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Combating Violence
A Community Approach

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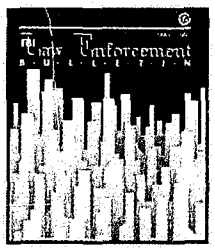

Cover: *This issue focuses on the need for police and citizens to join together to fight the violence that plagues communities across this Nation.*

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William S. Sessions, Director

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Building Support for Community Policing

An Effective Strategy

By
ROBERT C. TROJANOWICZ, Ph.D.

For any community policing effort to be successful, police administrators must not only have the support of their departments but also of citizens, elected officials, community agencies, and the media. Each of these groups has it own priorities and concerns. Therefore, a goal of each police administrator should be to develop an overall community policing strategy designed to promote consensus building among all five groups. This can be accomplished by identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, and then building a community policing strategy on the former while resolving the latter.

To increase the level of commitment to community policing, police administrators must address certain issues for the concept to become viable within both their departments and communities. Addressing these issues up front can benefit those departments that are considering a shift to community policing, as well as those that have already started to implement the approach.

Understanding the Change

Police administrators who plan to shift to community policing can avoid problems by first understanding the concept and what is required for a department to adopt a community policing strategy. It is important for administrators to do their homework to obtain a clear understanding of what community policing can and cannot achieve and what it does and does not demand from police administrators and the five main groups on which these administrators depend for support.

To achieve this, administrators should review the literature to recognize that community policing is both a philosophy and an organizational strategy. They should also

> ***"...community policing...requires the participation and support of everyone, not just community leaders."***

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realize that this organizational strategy requires a permanent assignment of community policing officers to defined beats, where they have the opportunity for daily interaction with area residents.

Most importantly, however, police administrators should look at community policing in the context of the "big picture." This simply means that the community policing approach should not be looked upon as a cure-all to the problems of society.

A shift to community policing does not take place in a vacuum. It alone cannot undo the root causes of crime (unemployment, welfare dependence, decaying schools, drug abuse, and child abuse and neglect). It can, however, make a valid contribution to help address these serious problems, but only when police administrators become ardent spokespersons for social change.

The Police Department

Building consensus within the department requires police administrators to practice the politics of inclusion. The philosophy of community policing stresses the importance of building trust with the community by empowering average citizens and making them a part of the process. And, the first place to perfect those skills is within the police department.

The commitment to community policing must be reflected through the personnel management process. To accomplish this, the police administrator must involve the upper command staff in providing input and making decisions. Then, it is important to seek actively the support and input of all levels of police personnel, including civilians, on developing a workable plan.

Police administrators should also encourage feedback from within the department, and they must be willing to provide visible backing for mistakes and failures. After all, community policing impinges on everyone within the department.

A defensible plan for the deployment of community officers is also needed. In no way should assignment to a beat be used as punishment. Instead, police administrators should expand the role of community officers to that of generalist, rather than specialist, thereby recognizing them as professionals.

Citizen Support

A shift to community policing implies dramatic changes for the "winners" and the "losers." Community policing makes obvious "winners" of the law-abiding people who live in decaying, high-crime neighborhoods plagued by violent crime and open drug dealings. These people receive the full-time support of community policing officers, and in turn, become the most vocal supporters of the approach.

On the other hand, the high visibility of community policing officers can inspire a backlash from middle- and upper-class residents who resent what they perceive as more of their tax dollars flowing into neighborhoods that already consume a disproportionate share of the police department's time. This approach to policing can also engender resentment among those who see their previous level of service reduced, i.e., the business owner whose foot patrol officer now spends time in residential areas as well or the middle-class taxpayer who is asked to report a bicycle theft by phone. Under community policing, citizens have to do more for themselves to free up patrol time so that problem solving can be facilitated.

To achieve citizen support for community policing, administrators must develop a plan to educate the public about the virtues and tradeoffs of this approach. This means

talking to civic groups, issuing press releases, and placing articles in community newsletters. All this should be done before implementation. Essentially, police administrators must take advantage of every opportunity to explain to citizens "what's in it for them."

Along these same lines, community policing sometimes forces departments to restructure their response priorities. Therefore, the issue of response time must be addressed at the outset. Citizens need to know that the police are constantly being asked to do more with less. When restructuring is part of the shift to community policing, people must be told why the tradeoffs will benefit them in the long run. Above all, citizens must be guaranteed a quick response for life-threatening situations; however, everything else is negotiable.

Another "must do" for police administrators is to inform citizens that their participation is crucial. Community policing issues a challenge to residents to become part of the solution to the problem. Oftentimes, this means citizens will be asked to solve problems themselves rather than turning to the police for help.

Citizens should be reminded that it is the job of the entire community to make their neighborhoods safe and attractive places to live and work. And, they must be made aware that the community policing effort requires the participation and support of everyone, not just community leaders.

Police administrators can gauge support of community policing efforts by conducting on-going surveys. Surveys provide a good baseline against which community policing can be evaluated and also allow for continued monitoring to prevent the momentum from becoming stalled.

Feedback from the community also becomes a part of the accountability process and involves the community in performance evaluation. One way for this to happen is for sergeants to ask citizens firsthand how community officers are performing. However, community residents should be made to realize that they will also be evaluated in terms of their contributions to make community policing work. This can be accomplished by determining how many citizens are involved in block clubs, volunteer work with youths, or beautification projects.

