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Alternative Neighborhood Crime Prevention Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The success of police involvement within the local community requires the police to find ways to keep citizens interested and willing to support the city's efforts within the community. One of the more traditional citizen programs has been Neighborhood Crimewatch. Neighborhood Crimewatch has been criticized as lacking community support and involvement. An alternative to traditional Neighborhood Crimewatch programs are Citizens Police Academies and many other programs. These programs encourage citizen involvement and provide support for the police. These programs can develop a bond between the police and the community. People educated in a Citizens Police Academy may be seen as a resource for the police department and a source of support.

The purpose of this research is to identify and discuss problems with the traditional Neighborhood Crimewatch program and point out the advantages found in alternative neighborhood crime prevention programs such as the Citizens Police Academy. Specific information regarding the Neighborhood Crimewatch and the Citizens Police Academy programs are given and recommendations will be made regarding implementation of these programs.

My conclusions point out the shortcomings and weakness in traditional Neighborhood Crime Watch programs. Police administrators should consider supplementing traditional programs with those designed to promote a partnership between law enforcement and the community. The Citizens Police Academy has proven to be a valuable tool in forging an alliance between the police and citizens. Academy graduates can be used as volunteers who will help administer other community based programs and assist the police through understanding and dialog.

Introduction

The goal of this research project is to identify shortcomings and weaknesses in the traditional Neighborhood Crimewatch programs. This research recognizes the value of Neighborhood Crimewatch programs, but identifies certain problems concerning citizen participation and sustenance. Alternatives are presented that are designed to supplement and bolster interest in Neighborhood Crimewatch programs. These alternative programs, Citizens Police Academy, Citizen Patrols, Crime Lines, Youth Rodeos, Operation ID and many others can help create an atmosphere and attitude of cooperation and empowerment within the community through education and participation. Among these, the Citizens Police Academy will be given primary consideration. Interaction between the police and the citizenry enhances communication and establishes better understanding. These programs enable the police and residents to form a bond that will translate into community support for the police and public responsibility for its own safety.

This paper is presented for review by police and city/county administrators interested in taking a realistic view of traditional citizen involvement programs and comparing and contrasting those programs in the context of Community Oriented Policing principles. Various sources are utilized to produce this report. Articles authored by experts in the fields of crime prevention and community involvement are included. Professional journals and government publications also provide information for this paper. Several personal interviews were also conducted and the personal observations and experiences of the author are included for the readers consideration.

The intended outcome of this research is to provide useful information regarding effective and positive involvement in the community. The Community Oriented Policing concept is

providing opportunities to reestablish local law enforcement as a partner in the community. This concept is critical if law enforcement is to remain effective and maintain community support into the next century.

Historical and Legal Context

For many years local police and other law enforcement agencies in the United States have relied on programs such as Neighborhood Crime Watch to involve citizens in crime prevention efforts in the community. Citizen involvement has been recognized as important but until recently has not been taken seriously. William Sessions, former Director of the FBI wrote in 1988 "[t]he citizen participation reflects the beginnings of organized policing in this country, which was modeled on England's experience. The London Metropolitan Police, organized under Sir Robert Peel, stressed citizen cooperation as one means to reduce crime" (Sessions 1).

Over time, police administrators have been under more pressure to involve citizens in the police function as a way to foster support within the community. The prevailing logic is pushing the police toward more involvement within the community by re-evaluating traditional programs and methods. Chris Braiden wrote in 1991 that change was in order: "... the conventional police organization is like a 50 year old house. When it was built, it was new, strong, and in vogue, but with the passage of time... parts of it rot, and it goes out of style. The answer, however, is not to bulldoze it down. What is needed is an imaginative renovation job" (Braiden). This change is inevitable if we, as police practitioners, are to remain effective and responsive to the community.

"Researchers and writers have questioned the effectiveness of Neighborhood Watch, and those who expect, but do not see, dramatic, sustained crime reduction declare the program to be outmoded and bereft of benefits" (Cantrell 2). This statement supports the notion that while Neighborhood Watch has been used for years, newer and more innovative programs are needed.

It is my observation that neighborhood watch groups have had little impact on crime in the community. Residents have been asked to be the 'eyes and ears' of the police. Personal experience has shown that without a current threat in the neighborhood interest is usually low. Departmental resources are expended with very little return when neighborhood watch is the primary program in the agency's crime prevention arsenal. Interaction with the residential community is essential. The move has been from traditional enforcement methods toward community based crime prevention and involvement programs.

