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Neighborhood role key in homeland defense

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An official with the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development said this week he is impressed with Chattanooga residents' efforts to improve their neighborhoods.

"I have never seen this in Region 4, and this is the fourth annual (neighborhoods) conference here," said Jim Chaplin, Southeast regional director for HUD.

Mr. Chaplin gave the keynote address at the city's neighborhoods conference, which was attended by more than 530 residents and 40 vendors. The conference ended Friday after a day of community builder workshops. Lutena Lewis was among those who gathered at the Chattanooga-Hamilton County convention and Trade Center to attend neighborhood development seminars and hear Mr. Chaplin's address.

"It's motivating and helps us to address things in our community," she said.

Col. John Mogan, deputy director of the Tennessee Office of Homeland Security, told neighborhood representatives their help is needed in homeland defense.

"We had neighborhoods in Florida that actually had terrorists living among people," he said. "It's a consideration that you need to know your neighbors."

Col. Mogan asked residents in Neighborhood Watch organizations to expand their focus from looking for signs of crime to looking for signs of terrorism, such as unusual types of gatherings, abandoned vehicles or "anything out of the ordinary."

In his talk, Mr. Chaplin used Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Mel Martinez as an example to inspire residents and remind them of opportunities available in this country.

Mr. Martinez came to the United States at age 16, without his parents and unable to speak English, Mr. Chaplin said. Years later he became an attorney and was appointed by President Bush to be HUD secretary, he said.

"Where is the next young Mel Martinez? Is he in our neighborhoods in Chattanooga, Tennessee?" Mr. Chaplin said.

He also commended Chattanooga city officials for getting the **Renewal Communities** designation, and talked about the national goal of ending homelessness in 10 years. Instead of providing a "continuum of care," officials plan to focus more on preventing homelessness, he said.

The homeless community is only 10 percent of the population but consumes nearly half of the resources made available by HUD, Mr. Chaplin said.

He said one way neighborhoods can help end homelessness is by helping to promote more home ownership. Home ownership doesn't begin when a deal is closed, it starts when a person gets a job, he said.

"The skill and development to get a job starts in the neighborhood, at home," Mr. Chaplin said.

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