> ***"By involving community agencies, police administrators emphasize teamwork and eliminate duplication of services."***

Elected Officials

Community policing attracts strong bipartisan support, but it also has its detractors. Conservatives worry that it may be "empowering" community agitators, adding to instability. Liberals worry that it may imply an erosion of civil rights, including the right to privacy.

Yet, the primary political resistance is not ideological but practical. Elected officials have good reason to worry about any change that threatens their existing level of political support. Restructuring police priorities in ways that imply a reduction in the level of service is a serious issue for police administrators.

To address the concerns of elected officials, administrators must educate politicians on the criteria of community policing. While some community policing initiatives are very attractive to elected officials, others may not be so well received. Therefore, administrators must carefully explain the tradeoffs implicit in community policing to elected officials.

Dealing with the concerns of elected officials is not an easy task. They must be convinced not to subvert the process by promising special consideration for the affluent and influential. And, they must be persuaded not to politicize the initiative. A defensible plan for community policing is on the basis of need—high crime rate, high fear of crime, disorder, and a large percentage of problem people, including juveniles.

City council members whose districts enjoy the services of a community policing officer must understand that the officer is not their personal servant. Instead, politicians and community officers should work together on initiatives, so they can share the acclaim. But, it is the community, not the politician, who sets the priorities.

On the other hand, it is essential for politicians who do not have a community policing officer in their districts to understand why they should support community policing. They need to grasp why the shift to community policing will improve the quality of life in

their jurisdictions, so that they can explain the rationale to their constituents.

Community Agencies

Over the years, the police have assumed many of the responsibilities of community agencies, mostly because the police department is the only agency open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. However, this does not mean that community agencies should not become a part of the community policing effort. On the contrary, their backing is a key ingredient to the success of community policing.

This is why police administrators must involve community agencies in the planning and implementation stages. Diagnosing each neighborhood's strengths and weaknesses and then developing solutions is essential.

By involving community agencies, police administrators emphasize teamwork and eliminate duplication of services. After all, a team of problem solvers, including a police officer, is much more effective than repeated responses that simply "put out fires" or "apply bandaids" to major wounds.

Another step police administrators can take to involve community agencies in community policing is to encourage agencies to alter or expand their operations from the usual 9-to-5 mode. A simple alteration such as this can have a major impact on calls for service to police departments by increasing officers' free patrol time so that they can work on more serious problems.

Most importantly, everyone should share the credit. Just as it takes a major team effort to solve the myriad of problems that plague the neighborhoods, it takes a special effort to ensure that all relevant agencies are given credit for any success realized.

There is also a need for other personalized and decentralized service providers in the neighborhood. If community police officers are the only decentralized and personalized service providers, they will become inundated with requests for assistance, many of which are not law enforcement related. The use of a facility that could serve as a neighborhood network center to house service providers will stimulate informal communication among professionals and will personalize all services offered to residents.

> ***"Enlisting the assistance of the media is part of a continuing effort to keep the community informed about new initiatives."***

The Media

It is easy for police administrators to view the media as the enemy since, for the most part, their primary focus is on bad news. However, because of its proactive approach, community policing provides the department with an opportunity to enlist the media to educate the public about the good things the department is doing.

When dealing with the media, police administrators must have a plan in place before going public. Community policing is not an easy concept to explain, so it is important to work out details before using the media to announce the effort.

By making a concerted effort to reach the media, police administrators demonstrate that this group plays an important role in the success of community policing. Citizens need to understand the reasons for controversial changes, and they also need to know that the department will be asking for their direct support and participation. An effective way to do this is through the media.

The challenge for police administrators is to make media representatives realize that this is part of their civic duty. Although it requires time to cultivate media contacts, the effort will pay off in the long run.

Police administrators should use every opportunity to provide information on community policing to the media. This means holding press conferences, inviting media representatives to walk the beat with community officers, and issuing news releases on recognition and awards programs that reinforce the commitment to community policing.

Enlisting the assistance of the media is part of a continuing effort to keep the community informed about new initiatives. However, it is important to remember that the media resent being manipulated and that they resist what may be perceived as news management. Therefore, police administrators should allow community officers to talk

directly to the media. Even if officers make mistakes, or some projects of the community policing effort are not successful, openness with the media can go a long way. It shows that allowing officers a new freedom to succeed also means allowing them to fail. And, ironically, a willingness to discuss a project that flopped can be an excellent opportunity to tout community policing's successes.

Conclusion

An effective community policing effort requires the support and commitment of the police department, citizens, elected officials, community agencies, and the media. Each of these five groups need to become a part of the solution to neighborhood problems rather than being aloof or indifferent.

However, it is important to remember that community policing is not an overnight miracle cure or a quick fix, even though it may make a dramatic and immediate improvement in some target neighborhoods. The community officer who spends time today organizing a sports league for idle inner-city youths has good reason to hope that this effort will pay off in the future, but there is no guarantee.

Community policing is a subtle, but profound, way for police departments to approach problems. And, it offers better odds of making a positive impact as momentum builds in the future. ✦