Crime Prevention is important to the quality of life in our neighborhoods, communities and the state. It means law enforcement working with communities, business, and service organizations to develop action plans based on information about crime and other problems (Missouri 1).

Conventional thinking among police administrators has relied on citizen involvement through Neighborhood Watch and similar programs. As far back as 1984 the National Criminal Justice Resource Center conducted studies which stated:

Findings provide little support for the proposition that neighborhood watches have helped reduce crime. Although crime was declining somewhat more rapidly in blocks that had watch groups in place, the decline seems attributable to social and economic changes in those areas rather than the neighborhood watch groups per se. Given the absence of watch groups from the neighborhoods that need them most, they cannot, by themselves, make a real dent in the crime problem (Henig).

Henig's statements confirm that although Neighborhood Watch programs are important, they cannot be relied upon as the only source of positive interaction between the community and the police. "Even if they had no effect on crime, continuation of the watches could be justified by the increased feeling of safety experienced by residents and by the improved relationships between police and the community" (Henig).

Many new and innovative ideas have been studied and implemented over the past ten to

fifteen years. Most of these programs involve placing the police officer back in the community. Another key feature has been making the police accountable to the citizens and responsible for providing appropriate service to the community. The police have a vested interest in the community and it has been found that through involvement and education valuable alliances can be formed between the police and the community.

A key element to preventing crime is public education. We must let the public know that prevention is possible, that they are capable of taking preventive action, and that it is worthwhile to do so. The transmission of knowledge and skills remains the critical component. Citizen need to be empowered to assist in the prevention of crime (Missouri 4).

The philosophy of community involvement and establishing a partnership between the police suits the model we see in the Citizens Police Academy. This idea of the Citizen Police Academy was first developed "in 1977, by the Devon and Cornwall, England, Constabulary. Originally called The Police Nightschool, the purpose was to familiarize private citizens with the nature of police work and the organization of the police system in England" (Hilson 1).

History has shown us that in order to progress we must look at the past with a subjective eye and be willing to bring with us what has worked, make changes as appropriate and take advantage of new and innovative ideas and programs as we move into the next century. The nature of police work is changing with the expectations of the public. The citizens are becoming more demanding and critical of the police and we must respond by providing a more professional and responsive level of service to the community.

Review of Literature or Practice

Although neighborhood watch programs were, for years, the basis of gauging involvement and interest in the community, research has shown that the concept of Community Oriented Policing demands varied and innovative approaches to meeting the needs of the public.

In 1987, Dennis P. Rosenbaum researched this issue and concluded "...local surveys indicate that the level of investment in crime prevention activities among law enforcement agencies remains very minimal despite all the talk about this being their top priority" (Rosenbaum 113). To make community policing work a firm and decided commitment on the part of department and city administration must be made. Past research suggests that traditional block watch style programs are difficult to maintain and may even be counter productive:

There is evidence to suggest that if given the opportunity to participate, residents in the majority of high crime neighborhoods would not participate and when citizens do participate, the social interaction that occurs at meeting may lead to increases (rather than decreases) in fear of crime, racial prejudice, and other crime-related perceptions of feelings. .. There is little evidence that Block Watches (as typically implemented) are self-sustaining (Rosenbaum 127 - 8).

The Citizens Police Academy (C.P.A.) is becoming a valuable tool that can be used to improve communications between the public and the police and can establish a basis for other programs within the community. Volunteers from the community can help with other programs such as:

- Handicapped parking enforcement;
- Youth Summer Camps;
- Ride Along programs and Police Trading Card giveaways;
- Police Chief for a Day;
- Open House at police facilities;
- Rewarding Good Behavior;
- Adopt a House;
- Safety Towns, Radio Broadcasting, Child J.D., Newsletters, McGruff House;
- Junior Police Academy;
- Block Watch, Community Surveys, Police Play Day, Solidarity marches;
- Crime Line, Training Videos, Bicycle Safety Rodeos and many more
(Rachin 25 - 34).

Most departments contacted either now have a Citizens Police Academy or are preparing to start one. All sources agree that C.P.A. graduates can be a valuable resource for the

department if used in a positive way. The Columbus, Ohio PD uses senior citizens who graduate from their C.P.A. program as "foster grandparents or block parents for children who may need help in an emergency. . . and as support for victims of crime in their neighborhoods. They accompany the victim to the police station and to court" (Columbus PD 3). The Pflugerville, Texas PD (located just outside of Austin in Travis County) is planning to use C.P.A. graduates to volunteer for duties such as shuttling vehicles to the city shop for service, filing inside the P.D., answering non-emergency telephones and calling back complainants on minor cases that are not currently being worked" (Marek). The Harker Heights, Texas PD uses C.P.A. graduates to canvas residential neighborhoods gathering information and presenting crime prevention information (Gaylean), whereas the Greenville, Texas PD has no follow-up or program to maintain interest among C.P.A. graduates (Henry). This would indicate that local priorities will dictate the level of involvement attained.

