San Diego police Officer Patti Clayton is on the front lines of community-oriented policing.

In a cluttered storefront in a crowded strip mall on University Avenue in City Heights, Clayton is the guiding hand behind an innovative program to decrease crime and improve police relations among young refugees from East African countries.

With a $300,000 federal grant from the Office of Refugee Settlement, Clayton started a program three years ago that faced daunting challenges from the start.

Crime among the African youths on San Diego streets was escalating. Gangs were proliferating. Burglaries, vandalism, assaults and truancies were becoming the norm.

"On my patrols, I would see refugee youths loitering on street corners; they appeared aimless and lost," Clayton said. "They started getting into trouble, stealing golf carts, fistfighting, being truant."

When officers tried to intervene and help in certain situations, the refugees reacted with mistrust, even hate. They would not even report crime.

Police were the enemy.

Clayton said the anti-police attitude among youths was a throwback to life in their homeland, places such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, where anybody in a uniform was to be feared. Police were corrupt and violent. Ditto the military. Warlords ruled.

When their families fled to America in the 1990s, the youths brought these so-called anti-uniform attitudes with them. Clayton set out to change all that.

There are now an estimated 20,000 East African refugees living in San Diego -- many with a whole new attitude toward police. There is trust and hope. Some officers, such as Clayton, are regarded as family or friend.

It wasn't an easy transition. If the language barrier weren't enough, police had to deal with huge cultural divides.

Capt. Bob Kanaski, commander of the Mid-City division where many of the refugees live, remembers an incident when officers responding to a domestic violence call at an apartment building entered without taking off their boots.
"The officers didn't realize the residence was a holy place, and they weren't supposed to walk in with boots on," Kanaski said.

In Clayton's first weeks in the job as the community relations officer at the Multi-Cultural Storefront near 54th Street, she reached out to about a dozen organizations that dealt with the African refugees.

A Somali, Muktar Hirsi, was hired as a community service officer and became a valuable addition.

Clayton also met with parents and youths, teaching the way police can help them deal with juvenile crime, domestic violence, child abuse and identity theft.

She got the youths involved in community service. There were neighborhood cleanups and organized athletic events. Gradually, there was a level of trust with police that was not there before.

Now many youths hang out at the storefront, where they can use computers to help with schoolwork. A Web site (www.eayo.com) has been set up for them to keep track of activities.

Crime is on the decline among the refugees aged 13-18, Kanaski said.

He believes the effort is the finest example of community policing at work.

"It's getting results," Kanaski said.

There are some bumps ahead.

The grant money runs out in September and new funding must be found.

City budget woes may force the storefront to close, and community service officers vital to the program to be laid off.

But that may not deter Abdikarim Warsame, 19, perhaps the best example of the program's success. Warsame just joined the police cadets.

He wants to be a cop.

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Caption: 2 PICS
1. STUDY TIME -- Fatuma Guyo (left) and Salma Ugas worked on a high school project yesterday at a Police Department storefront in City Heights as Officers Patti Clayton and Muktar Hirsi watched. (B-1:7; B-5:2) 2. San Diego police Officer Patti Clayton of the
Multi-Cultural Storefront in City Heights has had success in reaching out to young East African refugees. (Ed. 1) 1,2. K.C. Alfred / Union Tribune
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