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Detroit Public Schools, city cops vow to cooperate

Residents criticize departments for squabbling over turf

George Hunter / The Detroit News

Detroit-- Norma Hernandez looked outside her office window one recent afternoon and saw several known gang members lurking on the sidewalk.

The principal of the Phoenix Academy in southwest Detroit called school police for help with what she felt was a brewing gang situation. Hernandez, whose K-8 students include members of the Latin Counts, Cash Flow Posse and Sureño gangs, was told Detroit Public School officers were deployed to another emergency and wouldn't be able to respond.

Hernandez then dialed Detroit Police -- but when a squad car arrived 15 minutes later, she said, the officers told her the situation was a job for school police.

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"They just told me, 'DPS will handle this.' Then they drove away, leaving me there amongst a bunch of gang members," Hernandez said. "I felt totally abandoned -- and it's not the first time something like that has happened."

The incident underscores what some residents and law enforcement officials say is a longstanding rift between the city's and school district's police officers. Detroit Police officials acknowledge there often has been confusion over the two agencies' roles and disputes over jurisdiction.

When Detroit Police Chief Warren Evans ran for mayor last year, he promised to implement a school safety plan that he said had been rejected "because DPS security was concerned about protecting their turf."

The perceived wrangling over turf was a contentious topic during a recent meeting at Western High School, in which students and educators called for the city and DPS officers to put aside their differences to better respond to school emergencies.

Some complained that the lack of coordination between agencies resulted in slow response time -- or no response at all.

Evans and Detroit Public Schools Police Chief Roderick Grimes pledged to try to heal the rift, which they said existed before they took over.

"I'd be happy to sit down and work out a plan that would help our departments work together," Evans said.

Grimes, who was hired earlier this year, echoed Evans' pledge. "There's no question (Detroit Police and DPS Police) could be better coordinated," he said.

Detroit Police 2nd Deputy Chief John Roach said the two agencies have worked better together since Evans became chief in July.

Part of the confusion over turf, Roach said, is that the areas of jurisdiction can get muddled.

"If there's a call for a disturbance at a school, that's DPS' call, but when it's close to school property, that's where it can get confusing," Roach said. "And the confusion isn't all on our end. Sometimes the citizens are confused as to who has what jurisdiction."

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DPS Police Chief Roderick Grimes, hired earlier this year, said he's willing to work with the Detroit Police Department. (David Coates / The Detroit News)

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