

## From the Desk of Sheriff Jim Coats

By East Lake Blister Staff  
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Cleaning up graffiti and cleaning up their record. This is the aim of a new community service program for youth launched by the Sheriff's Office. The new "Graffiti Response Program" uses the volunteer hours of kids who have committed minor crimes in an effort to stop the flood of graffiti that has that is plaguing areas of Pinellas County.

The kids volunteer to perform the service hours through the Sheriff's Office Diversion Program and through it, are provided with a way to perform community service to avoid criminal prosecution. In addition, the program helps alleviate the burden on the court system from minor first time offenses, while offering kids a second chance.

Graffiti is a growing problem in several areas in Pinellas County and is in some cases gang related. The Sheriff's Office has formed a partnership with the community organization Faith and Action for Strength Together (F.A.S.T.) to address this issue through the Graffiti Response Program.

The volunteers to the Graffiti Response Program will work off community service hours as determined by the diversion program by cleaning and/or painting structures which have been damaged and defaced by graffiti. Most property owners are quick to fix the damage themselves; however there are those abandoned properties that are eye sores in the rest of the community. While these are the properties that the program hopes to target, the program is also available to help some homeowners who request the assistance. In a recent case, a homeowner provided the paint and supplies, and the youth provided the labor. The hope is that the program will deter kids from committing crimes or joining gangs, while at the same time provide a service to the community; and that the community will be able to see results.

The program currently has ten volunteers; and the teens who have been assigned to perform this community service in lieu of prosecution for minor offenses have already been hard at work wiping out graffiti on various occasions since November. Their duties have included locations both privately owned and public located as far north as Dunedin and as far south as Lealman.

The Community Education and Programs Unit which coordinates the schedule of the Graffiti Response Program plans to have the group out about twice a month.

It is important to remember that graffiti is a crime. The Sheriff's Office asks citizens to report graffiti when they see it so that it can be investigated. Later, it may come to be tackled by the Graffiti Response Program.

Our deputies are already hearing from the volunteers about how the program is causing them to re-examine themselves and their actions, raising their awareness, providing a positive influence while improving the look of the community. While it may be just a fresh coat of paint for some, for the kids it means an opportunity at a fresh start.

For more information about the Graffiti Response Program contact the Sheriff's Office Community Services Section/Community Education and Programs Unit at (727) 582-6200.