Graduates from the Midland, Texas Citizens Police Academy are encouraged to participate in a Citizens on Patrol program. These civilians patrol their own neighborhoods and report suspicious activity to police. "This program is designed to make trained observers of these people so that they may become additional eyes and ears for the police department" (Midland 1). The Midland Citizens on Patrol program is fairly typical. Another popular activity for C.P.A. graduates is the Citizens Ride Along program. The Tustin, California PD initiated the Ride Along Program "to bring the police department and the community closer together (Yackle 1).

This research has shown that there is a vast difference in the level of expectation and community involvement from one department to the next. This could be due to resistance inside the agency to implementation of Community Oriented Policing programs. This can come from budgetary and personnel shortages to simple resistance to change: "Many of the agencies

experienced reluctance among their officers when the CPA was started. Of these agencies, all report a positive change in attitude toward the program. In fact, several agencies report a number of officers volunteering to instruct (Hilson 6).

Hilson wrote in a later article regarding the Citizens on Patrol program that "[w]hen the (Fort Worth, Texas) Citizens on Patrol program began in 1991, it was estimated that only 20% of the police officers supported the program. It is now estimated that 80% of the officers are in favor of COP" (Hilson 10). This would indicate that although there is usually some initial resistance to implementation of these programs, that resistance is overcome by the positive experience and outcomes generally seen as a result of these programs.

The marked contrast between community policing involvement from one agency or community to another was discussed in the New England Community - Police newsletter in 1997:

And, just how are many of these communities practicing Community Policing? Programs such as Citizens Police Academy, Neighborhood Watches, and Bike Patrols have been instrumental in not only humanizing the police officer in the eyes of his or her constituents, but these programs are helping to make the police an integral part of the communities they serve (New England 1).

Each community has its own individual needs and limitations. The beauty of the Community Oriented Policing model is that it can be molded, changed and transformed into whatever the community and the agency decide is appropriate. It recognizes that each community is different and presents numerous options and progressive programs to help establish a positive interaction between the police and the citizens within the community.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

The key issue to decide is what level and to what extent the local agency or organization wishes to be involved within the community. One could elect to stay with the more traditional

role of the police as being a reactionary organization or the decision can be made to take a more pro-active role in the community. Traditionally neighborhood watch programs have been the basis for community involvement. Within the past ten to fifteen years police researchers and administrators have found that the public is generally not satisfied with the police keeping their distance until some reaction is needed. Many communities are demanding more service from and interaction with the police. "A community that is more involved with its police agency translates into a community more willing to cooperate with its police" (Bobinsky 9).

To establish a partnership between the police and the community many police executives are considering non-traditional ways to deliver police service:

... police executives are currently searching beyond conventional methods and are adopting new and improved strategies for delivering service. These new strategies include community policing, community-oriented policing, neighborhood policing, problem-oriented policing, and community policing and problem solving (West 51).

One of the best and most cost effective ways to establish a basis of cooperation with the community is the Citizens Police Academy. By utilizing and C.P.A. graduates a volunteer base is established and with non-traditional thinking these volunteers can be responsible for improved understanding and support from the community.

Embracing non-traditional methods of delivering police service will always meet with a certain amount of resistance from within the agency. The public may also view this new concept with skepticism. This may be due in part to the fact that in the past the police have not done a very good job at responding to the needs of the community. Police administrators must find ways to pay for these new programs and overcome the inevitable internal resistance. This will mean that the agency must take a definite position and embrace the concept of community involvement. In a recent crime prevention bulletin the Missouri DPS stated:

Crime Prevention is important to the quality of life in our neighborhoods, communities and the state. It means law enforcement working with communities, business, and service organizations to develop action plans based on information about crime and other problems. .. A key element to preventing crime is public education. We must let the public know that prevention is possible, that they are capable of taking preventive action, and that it is worthwhile to do so. The transmission of knowledge and skills remains the critical component. Citizen need to be empowered to assist in the prevention of crime (Missouri 1 - 4).

The ability to forge a partnership between the police and the community will have a lasting effect on community relations and the crime rate. Hilson stated in 1994 "[a]ny reduction in crime must include a joint effort of the police and the community" (Hilson 1 0).

