

**2007 HERMAN GOLDSTEIN AWARD FOR
EXCELLENCE IN PROBLEM ORIENTED POLICING (POP)
Devonshire Area
Volunteer Surveillance Team (VST)**

Summary:

The Los Angeles Police Department's (LAPD) Devonshire Area has the distinction of having one of the Department's oldest and most successful community volunteer programs. This program, called the Volunteer Surveillance Team (VST), has been in existence since 1992 and consists of 50 highly trained and dedicated community members who reside within Devonshire Area and function with the sole purpose of detecting criminal offenders who prey upon their own community. Regardless of the weather, time of day, and often lacking even a minimum of comforts, these truly committed volunteers have consistently demonstrated their significant value as an effective and efficient crime fighting resource. Deployed in only non-hazardous situations as observers, VST members work only under the watchful supervision of two on-duty police officers that carefully evaluate crime patterns and then supervise every aspect of each detail.

Since the program's inception, its members have volunteered in excess of 46,500 hours of service to their community; thereby, saving the City approximately \$1,250,000 in officer salaries and benefits. In the 14 years of operation, the VST has been directly responsible for the arrest of over 4,100 individuals. During the year 2006 alone, the Devonshire VST participated in a total of 113 details volunteering over 4030 hours and was directly responsible for 134 arrests. These arrests include a wide variety of offenses that range from truancy; narcotics and vandalism incidents to more serious criminal conduct such as auto theft, residential burglary and robbery.

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As a direct result of their successful efforts and outstanding reputation, the Devonshire VST is often touted during Computer Statistics (COMSTAT) inspections before the Chief of Police as a model program that many other Areas and jurisdictions are now attempting to emulate. Given the VST's demonstrated success as a community-policing tool, the program has been the subject of a number of television and newspaper stories including:

- KCAL Channel 9 News
- KABC Channel 7 News
- *Parade Magazine*
- *Los Angeles Daily News*
- *Los Angeles Times*.

In recognition of the membership's significant contributions and true commitment aimed at improving the community, the VST have been recognized by the following:

- California State Senate and Assembly
- California Governor and Attorney General
- Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors
- Los Angeles City Council and the Mayor
- Chiefs of Police, Los Angeles Police Department

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The below example is only one of the many applications of the Volunteer Surveillance Team model.

Scanning:

The officers of VST reviews the general crime trends occurring in the Devonshire Area. After doing so, the officers ascertained that vandalism and shoplifts at a large local mall were being committed by groups of juveniles. Mall authorities were also complaining of public disturbances by groups of juveniles were on the rise. Crime reports of burglary from motor vehicles and residential burglaries near local schools were also on the rise during school hours. In order to address these problems, the Devonshire VST developed a comprehensive truancy prevention/enforcement program called Devonshire Volunteer Surveillance Team Against Truancy (DEVSTAT).

Analysis:

The officers were able to obtain this information and make a quick analysis with the aide of the Devonshire Crime Response Detail (CRD) unit. The officers then met with school authorities and learned that unexcused absences were on the rise. The officers also met with mall security and also contacted victims and witnesses for additional information. After gathering the information, the officers were able to determine that the many offenders were juveniles, truant from local schools.

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Response:

The officers then met with their supervisor in order to obtain approval for a truancy operation. Officers relied on past VST operations as a model, but changed certain tactical considerations to conform to the truancy detail's requirements. The use of past VST operations as a guide is key, because not only have they been proven successful, they also meet with LAPD policies and guidelines. The officers contacted the Devonshire Juvenile Section and Los Angeles School Police Department for additional officers. The officers contacted the VST planning/detail coordinator who in turn contacted the general VST membership in order to field the necessary observation posts. Four VST observation posts (OP) were deployed:

- Two OPs were staged, on foot, within the mall
- Two OPs were positioned, in private vehicles, around a local high school and middle school

Assessment:

After two concurrent days of truancy sweeps, twenty misdemeanor arrests for 45.04 LAMC (Truancy) were obtained. Five more arrests for truancy were obtained on a third operation the following week. As a result of the arrests, complaints involving juveniles in the mall as well as daytime property crimes around the schools were reduced significantly.

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Agency and officer Information:

Although the concept of citizens acting as additional “eyes and ears” to aid local law enforcement is not new, the level of planning, professionalism, and dedication displayed by the Devonshire Volunteer Surveillance Team, is unique.

Each newly selected member must:

- Pass a comprehensive selection process.
- Submit fingerprints in order to check for a criminal record and obtain background clearance from the Department of Justice.
- Receive a minimum 30 hours of training in police radio operation, surveillance techniques including the use of video and still cameras, and LAPD/VST policies and procedures. VST study materials include a 45 page-training manual, videos of crime scenarios, and vehicle identification guides.

Once this orientation is successfully completed, the new VST member is deployed with a senior volunteer during an initial probationary period. This process is intentionally designed to reinforce classroom training under actual field conditions. Bi-monthly mandatory member meetings reinforce training and have proved valuable in maintaining proficiency.

The Police Officers assigned to be the officers assigned to the program must share the dedication of the civilian members. The officers duties include:

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- Analysis of crime problems and trends by consulting with Devonshire Detectives, the Crime Response Detail, Senior Lead Officers, etc.
- Officers determine if VST resources can be applied to the particular crime problem
- Analysis of target location in reference to observation post placement (rooftop, private vehicle, etc.).
- Write up Operations Plan that defines the operation's mission. This includes a brief analysis of the crime problem, maps of the target location (with OP placements), and a list of assets requested (number of VST and police personal, special equipment, etc.). The officers in charge then submit the Operations Plan to their supervisor for approval.
- Officers conduct the operation by coordinating the assets and providing security for VST personal. The officers are primarily responsible for the safety of the civilian volunteers.
- At the termination of the operation, the officers debrief the personal and collect equipment. The officers additionally write any required arrest reports and book defendants/evidence.
- Officers submit an operational "After Action" report to their supervisor detailing the outcome of the operation.

Given the Devonshire VST's extensive training, discipline, well-established operating guidelines, and the effective supervision from the officers, no member has been injured or had his/her personal safety compromised during a VST operation.

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Following the Devonshire Volunteer Surveillance Team model, Police Departments can:

- Involve motivated members of their community in a partnership with the Police.
- Use the trained Volunteer Observers to supplement and multiply their Police Officers' ability observe crimes in process and arrest the suspects at little additional cost to their Department.

Contact:

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Officer-in-Charge

Devonshire Volunteer Surveillance Team

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