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Latino families get anti-gang advice in Lincoln

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Dozens of Latino families gathered in a school auditorium Sunday to hear from an expert how they can link traditional cultural values to modern mental health services – and hopefully avoid a gang problem.

Such meetings are not new in communities dealing with urban crime. What's surprising is that this event took place in Lincoln, a rural town dealing with demographic change.

"Strong Families & Great Communities" featured Roberto Dansie, a psychologist who laced his presentation with jokes and songs to provide a "psychology of hope" that could reduce problems of "isolation, depression, gangs."

Lucha Balderas, a longtime Lincoln resident who helped arrange Dansie's talk, said she worries about a growing gang culture. Balderas said that with Southern Californians moving to the fast-growing area, many young Latinos were becoming involved in battles between the Norteños and Sureños street gangs, which have plagued urban communities in California.

"It hurts my heart for kids from the same country to be fighting each other," she said.

Placer County mental health officials organized and paid for the event with funds from a federal grant and California's Proposition 63, which provides money for local mental health programs.

Cindy Brundage, a program manager with the Placer County Children's System of Care, said the county is on a mission to reach out to traditionally underserved communities.

"We want to help families understand the mental health and substance abuse issues their children may be facing," she said.

Dansie will conduct a training session today for county providers of mental health care.

On Sunday, Dansie urged his audience to see mental health disorders in a broader context of culture, history, diet and behavior.

"We have an epidemic of depression," Dansie said during a break in his Spanish-language presentation. "Through culture and the wisdom of our ancestors, we have many resources."

During more than two hours on the stage at Lincoln High School, Dansie advocated everything from a better diet to learning English, even if it's just one new word each day.

Dansie said the best way to learn was the way children do.

"If you want to learn something well, get excited about it," he said. "A person who is excited is

attentive and concentrates."

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