

Alexandria Gang Prevention Community Task Force

Minutes

Wednesday

May 20, 2026

6 p.m. – 8 p.m.

901 Wythe St., Alexandria, VA 22314

- ❖ Please advise Chairman Dillon of any discrepancies regarding attendance. It is respectfully noted that Task Force members are expected to attend at least 75% of scheduled meetings. Please advise Chairman Dillon if you need to be excused.

Task Force Members Present: Jim Dillon (Chair, Business Community), Vice Mayor Bagley (City Council), Dana Wedeles (City Manager's Office), Rachael Dischner (Ferdinand T. Day Elementary School), Timothy Brannon (Francis C. Hammond Middle School), Aisha Ortiz (Alexandria City High School), Steve Nelson (African American Community), Marilyn Nevy Cruz (Latino Community), Reverend Anthony Oliver (Faith Based Community), Bryan Kirkes (Citizen At-Large), Frank Broomell (Citizen At-Large), and Clara Kwayke (Youth Representative).

Task Force Members Not Present: Councilman Abdel-Rahman Elnoubi (Alexandria City Council), Timothy Beaty (Alexandria School Board), and Madeline Barrientos Recintos (Youth Representative). .

Staff Group on Gangs Members Present: Yon Lambert (City Manager's Office), Dana Wedeles (OPA), Mike Mackey (CSU), Sherrif Sean Casey (ASO), Miguel Blancas (DCJS), Caitlin Sweeney (Adult Probation & Parole), and Victor Martin (ACPS).

Guests/Staff: Caitlin Brown (ALX Beyond), John Porter (ALX Beyond), Kennetra Wood (ACPS), Jasmine Coombs (DCHS), Lela Gormley (AYA), Olivia Bassing (AYA), Jeffrey Kwakye (ACPS Student), Liliana Janssen-Checa (NVFS),

Alexandria Gang Prevention Community Task Force Members:

1. Vice Mayor Sarah Bagley (Member, Alexandria City Council)
2. Councilman Abdel-Rahman Elnoubi (Member, Alexandria City Council)
3. Ms. Dana Wedeles (City Manager's Representative)
4. Mr. Timothy Beaty (Alexandria City School Board)
5. Mr. Tim Brannon (Middle School Representative)
6. Ms. Rachael Dischner (Elementary School Representative)
7. Mr. Steve Nelson (African American Community Representative)

8. Mr. Bryan Kirkes (Citizen Member, At-Large)
9. Mr. Jim Dillon (Chair/Business Community Representative)
10. Ms. Marilyn Nevy Cruz (Vice Chair/Latino Community Representative)
11. Reverend Anthony T. Oliver (Faith Based Community Representative)
12. Ms. Aisha Ortiz (Alexandria High School Representative)
13. Mr. Frank Broomell (Citizen Member, At-Large)
14. Ms. Clara Kwayke (At-Large, Representing Youth of the City)
15. Ms. Madeline Barrientos Recintos (At-Large, Representing Youth of the City)
16. Vacant (Resident or Representative of ARHA Properties)
17. Vacant (Parent of Youth)

1. Call to Order, Introductions, Roll Call: Chairman Dillon called the meeting to order at 6:05 p.m. All present confirmed their attendance.
2. Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes: There was a quorum to approve meeting minutes from the March meeting, and the minutes were approved.
3. City Council Opening Comments: None.
4. ALX Beyond Program Locator Presentation
 - Caitlin Brown, Executive Director with Alexandria Beyond the Classroom (ALX Beyond), presented an overview of the ALX Beyond Youth Program Locator and the broader efforts of the Youth Support Network (YSN) to connect Alexandria youth with expanded learning and out-of-school-time opportunities. The YSN, established in 2020 as a public-private partnership, includes more than 100 organizations and supports K–12 youth across the city.
 - Key findings from a 2023 community landscape study were shared, including feedback from 5,785 stakeholders. The study found that only about one-third of students participate in out-of-school-time programs, with participation declining significantly in middle and high school. One major recommendation was the creation of a centralized “hub” to improve access to opportunities and reduce barriers for youth and families.
 - Brown highlighted the development of the ALX Beyond Provider Portal and Youth Program Locator, powered by Cityspan. The system was created in response to provider feedback, with 75% of organizations expressing a need for a shared data and registration platform. The portal allows providers to maintain program information, while the locator helps families search for programs by age, grade level, program type, cost, and schedule.

