

# ESPERANZA

*Project Proposal*

## **Project Summary**

### **The Problem**

Gang members and young men on the periphery of gangs represent one of Panama's most marginalized and problematic populations. The four street gangs[1] within Esperanza's focus area-- the historic district of Panama City (Casco Viejo)—comprise 120-160 members, whose criminal activities range from drug sales and petty crime to gun violence, threatening not only the neighborhood's residents and businesses, but also the public's opinion of the viability of the mixed-income community model that is trying to take root in Casco Viejo. Historically, the Panamanian authorities have used primarily repressive means to combat gangs in Casco Viejo, which have been repeatedly shown counter-productive over the long term. No long term secular programs have targeted this population in Casco Viejo.

### **Summarized Goals of the Project**

Esperanza seeks to be a model community-based program that intervenes in members into the broader community and transforming their areas of operation into safe zones for business, residents and tourists. The project's goals are:

1. To integrate a majority of the participants into mainstream society;
2. Work with the participants, private business and government authorities to transform the participant's immediate areas into safe zones with touristic appeal and opportunities for micro-businesses, including businesses owned by participants;
3. Change perceptions of the participants by the community, outsiders and the authorities; and Connect the former gang member's dependents and families with other community programs that can help break their cycle of poverty.

### **Expected Results of the Project**

Based on results from the pilot concluded in October 2013, over the next 24 months we expect:

1. Up to 160 participants will go through the program (with an expected graduation rate of 70%);
2. Almost all graduates will demonstrate significantly higher levels of individual integration with formal society, with approximately 70 acquiring full time employment, returning to school or entering drug treatment programs;
3. Several small businesses will be created, likely by the young men currently leading the gangs;
3. Three currently marginal streets will become integrated with the rest of the

- community;
4. A significant number of women and children related to the gangs will enroll in other community programs; and
  5. Each of the four gangs cease to self-identify as a gang and cease to depend on or regularly engage in illegal activity.

### **Collaborating Partners**

Esperanza's partners are:

1. Fundacion Calicanto's CAPTA and Enlaces programs for participants dependants;
2. The National Police and SPI, who attend meetings, activities and graduations with the participants;
3. The Cuerpo de Bomberos, who provide first-aid training and also attend program functions.
4. The Asociation of Friends and Neighbors of Casco Antiguo (AVACA), who help connect Casco Viejo businesses and residents with program participants for employment, mentoring, community work and seed capital for their businesses.
5. INADEH provides technical training for participants who have specific career goals.
6. We have meet with representatives of PROSI to discuss ways of working

together if and when PROSI enters Casco Viejo.

**Program Narrative**—the goals and objectives of the project relative to the problem statement

While the exact causes of gang mobilization and membership are a subject of considerable scholarly debate, two things are clear: (1) the root causes have to do with social disorganization in urban ghettos (with its attendant causes and consequences) [2]; and (2) gang members are a highly-marginalized population, whose lack of formal ties to society are the primary obstacle to treatment[3]. Because gangs are a symptom of complex community problems, short term, simplistic approaches to prevention and intervention, let alone repression, rarely work[4].

Esperanza takes a long-term, holistic approach that treats the problem at the individual, group and community level, with a particular focus on integrating its participants into their community (and therefore broader society).[5] Esperanza's ultimate goal is for participants to remain in our community as productive members, rather than to be displaced to prisons or other neighborhoods. Prior experience in Casco Viejo has led Esperanza's founders to believe that the presence of reformed gang members in our community increases social cohesion and avoids creating a vacuum into which other criminal elements might enter.

We define integration on three levels: group, individual and geographic. At a group level integration means that the group ceases to self-identify as a gang and ceases to depend on or regularly engage in illegal activity[6]. With respect to an individual, integration also requires the establishment of ties between the individual and society, measured by: (a) formal employment or legal entrepreneurial activities; (b) regular participation in educational, civic, athletic or religious organizations, (c) participation in the political process, (d) renting or owning a residence; (e) use of public services and formal economic system; (f) understanding and regular exercise of legal rights and responsibilities; and (g) establishment of “loose tie” relationships beyond family and former gang mates. On a geographic level, integration means the physical improvement of streets where the participants live and erosion of negative perceptions of the street by the broader community.

The program leverages several unique characteristics of the historic district that allow it to approach integration from multiple angles, over a relatively long period of time and with focus on individual development, group dynamics and improvement of the participants’ environment. The characteristics that allow this are: a quickly growing tourism industry that creates opportunities for employment and small businesses; commitment of Casco Viejo business leaders to providing opportunities for participants to remain in the community rather than lobbying for displacement to other parts of the city; a forward-thinking population of new residents willing to put resources and effort into the integration process; and a sense of motivation and urgency created by

pressure from repressive tactics by police and accelerating displacement of indigenous population. Adding to the motivation (a critical element) is word of the success of graduates from Esperanza's pilot program.

While the community conditions in Casco Viejo are favorable for integration, they are not sufficient. Participants limited educations, job and social skills and high degrees of emotional trauma, prevent them from taking advantage of the opportunities brought by the improving fortunes of their neighborhood.

