

PIKE COUNTY COURIER

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Gang violence/bias forum scheduled

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DINGMANS FERRY — A local discrimination monitoring group says gang violence, bias and discrimination incidents and are on the rise and has scheduled a forum on discrimination and gang violence in Northeast Pennsylvania.

A Tri-State Unity Coalition statement of Feb. 1 says gang activity is ncreasing in our region. "There have been a few featured articles in the news about incidences in Monroe County. Gang-related graffiti was also found at a public place in Matamoras (Pike) 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," coalition spokesman Robert Veneziale, Ph.D. wrote.

The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (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 PHRC annual report for 2006-07 was just published and there were a total of 19 bias incidences reported in Monroe and eight in Pike County. This was equal to or the highest number of incidents reported annually for these counties, according to the Coalition.

The number of discrimination cases docketed also includes those that are not known to the public and are reported separately. In Pike County there were 10 cases docketed for 2006-07.

The Tri-State Unity Coalition also monitors bias incidents in Pike County. They report a total of 44 incidents in Pike County since their organization was formed in 2000 and 12 of these incidences 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 incidences are actually reported.

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 (PEEC) in Dingmans Ferry. 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 (RYOT) from Safe Haven will put on a socio-drama. Also speaking will be Michael Leonard Sr., a criminal justice consultant and gang expert (www.gangsreal.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. For more information, contact the Tri-State Unity Coalition at 570-686-5555 or www.tristateunity.org and tristateunity@gmail.com.