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The Community Handbook: A New Resource For Action
By Jill Lingwall

"Americans, Many of them poor, black or Hispanic -have figured out what the armchair critics haven't. . . They have discovered that it is possible not only to fight back, but to win. In some elite circles the talk may be only of the sad state of the helpless and the hopeless, but while these circles talk on, the helpless and the hopeless themselves are carrying out a national drug policy. They're fighting back."

Drug Czar William Bennett
"Drugs and the Intellectuals," 1989

The Des Moines Police Department has taken William Bennett's words very seriously. Through a four-pronged strategy known as the "Municipal Approach," the department is helping ordinary residents fight back. The approach combines enforcement, prevention/education, treatment and community involvement in a comprehensive fight against Des Moines' drug scourge.

As a part of the community involvement aspect of the "Municipal Approach," the department, along with the United Way and concerned residents, developed a community handbook to help neighbors mobilize their forces. Last winter, Chief William Moulder and Neighborhood Area Resource Coordinator Sergeant Larry Cramer organized a series of meetings with representatives from over 35 neighborhood associations and city officials. The meetings were designed to pinpoint common concerns to provide information for the handbook.

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Carol Clift of the United Way acted as facilitator for the meetings. Clift said the meetings had to be carefully controlled to make sure they did not turn into a session for complaints. "We kept the whole thing very structured to allow everyone a chance to speak," she said. "We received lots of input from the over 80 people who attended. They let us know what worked and what didn't."

Sgt. Cramer and others took the easels scribbled with magic marker notes from the meetings and organized them into a rough handbook form. Neighborhood leaders and others in the police department added suggestions.

City Manager Cy Carney said in the past, City Hall had decided what was right for the neighborhoods. "That's the wrong order of event to determine what's good," he said. "We need to go to the neighborhoods with a blank piece of paper and an open mind and see what they see as problems and issues." Carney said the development of the handbook was a good example of grassroots cooperation.

Donna Stuhr of Senator Tom Harkin's office, agreed. "No one knows better what the communities need than the people living there," she said.

Pete Rounds, the Lieutenant commanding the vice/narcotics unit said the handbook gave people a clear direction on what actions they could take. "When people team up and work together, it not only helps enforcement, but it helps create an attitude that drug abuse isn't o.k....

this problem is an epidemic that ultimately affects every one of us."

The handbook is available in Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian. It contains information on everything from street lighting to police patrol procedure and hints for effective meetings and group planning. Numbers are listed for most city services and officials.

Sample "Dear Johns" letters are in the handbook for neighborhoods plagued with prostitution. Citizens are encouraged to write down license numbers of cars seen picking up "johns." Residents can get the names and addresses from the transportation department.

Members of the River Bend Association send a number of the letters to "johns" and their wives. "It makes the men nervous," Doloros Thomas, a member of the association, said. "We want the johns to know we know what they're doing."

Sgt. Cramer said he feels the handbook is useful for individuals who want to organize neighborhood associations and for those who are already active. "We think the handbook is a great resource for individuals who want to do something, but aren't sure what direction to take," he said. "It has a wide spectrum of information. It really is a resource for action."

Cramer said copies of the handbook are available from the Des Moines Police Department, 25 East First, Des Moines, Iowa, 50309. He said the book may be used as a model for

other cities trying to include community policing in their
fight against drugs.