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February 19, 2008

COUNTY GANG TASK FORCE MAKES WAVES IN FIRST FOUR MONTHS

After four months on the job, the Merced Multi-Agency Gang Task Force has begun turning the tide in the county's battle against the spread of criminal street gangs, according to Los Banos Police Chief Chris Gallagher, who oversees the Task Force activities on behalf of the participating county law enforcement leaders.

Since its creation in October of last year, Gallagher said, the eight members of the Gang Task Force have made 87 felony arrests, 78 misdemeanor arrests, conducted 102 probation searches, several parole searches and have written and served ten search warrants which resulted in the confiscation of guns, methamphetamine and marijuana. They have also contacted and validated 80 gang members.

The county-wide Gang Task Force was launched to help law enforcement agencies coordinate intelligence gathering and enforcement actions against gang members. It is comprised of officers from the Merced County Sheriff's Department, Merced, Atwater and Livingston Police Departments, the Merced County Probation Department and the Merced County District Attorney's office.

The Gang Task Force is a partnership with the state Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, one of only six such arrangements between state and local law enforcement agencies in California. Val Pacheco, from the BNE office in Fresno, was recently selected to command the unit, and "has done an outstanding job of directing the activities of the Task Force," Gallagher said.

"We are here to assist any agency that calls for our help," Pacheco said. "We have tools and information at our disposal that local agencies might not have readily available. We are excited about the prospect of really making a difference in Merced County's battle against gangs," he added.

The Gang Task Force's primary responsibilities are to assist local jurisdictions in identifying gang members and respond with them to gang related incidents, Gallagher said. He said a key objective for the Task Force is to create a data bank that contains information on every known and suspected gang member in Merced County. This data would then be readily accessible to local law enforcement agencies.

“The more complete and detailed the intelligence law enforcement has on gang members, their associates and activities, the quicker we can respond to incidents or interrupt their criminal enterprises,” Gallagher said.

The Gang Task Force has assisted Sheriff’s detectives and detectives from Merced, Atwater and Dos Palos police departments in investigating three gang related homicides and two attempted homicides. “We are continuing to fine tune our response capabilities and I think all the chiefs are confident we’re moving in the right direction,” Gallagher said.

Merced County District Attorney Larry Morse II said he was “encouraged by the progress made by the Task Force in a few short months. The law enforcement community in Merced County will never accept gang violence and intimidation in our communities. While we know that keeping kids from ever joining gangs is the best long term strategy, and one we are pursuing, we all are committed to giving the Task Force the resources and support they need. Those who do choose to participate in gang life and gang crimes will be held fully accountable for their conduct.”