

Baker sees anti-gang group's work during Haverhill visit

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HAVERHILL — Gov. Charlie Baker stopped by UTEC's new office and drop-in center in Haverhill on Monday, where he met privately with a group of young men and women with past, serious criminal involvement.

He wanted to learn how a program like UTEC is helping them turn their lives around.

They shared their past challenges with the Republican governor, as well as their hopes for the future, and how they are working closely with the program's street outreach workers, UTEC officials said.

"A lot of them feel like they've been let down by most of the adults in their life," Baker said after his private meeting. "They don't feel like that's going to happen here."

The governor was referring to young adults who are working with UTEC and can be assured the program won't give up on them, even if they are incarcerated again, UTEC officials said.

"It's very clear that the team at UTEC sticks with them, stays with them, supports them and helps them figure out a better path," Baker added. "Some of these kids were telling me about what they were up to before they became part of this organization and what they're up to now. It's a night and day thing and it's working. It's special and it deserves our support."

UTEC's new drop-in space at 241 Winter St. opened informally about six months ago and a



Attending a roundtable discussion at UTEC's new Haverhill offices, are, from left, Essex County Sheriff Kevin Coppinger, state Rep. Linda Dean Campbell, D-Methuen, state Rep. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, state Rep. Christina Minicucchi, D-North Andover, UTEC street worker Mao Kang, and Police Chief Alan DeNaro. MIKE LABELLA/Staff photo

grand opening is planned for June 4.

In addition to Gov. Baker, also taking part in the discussion were Mayor James Fiorentini, Police Chief Alan DeNaro, Deputy Chief Anthony Haugh, Essex County Sheriff Kevin Coppinger, state Reps. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, Linda Dean Campbell, D-Methuen, Christina Minicucchi, D-North Andover, Lenny Mirra, R-West Newbury, and state Sen. Diana DiZoglio, D-Methuen.

DeNaro said the answer to combating gang activity is not necessarily putting more officers on the street, but rather, focusing on rehabilitation and lifestyle alternatives and not incarceration.

"We're an information conduit for UTEC rather than a pipeline to jail," DeNaro said. "If we can keep them out of the jail system, which doesn't work, we can focus

on lifestyle changes. Handcuffs don't work for the majority."

DeNaro said it will be a few years before the city sees measurable results as it takes time for a program such as UTEC to work.

Edison Mejia, 34, a transportation assistant with UTEC, told officials that he wishes the program was around when he was in his teens.

"I did 10 years in the system and now I want to help younger individuals not go down the path I went down," he said. "You've got to curb it when you're young, like 17, 18 and 19, as that's when you get into a criminal lifestyle. This program does work, and it gives them hope."

Eric Cruz, 25, a UTEC street worker, said he reached out to UTEC after a friend was killed due to gun violence.

"I didn't want it to happen no

more in my city," Cruz said. "I made it my duty to stop it and eight months, two weeks in, a lot of the gun violence decreased. I couldn't be happier to be part of the UTEC family. They showed me what a family really is."

Campbell joked that in the legislature, "everybody knows how to say UTEC now."

"We have to sell what we want to spend based on results," Campbell said about the fight to double the grant money in the house budget that would fund UTEC. "You do the one-on-one, the person-to-person that gets results. It was so easy to sell this."

UTEC received \$400,000 last year from the Safe and Successful



From left, state Rep. Linda Dean Campbell, D-Methuen, state Rep. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, Mayor James Fiorentini and Gov. Charlie Baker listen to Gregg Croteau, CEO of UTEC, discuss his program which helps prevent young men and women from continuing with gang and criminal activity.

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Youth Initiative (SSYI), led by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

Since taking office, the Baker administration has allocated a total of \$27.9 million for cities to implement SSYI. The governor's 2020 budget recommends funding SSYI at \$10 million, \$1.9 million above 2019, an increase of 23% to help expand the program to young women, according to the governor's office.

A women's pilot program is currently being implemented in Haverhill, Fall River, Lawrence and Lowell — all of which were prepared to begin serving young women in 2019. All sites will begin serving women in 2020.