-them-up-and-throw-away-the-key (policies) — the evidence shows it has not been very effective."<sup>1</sup>

In 2008, our jail started a rehabilitation program called "Smart Choices". This program gives drug counseling, provides job training, helps inmates get GEDs, has counseling to curb criminal thinking, and gives one-year of aftercare to rehabilitate offenders. In its first year, only 39% of participants ended up back in jail, as opposed to 70% of regular inmates who re-offend. That's a great improvement. Members of our congregations who have been through the program tell us that, because of their participation in Smart Choices, they are living crime-free, productive lives. They now have jobs; are reunited with their families; and have kicked crippling addictions. However, despite the success of the Smart Choices program, Sheriff Coats cut the 56 spaces for women completely, and has plans to reduce the 56 spaces for men later this year. Meanwhile, there remains an approximately 45-day waiting list for men who want to be in the program.

We understand that the Sheriff has been directed to make major cuts to his budget. However, it is wrong to ignore the needs of the inmates at the expense of budget cuts. Funding Smart Choices will increase public safety and change inmates' lives. To run the program at the capacity we are requesting will cost approximately \$873,600 (using current costs), which is only 0.5% of the Sheriff's budget after major budget cuts. Clearly, cutting this program will not reduce the Sheriff's budget woes. Not only that, but funding Smart Choices now will save tax-payer dollars in the long-term by reducing the number of people who return to jail. According to conversations with staff at the county jail, we estimate that reducing the repeat offenders rate at the Pinellas County Jail by just 1% will save the county \$1.8 million annually. This means that running the Smart Choices program will in turn help reduce budget costs.

**THE SOLUTION:** We want Sheriff Coats to reinstate the women's program with 40 spaces, and to expand the men's program to 80 spaces. We want him to do both by the beginning of the next fiscal year (October 1, 2010).

<sup>1</sup> From St. Petersburg Times article "Crist, others support inmate rehab programs in tight budget," by John Frank; Monday, February 15, 2010.