The intrinsic benefits of the CPA appear to overcome any economic costs incurred by the departments. Many agencies have implemented creative ways to finance their CP As, such as grants, asset forfeitures, and citizen contributions. The effort expended in finding financing seems to suggest the value police administrators place upon CP As (Hilson 7).

Hilson's statement touch on some of the fiscal problems found in implementing new programs. Using the Citizens Police Academy as an example, the costs involved not only include the direct cost of putting on the classes, but will cost the agency in personnel time involved in administration of the class, screening applicants, preparing curriculum, etc. (Greenburg 12). Once these academies are established "the number of requests for crime prevention speakers and home and business security surveys that academy participation may generate" will probably increase (Greenburg 12). Greenburg goes on to say: "[w]hile this is not a disadvantage, per se, such requests could overburden officers by increasing their workload" (Greenburg 12).

By expanding the role of these (citizen) police academies, most of the current disadvantages would be reduced. For example, newly certified citizen instructors would be more motivated to concentrate on crime prevention topics and less likely to overemphasize public relations. Their services can be used to develop new curriculum guides or to expand and revise current materials for diverse populations. They could also serve to augment the department's personnel resources as crime prevention speakers and home security inspectors (Greenburg 13).

The costs associated in 1990 with conducting a Citizens Police Academy in Terrell,

Texas averaged "\$679.00 per class" (Lawson 13) for pens, binders, handouts, etc. The costs involved in implementing community based programs can be negligible for the more simple programs involving public relations, however, more involved programs such as placing officers in the neighborhoods and other non-traditional methods of delivering police service can be quite expensive. Many agencies must rely on grants to establish these programs.

Regarding the cost of financing a Citizens Police Academy, Hilson stated in May of 1994:

The intrinsic benefits of the CPA appear to overcome any economic costs incurred by the departments. Many agencies have implemented creative ways to finance their CP As, such as grants, asset forfeitures, and citizen contributions. The effort expended in finding financing seems to suggest the value police administrators place upon CP As (Hilson 7).

Once citizens complete their training they can be used as volunteers and "perform some of the clerical duties, administrative work and mundane tasks that ultimately rob officers of the time that could be better spent fighting crime" (McKay 9).

Conclusion / Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to identify shortcomings and weaknesses in traditional Neighborhood Crimewatch programs. Although Neighborhood Watch programs serve a valuable purpose in the community, they very often suffer from lack of participation and support within the community. With the move toward Community Oriented Policing, other programs have emerged as being more valuable and less of a drain on agency resources. One of the most valuable community based programs is the Citizens Police Academy. The citizens graduated from the CPA programs can become a valuable resource to the police agency and can assist with the implementation and support for many other programs.

The issue of community involvement is one that must be dealt with by every service provider in the public sector. All levels of government, from the Federal to the local level, must be concerned with their interaction with the public and their response to the citizens expectations and demands. If we would simply glance through most police or law enforcement journals written during the past ten to fifteen years we would find at least one article dealing with community policing issues in the vast majority. This is an issue that affects every person in public service.

The problem is how do we examine these programs and decide on which ones will work in our area and which ones will not. Administrators must be willing to consider all options when dealing with this topic. If we look at the move toward community policing as a problem we will fall behind and possibly crushed by the weight of our own organizations. If we, on the other hand, look at the future as a challenge that can and must be met with a positive attitude and an open mind to all possibilities the organization and the public will be stronger for it.

The recommendations of this project are that we, as police administrators, must embrace the idea of community involvement and responsibility. We should look for programs and non traditional ways to deliver police service to the community. A bond between the police and the community must be formed. The police must be responsive to the needs of the community we serve and this response must come in many different forms and varieties. The concept of community policing was addressed by John Cox in 1992 and is still appropriate today:

Community policing offers a concept that emphasizes the police as part of the community. Community policing departments respond positively to the needs of the communities they serve, and they help to restore the quality of life. Yet, they do not surrender the responsibility of criminal detection and apprehension. It is a winning combination (Cox 5).

This paper presents only a fraction of the programs available to law enforcement. The beauty of the community oriented policing concept is that the nature and scope of these programs is limited only by the imagination and vision of the people implementing the programs. These programs and issues cannot be decided upon by a single administrator, but must be conceived and implemented by people at all levels, both within the organization and from the community. For law enforcement to progress and thrive into the next century we must take advantage of non traditional ways to deliver our service and respond to the needs of the society we have sworn to serve.

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