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A plan to help young black males

A Times Editorial

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State Rep. Frank Peterman of St. Petersburg is on a mission to save black males in Florida. And Peterman, who represents mostly black House District 55, has a plan. During the last legislative session, he sponsored HB 21, "Council on the Social Status of African-American Men and Boys." This does not appear to be just another study commission.

The bill, which became law last month, creates a 19-member council to be appointed by the governor that will "make a systematic study of the conditions affecting African-American men and boys, including, but not limited to, the homicide rates, arrest and incarceration rates, poverty, violence, drug abuse, death rates, disparate annual income levels, school performance in all grade levels including postsecondary levels, and health issues." The attorney general's office will administer the council, and taxpayers will pay an estimated \$182,751 annually for three full-time employees, office space and other expenses.

Although critics contend the effort is yet another feel-good initiative that will waste tax dollars, Peterman deserves credit for earnestly trying to reverse what appears to be an intractable crisis. No one else in Tallahassee has offered such a sensible plan.

"When you look at what's happening statewide with regard to blacks and crime, there are high numbers of black males who are killing one another," he said. "We hope to put together a council that will create policy. We don't want to put something together and put it on a shelf as a mere statistical document. I believe, like many researchers do, that this is a public health issue as much as it is a public safety issue. It has a lot of the same characteristics of a disease to some degree."

Grim statistics justify Peterman's concerns. According to the Harvard Medical School's Consumer Health Information Center, almost 12 percent of black males suffer from depression and less than 16 percent seek needed mental health treatment. A Justice Department study shows that in 2003, more than 9 percent of all black males age 26 to 29 were incarcerated. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that homicide is the leading cause of death for black males between the ages of 15 and 34.

Peterman said that in addition to establishing an institute, he intends to create "small black male academies" throughout black communities statewide. He will enlist the help of local governments and religious, community and school organizations willing to help young black males learn, among other behaviors, the value of doing homework, talking

civilly with others, solving problems nonviolently, respecting authority and respecting their peers.

To their credit, Gov. Jeb Bush and Attorney General Charlie Crist have embraced the initiative. Now Peterman needs to persuade the state's black residents to commit to the long and difficult work ahead. After all, the future of black men is at stake.

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RESPONSE

RE: A plan to help young black males

I applaud Rep Frank Peterman's idea, and Governor Bush's support of, the initiative to address the crisis affecting young black males in our community today. It is paramount that education is included in this essential effort.

As a former public school educator I saw firsthand the high rate of failure and expulsions of young black boys. After retiring, I opened a small private school to serve grades kindergarten through fifth grade, predominantly black boys, in south Pinellas County. I knew these children needed something different than what was offered in the public school system.

Everyday our students learn exactly what you stated "the value of doing homework, talking civilly with others, solving problems nonviolently, respecting authority and respecting their peers."

Thanks to the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship and John McKay Scholarship programs 50 financially needy, minority children can attend our school this year and get a new chance in life. Hopefully Frank Peterman will be open to allowing private schools that serve voucher students a seat at the table as this commission drafts a plan for, as you described it, this "intractable crisis".

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