

Move Up decides to move in



MATT NICHOLS/Special to The Star
 "We want to promote self-reliance. When we leave, we want them to be empowered," Riccardo Lewis says of Move Up's initiative to help residents of the Hilltop Townhomes near 20th Street and Topping Avenue. Children helped Lewis distribute fliers on Saturday.

Group hopes presence spurs change in complex

By KAREN UHLENHUTH
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 The Kansas City Star

The scene was frolicsome, with children sporting headgear made of twisted balloons and dashing through the spray from a firefighter's hose. But the mission Saturday at Hilltop Townhomes was quite serious.

Leaders from Move Up, a grass-roots community organization, had decided to tackle crime and apathy in the troubled East Side apartment complex by setting up operations in an apartment. Members of the group will

take turns living and working in the four-bedroom apartment during the next month. In a similar event two years ago, the group camped out six days at another of Kansas City's trouble spots — the intersection of 39th Street and Prospect Avenue — in an effort to jettison drug dealers and other criminals.

On Saturday, group members also launched "30 Ways in 30 Days," an effort to bring a range of services — and, they hope, more attention — to this community of about 1,600 people.

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In a blot of shade cast by a large open-air tent, employees from KJL Med asked Hilltop residents questions about diet and exercise, took blood samples and measured blood pressure. They then advised the residents how they could improve their health by changing certain habits.

Throughout this month, Move Up will bring parenting instruction, children's recreational activities, anger management sessions, sickle cell anemia education and more to the neighborhood, a collection of 304 row houses on 34 acres on a rise abutting 20th Street and Topping Avenue.

Many residents of Hilltop, most of them single mothers, lobbied Move Up to move in and establish a beachhead against the neighborhood's lawless element. In a letter to the community organization, one woman wrote, "I would like to be able to sit on my porch and go outside."

Riccardo Lucas, the event's organizer, said he hopes the woman will be able to.

"It's not too much to ask to sit on a porch to catch a breeze without catching a bullet," Lucas said.

The low-income neighborhood has been plagued by open-market drug dealing and violent crime, according to police statistics and residents who completed nearly 100 surveys for Move Up.

Problems can "kick off" at any moment, said June McKinney, who moved into a town house two months ago.

When a drug-related nucleus erupted on a floor above in the middle of McKinney's first night there, she said, "I was on my knees praying."

Said Lucas: "Unfortunately these are the circumstances in this neighborhood and a lot of other neighborhoods in the city."

Many residents expressed support for the community service marathon. They also have started a residents association. Lucas said Move Up also wants to help residents set up mediation, literacy and nutritional programs.

"We want to promote self-reliance," he said. "When we leave, we want them to be empowered."

Move Up invited other agencies to participate in the marathon, including the Kansas City Police Athletic League, the city Health Department, and the Parks and Recreation Department.

partment.

City officials and local celebrities also have been invited to spend a few nights at the Move Up "pad." City Councilman Troy Nash is moving into another home at Hilltop to help in the effort.

Lucas is adamant that Move Up can only bring attention to the problems at Hilltop. Other agencies must step up to address the problems long term, he said.

"We have substance abuse users in this neighborhood. Who deals with substance abuse?" he said. "We have crime in this neighborhood. Who deals with crime?"

McKinney, a minister who leads a congregation at Hilltop, said she worries that when Move Up moves out, the group will leave a vacuum that will be filled by the usual cast of drug dealers and car thieves. The long-term answer lies within, she said.

"The people here's gonna have to do the changing," she said.

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To help residents of Hilltop Townhomes rid the area of crime, Riccardo Lewis (left) organized an effort in which members of the community group Move Up will live and work in the apartment complex. City Councilman Troy Nash is moving into another home at Hilltop to assist in the effort.

KEITH MEYERS/The Kansas City Star