

LEAD Coalition Becomes Official Group

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Gun violence in Panama City has been a topic of discussion since a rash of incidents over the summer.

On Thursday local government, law enforcement, and educators got together and made an official group to step in.

The leaders of this group are from different occupations, but they have one important thing in common; a passion for a safe community.

"Silence kills; first he ran the street late at night and I did not speak out because I was not his parents," said LEAD Coalition Director Janice Lucas. She continues with a story of a young boy who got mixed up with a young crowd. "...Then he got a gun, I didn't speak out and the police and the pastors and the parents did not speak out. By that time the business had begun moving out of my cities; the crime was high, the schools were failing, and they started killing each other in the streets."

She continued, "He was killed; his body stuffed in the trunk of a car."

Much like the story of a 24 year old named Tavish Greene; an unfortunate incident that Janice Lucas said was a "game changer."

"It was too late for him and now I can no longer be silent," said Lucas.

Lucas along with law enforcement, representatives of Panama City government, and educators all took a vow, Thursday morning, to break their silence.

"It's not always that you see government entities come together to solve community problems and this is what that is," said Superintendent of Schools Bill Husfelt. "We did not create this problem, but it is our problem."

It's the tragedy that brought them together, but it's a common goal that will keep it going.

"For this many thing to happen, this many tragedies, this many kids dying, young people dying, this is very unusual," said Sheriff Frank McKeithen of the Bay County Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff says they will do everything they can to stop it, but they cannot do it alone. They are calling on the community to start a conversation.

"They want the community to come be a part of us finding long term solutions to this systemic issue," said Lucas. "Restoring hope in Panama City; that's what I'm excited about."

Gulf Coast State College will take over the administration aspects of the group such as payroll, office space, and hosting meetings.

Janice Lucas was hired to become the Executive Director. She will leave her job with Bay District Schools to take over this role full-time.

Multiple agencies contributed funds the help kick things off. The Bay District Schools put in \$25,000, The City of Panama City contributed \$19,000 and the Bay County Sheriff's Office put in \$20,000.

Sheriff Frank McKeithen says the money BCSO put in come from there Law Enforcement Trust Fund, which comes from drug related or other arrests that result in forfeitures.

The next meeting will take place on December 5th at 8:30 am at the Panama City Police Department. They intend to set a more regular meeting schedule at that time.