- The Youth Program Locator is available in 12 languages and is accessible on desktop and mobile devices. Since its launch approximately 1.5 years ago, it has received about 7,500 views, with usage increasing following citywide and school-based communications. The locator currently features between 120 and 176 programs, more than 90 of which are free.
- Brown emphasized the importance of continued community engagement and promotion of the tool. She encouraged organizations to ensure their programs are listed and kept current, and asked partners to help establish permanent access points and regularly share the locator with youth, families, and community stakeholders.
- **Action Item:** Members were encouraged to promote the ALX Beyond Youth Program Locator within their networks and help identify opportunities for ongoing outreach and visibility. She emphasized the need for community ownership of the tool.
- Ms. Brown invited input on how to best promote the locator and build towards it having a permanent home or presence and long term impact on the community. Ms. Kwayke said she thinks partnering with the College and Career Readiness center would be a good idea.
- Ms. Brown also reiterated her main focus is on providing programming for middle schoolers. There was also discussion about the importance on focusing on youth who are transitioning to and from middle school.
- A question was raised about how Ms. Brown's initiative could be made more student-centered, as it currently appears to be geared primarily toward parents and adults.
- Discussion also focused on creating opportunities for students to apply skills such as computer programming and website development while contributing to the community, and ensuring students have a stronger voice in the outreach and student feedback process.
- A point was raised that the locator currently offers limited opportunities specifically for high school students, and participants discussed the need to expand options for this age group.
- Particular attention should be given to vulnerable youth populations, including immigrant and newcomer students who may feel disconnected from their schools and communities.
- Prevention efforts should focus on youth who are disengaged rather than students who are already connected to programs and activities.
- The transition from elementary school to middle school (especially 5th to 6th grade) was identified as a critical period for intervention.
- There was discussion about how youth programs should be designed around student interests rather than adult assumptions about what students should participate in.
- Students consistently reported in the landscape study that they want: Opportunities to spend time with friends, activities they consider fun, and programs that reflect their interests and identities
- A point was made about how schools and community organizations should actively seek input from less-engaged students when designing programs and services.

5. Youth Safety and Belonging Workgroup updates:

- Mr. Daniele shared his workgroup is focused on continued collaboration with the ALX Beyond and reviewing findings from the landscape study.
- He shared the group will develop an inventory of resources available through task force member organizations and connections, in order to address barriers that prevent youth participation, including transportation, awareness, scheduling, and accessibility.
- Mr. Dillon shared his group discussed recommendations for strengthening existing the Junior City Academy . Suggested improvements included: increased involvement from city departments and recreation staff; more interactive and hands-on experiences; greater program promotion through schools, teachers, counselors, and social media; better transportation options; allowing youth to help determine program schedules and formats; and increased focus on middle school students as a priority prevention population.

6. Staff Group on Gangs Updates:

- Staff reviewed IPE referral trends and intervention efforts.
- Many referrals continue to originate from specific areas of the city, mostly from the West End and Arlandria/Chirilagua communities.
- There was note about how seasonal increases in youth activity often lead to more conflict during warmer months.
- City Staff are examining patterns behind referrals to identify risk factors and collaborating on opportunities for earlier intervention.
- Members stressed the importance of distinguishing between youth involved in gangs, youth involved in crews or peer groups, and youth simply socializing with friends.
- Several participants cautioned against labeling groups of youth as gangs without clear evidence.
- There was mention of the school and community response to group on group fights or other incidents having gang undertones.
- School administrators and community partners discussed current challenges which included the following: most youth conflicts are highly individualized and difficult to predict, students often do not disclose underlying disputes until after incidents occur, family engagement is critical to prevention efforts, and parents are often unaware of conflicts or warning signs affecting their children.
- A takeaway from this portion of the discussion was that strong relationships between schools, families, and community organizations remain essential.
- There was also a conversation regarding the need for mental health and family support, as members highlighted growing mental health concerns among youth.
- Discussion focused on grief and trauma experienced by students, anxiety, depression, and social isolation, the impact of social media and excessive phone use, and the need for additional counseling and social work support.
- Participants expressed concern about budget reductions affecting mental health services and emphasized the importance of expanding preventative support.

