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# COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING IN SMALL TOWNS

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**O**ver the past few years, a good deal of attention in local government and law enforcement literature has been focused on "Community-Oriented Policing." When people hear that term, many different visions come to mind □ those of officers on foot patrol, bike patrols, returning to permanent neighborhood beats for officers, establishment of neighborhood resource centers, and the like.

What people sometimes fail to realize is that community-oriented policing is not just foot patrols or bike patrols or neighborhood beats. Those are simply tools of the trade. Community-oriented policing is a philosophy of law enforcement that must permeate the law enforcement organization to be successful. It is the manifestation of this philosophy that often results in the development of neighborhood beats, foot patrols, and other mechanisms to improve the level of service to the community.

The philosophy of community-oriented policing is a vision of the law enforcement agency as a customer service-based entity. This vision must begin at the highest levels of the organization and be regularly reinforced. Police agencies that succeed with community-oriented policing initiatives are those that have a strong directive from elected and appointed leaders that the main focus of the agency is to provide effective, courteous service to those it serves.

Effective community policing organizations focus not just on the traditional reactive aspects of law enforcement; they also try to be pro-active in dealing with issues. One basic premise is that, while it is great to have a good record as an agency of responding to and solving crimes, it is an even better allocation of resources to work to prevent a crime from occurring in the first place. Being pro-active can mean many different things depending upon the setting. Additional education programs for youths, establishing relationships between an agency's officers and neighborhood residents, and having officers notice environmental and nuisance issues such as weeds and abandoned vehicles in areas can all play a hand in preventing an area from deteriorating into a haven for criminal activity

in the future.

The techniques that are most often trumpeted in the media as examples of successful community policing efforts typically involve large, central cities, places where neighborhoods can be fairly well-defined and where certain neighborhoods seem to be particularly troubled with crimes and violent activity. Elected and appointed officials in smaller communities, though, should be aware that the philosophy of, and concepts associated with, community policing are also applicable for small towns and villages. In some instances, larger communities are taking their cues from smaller towns.

In most communities in Illinois, the entire city is essentially one neighborhood. In smaller towns where the city staff is small and there are no full-time building and health inspectors, the police are the only employees on the job in city vehicles after normal working hours. Finally, in most smaller towns, the response call activity would not prevent officers, during the day, from doing some community-oriented activities. The combination of these factors makes small towns the ideal location for implementing community-oriented policing.

Once the elected and appointed leadership of the community makes a decision to focus the police department on community-oriented activities, the tools to make that vision a reality can be in hand. It is vitally important throughout the process of community-oriented policing for the leadership of the department to continually reinforce the police department's mission and work to make the mission part of the organizational culture of the department.

Once that culture is ingrained in the department and the officers individually, the tools of community-oriented policing such as foot patrols, bike patrols, and additional education programs can fall into place. Without hiring a slew of additional officers to be permanently assigned to specific beats or spending a great deal of additional money, the typical small, rural community with a police department of 5 to 20 officers can incorporate community-oriented policing into its programming.

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Rather than constant "preventive" patrolling, especially during the early morning hours, officers can be assigned responsibility for such things as checking for violations of city weed ordinances, junk and unlicensed vehicle enforcement, and street lights that might be inoperable. All of these issues, while not traditional law enforcement in the reactive sense, can be a portent of problems to come if the community does not take action. This is a major new program in many larger communities, but many small town departments already utilize their personnel for these types of activities.

In addition, officers in small towns, especially during the day shift, can often be

made available for short periods to perform a variety of functions separate from the traditional law enforcement function. Officers can foot patrol through the business district, meet with business owners and customers informally, play ball in the park with a group of kids, make a presentation to a local civic organization, or present an educational program at the schools.

Initially, once a community-policing program is introduced, a few comments about officers on-duty "wasting" time with these activities, particularly the foot patrols or playing kickball with school kids at recess, may be expressed. However, I have always felt that there is a lot more good that can be done by an officer spending time with people, getting to know them and their problems and concerns than can ever be done riding by faceless behind the rolled up window of a squad car. As these efforts take root in your communities and problems are nipped in the bud, those negative expressions will be heard less and less often.

There are a myriad of educational programs that can be instituted in schools today by local police departments, including DARE and Officer Friendly programs in the lower grades, and such programs as DUI Prevention in high school drivers ed classes and substance abuse in high school health classes. Beyond those formal educational programs, though, it is the informal interaction with kids that can make community policing programs successful. With more single-parent and dual career families today, officers can serve as role models for our youths, but only if the officers are willing to take the time and make the effort. The philosophy and tools of community-oriented policing make that time and effort possible.

Some communities could be better served by deploying a full-time officer to work with youths at the school rather than putting that officer out on patrol in the traditional law enforcement sense. By working with the youths it is possible to reduce that need for constant, reactive patrolling and responding to incidents, as the number of incidents involving youths should decline over a period of time.

Selling the idea of a full-time youth officer working in the schools as a positive, pro-active effort rather than as a reaction to a problem can be a difficult task. As is the case with many community-oriented policing initiatives, though, the positive results of the endeavor in the long run will, hopefully outweigh the negatives associated with trying to get the initial program put into place. With the persistence and vision of our elected and appointed leaders in small cities, the tenets of community-oriented policing can be ingrained in the lifeblood of small communities in the same manner that it is taking root in our larger cities.

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