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**HEADLINE: MEETING ON GANGS: 'I HOPE IT DOESN'T
END HERE'**

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BODY:

Little Rock needs to solve its gang problem and reduce the number of young bodies in the morgue, concluded a gang violence panel that met Wednesday night on Arkansas Educational Television Network.

"Gang Violence: Arkansas Responds" was a statewide "town meeting" of community leaders, gang violence experts, parents of gang members, law enforcement officials and imprisoned gang members.

AETN produced the program in a response to the HBO documentary "Gang War: Bangin' in Little Rock," aired Tuesday night. The film is a straightforward look at the gangs that roam Little Rock and North Little Rock neighborhoods. Highlights include a gang branding, a drive-by shooting and frank discussion by gang members.

AETN interspersed the panel discussion with film clips of the documentary. After a segment featuring interviews with gang members' parents, Rita Misenheimer spoke about the "loss" of her son to gangs.

Misenheimer's son, Justin Pearson, now 18, joined a gang in St. Louis and sought out gangs in Little Rock when he moved to Arkansas. Pearson, who is white, joined a racially mixed gang. He is shown in the film hanging out with other gang members and later serving time in jail for armed robbery.

It was his first offense. He is serving 12 years in the state prison system's Varner Unit.

"I knew Justin was having problems ... but I was one of those naive mothers," Misenheimer said.

She said Pearson was drawing gang symbols, but she thought he was just artistic. When she did discover he was in a gang, people told her there was no law against joining a gang. She said she hit a dead end.

"It was pounded into my head, there's no law against being in a gang," she said. "You feel isolated. You can't pluck your child back into home and shake them and make them see what they're doing wrong."

Things are improving for Pearson, his mother said. Misenheimer said he joined a church and earned his general educational development certificate after he was arrested. He wants to work with troubled youths when he gets out of prison, he said.

Though Pearson wasn't rescued early, Misenheimer said other children can be saved. She said the AETN program was helpful but that now action is needed. "I just hope it doesn't end here," Misenheimer said.

Panel members agreed that Arkansas needs to start offering programs and resources for children who are drawn into gangs.

North Little Rock Police Chief William Nolan said his city has started cleaning up problem neighborhoods, targeting truants and enforcing a juvenile curfew law.

"We've got to do it not only on a city basis but a neighborhood basis," North Little Rock Mayor Patrick Henry Hays said.

"We've got to get angry ... angry at the problem," Hays said.

Pulaski County Coroner Steve Nawojczyk, who helped with the HBO film, works on the streets trying to make youths understand there are other options besides gangs.

"There are more good kids than bad kids. Kids join for identification, recognition, ... belonging and love," Nawojczyk said. "A lot of them do not have this at home. But we still have kids on the street that will kill you because of the way you look at them."

The Rev. Hezekiah D. Stewart of Watershed Human & Community Development Agency said children need to know they are cared for and loved. Many join gangs because of absent or uncaring parents, Stewart said.

Little Rock School Superintendent Henry Williams said the city needs to develop "beacon schools." Under that concept, Williams said, each community would have one school that would be open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to serve parents and children.

After producer Marc Levin made the HBO documentary, many Arkansans were outraged and upset at the negative image they said it created.

Levin said Wednesday that he chose to focus on Little Rock to show that the gang problem is not just a Los Angeles or Chicago phenomenon.

"The idea was never to make Little Rock look bad but to wake all of America up," Levin said.

The station received 688 calls during the program.

One call was from a 13-year-old who was considering joining a gang. He said the program changed his mind.

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