Espranza's approach has been developed over several years, starting with a predecessor MIDES/MIVI program in which Esperanza's technical team and private sector sponsors played key roles. Following the departure of the predecessor program from Casco Viejo, the former technical team and private sector sponsors began an analysis of the predecessor's successes and failures, obtaining a grant from Massachusetts Institute of Technology to visit and learn from gang re-integration programs in North America. Upon determining that a private-sector led approach was feasible, the team began a pilot program in June of 2013 with 16 members of a gang located on Calle 4a in Casco Viejo, registered by the Policia Nacional as "Hot Boys". Of the 16 members who participated in the pilot, 12 graduated and five are currently working and two are enrolled in a soccer school supervised by one of the program's psychologists. The former gang's leader has started his own business, a successful bar and recording studio called "La Vecindad." Though the Policia Nacional's gang register has not yet been

updated, our view (and that of the former members) is that Hot Boys no longer exists.

The resulting program activities are as follows:

1. An eight week program for up to 20 participants at a time, consisting of emotional development, professional development, job placement, neighborhood improvement, life skills, and civic rights and responsibilities;
2. work with partner organizations to provide entrepreneurial training, seed capital and support for selected graduates who demonstrate entrepreneurial capabilities and want to start street-level businesses;
3. support program graduates with long term mentoring, training on their civic rights and responsibilities, and individual and group psychological counseling;
4. create ongoing community service platform for graduates maintain their improved interaction with and perception by the community;
5. support local employers of graduates with counseling and assistance accessing public funding available for first time hires and hiring of minors;
6. work with the gangs, private business and government authorities to transform the gangs' immediate areas into safe zones with touristic appeal;
7. connect the former gang members dependents and families with other community programs; and



8. build connections and trust between former gang members and their communities, including police and fire departments.

### **Sustainability Plan**

While Esperanza's mission in Casco Viejo will be mostly complete at the end of 24 months, the project intends to keep some of the support and mentoring activities ongoing in Casco Viejo. Following completion of the 24 months, Esperanza may continue moving into Santa Ana and El Chorillo, as conditions in those areas ripen for the program's approach.

Esperanza's primary funding platform is the "Esperanza Social Venture Club", whose members donate \$25 or \$50 per month and receive discounts in Casco Viejo businesses, invitations to social events and individualized updates on participants' progress. The ultimate goal of the Club is to have 500 members donating an average of \$30 per month, which would make the program sustainable indefinitely. In the two months since its founding, the Club has signed up [ ] members, with the goal of reaching 500 within 24 months.

Esperanza provides an entry into mainstream society for gang members who want to participate in the economic and social mobility opportunities around them, avoiding the alternative of being left to repressive police programs or to moving to areas of the

city where the ground for gang activity is still fertile. Esperanza's ultimate goal is for gang members in Casco Viejo, and possibly later in other similar areas, to have the opportunity to become productive members of their quickly improving communities.

Esperanza's intervention model is to work with existing gang structures once we detect a high degree of interest in abandoning gang activity. This "bridge building" process is followed by a two day retreat where an in-depth diagnostic tool is applied to all members and the program's basic concepts and ground rules are discussed. If the retreat is deemed successful and interest in abandoning gang activity remains high, the group immediately begins a six-week program of personal development, skills identification, group and individual therapy and job placement.

Individuals with high leadership potential and entrepreneurial ambition (typically leaders) are diverted to an entrepreneurial track, which has the secondary purpose of allowing younger members to participate more openly in the personal development process, which begins to reduce gang cohesiveness.

The six week process is highly dynamic and tailored to the group based on indicators from the diagnostic tool applied at the retreat. The classroom is completely mobile, so that it can be Typical modules include: emotional development, self-esteem, victimization, domestic violence

--Intervention and integration. Esperanza's primary methodology is approaching active gangs and offering a large-scale re-integration program that provides comprehensive personal development, professional development, job placement, entrepreneurship training and seed capital for start-up enterprises.

--Ex prisoner re-entry. Some of Esperanza's participants have recently been released from incarceration.

Skills training, anger control, moral education, social intervention,

Convert gangs from fighting units into pro-social units.

Group guidance, group activities.

[1] We define Casco Viejo as the UNESCO World Heritage Site area, which includes all of the San Felipe Corregimiento and part of Santa Ana (up to 15th Street). The most recent statistics available to us from the Ministerio de Seguridad report four gangs in San Felipe, eight in Santa Ana and 14 in El Chorillo. We believe that there are actually only currently two active gangs in San Felipe comprising approximately 60 members, as one of the four reported by MinSeg has disbanded following Esperanza's pilot program and a second moved from the area several years ago. Within the portion of Santa Ana included in Casco Viejo there are two additional gangs, totaling an additional 60-70 members and peripherals.

[2] Chicago School

[3] Cite

[4] Cite

[5] Cite

[6] We use the commonly accepted Eurogang definition of a "durable street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity" broadly to also include young men who commonly associate with local gangs but may not be registered as or self-identify as members of that gang.