- Mr. Mackey provided an overview of the Court Service Unit's lens and approach to its role in the intervention stage of addressing some of these community concerns.
- Dr. Martin acknowledged this perspective and offered that communication between providers at the different levels of response could be tightened up.
- Vice Mayor Bagley mentioned that the City is investing in enhancing and upgrading technology used at the courthouse and invited conversation and suggestions around innovative ways to spend that money, with one of the hopeful outcomes being enhancing participation and communication between different parties involved in the justice process.
- Vice Mayor Bagley later added that funding of \$123,000 was allocated for out-of-school-time staffing and therapeutic recreation seasonal staff. Staff will assess unmet space and staffing needs and return to City Council with options in early fall.

7. Gang Task Force Member Updates:

- Mr. Nelson discussed upcoming community cookouts and outreach events as opportunities to share information about available resources, connect with families, build trust within neighborhoods, and increase awareness of prevention programs.
- Members noted that youth benefit from consistent contact with caring adults, mentorship can be a powerful prevention strategy, effective programs are built on reliability and long-term engagement, and future prevention efforts should prioritize relationship-based approaches.
- Mr. Dillon and Mr. Daniele shared about the 2nd Gang Prevention Soccer Tournament in September and highlighted it as an opportunity for the Task Force to all have a hands on event.
- Vice Mayor Bagley referenced a budget allocation for expanding therapeutic recreation positions within RPCA. Ms. Wedeles noted that these positions would be distributed across all recreation centers rather than concentrated at the Lee Center. This initiative is part of the City's broader effort to bring therapeutic supports more directly into community settings.
- There was also discussion regarding the dissolution of the Youth Resource Unit (YRU) and how to address the service gap created by its closure.
- Ms. Ortiz emphasized that existing staff are overextended while trying to support high-need students and are only able to provide limited mentorship and outreach. She expects more proactive, school-based support groups through counseling and social work teams to address unmet student needs, including grief, anxiety, and substance use.
- She also highlighted the importance of early intervention and understanding underlying causes of behaviors such as vaping and disengagement, noting many students lack access to counseling after major life events.
- Finally, she noted how the former Youth Resource Unit played a critical bridging role between students and trusted adults, including school resource officers, and had suggested that even a reduced or limited presence could still provide meaningful support and improve student behavior and engagement.
- Ms. Dischner mentioned how Neighborhood Resource Officers are being re-assigned to different roles as well.

- Mr. Daniele reiterated a previous point he made regarding consistency, regardless of the individual, team, or agency that is building a relationship with a youth.
 - Vice Mayor Bagley and other meeting attendees held a discussion regarding the role and cost-effectiveness of officers versus school-based support staff in providing consistent youth engagement.
 - There was emphasis that both groups can have meaningful impact if caseloads are manageable, but argue that under current staffing levels, social workers are stretched too thin to be as effective. The discussion raises broader concerns about funding priorities, role expectations, and how to best provide sustained, relational support to students.
8. Public Comment:
- Jasmine Coombs made a comment regarding the expectations of school social workers to be consistent, which led to further discussion about on how different roles are perceived and valued, suggesting that social workers and teachers may be under-recognized despite their deep, ongoing engagement with students, while police officers may be more publicly celebrated despite different day-to-day functions.
9. Administrative Items:
- There is one vacancy on the Task Force: ARHA Resident or ARHA Representative.
 - Next Meeting: Wednesday, June 17, 2026, 6 - 8 p.m. at Charles Houston Recreation Center.

Remaining 2026 Meetings

June 17

September 16

November 18

10. Meeting Adjourn: 8:03 p.m.