



# Problem Solving Quarterly

A Police Executive Research Forum Publication

Reporting on Innovative Approaches to Policing

Volume 8, Number 1

Winter 1995

## Park Disturbances Cease After Parking Lot Redesigned

by Glenn Gabriel

In 1993, the Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) Unit of the Mankato, Minn., Public Safety Department took on a project to reclaim a city property-Sibley Park for all citizens of the community to use.

### Scanning

The problem, as identified by the POP Unit and the community, was that many prospective park users were scared to use the park because of a large group of rowdy park users who gathered in the **parking** lot near the ball diamonds. The longer the group was there, the more they drank and the rowdier they became. The following problems arose:

- juvenile **drinking**,
- suspected drug dealing,
- numerous assaults,
- reckless driving,
- thefts and criminal property damage,

- indecent exposure,
- public urination, and
- harassment of park users.

The estimated total property damage to the park was more than \$15,000 over several years.

Sibley Park had a long history of attracting problem-causing groups. Between 1978 and 1993, when this POP project began, these problem groups chose various locations within the park to "hang out." Some groups gathered to drink or party, others to show off their cars. Park personnel and the police had tried a variety of unsuccessful solutions, such as closing off areas where these groups congregated and establishing daily park employee or police patrols.

The project focused on a group of car lovers who referred to themselves as "motorheads." Eventually, the "motorheads" evolved into a hard-core party group. The party started at **approximately** noon every **day**, with 300 to 400 people gathered in the park by 10 p.m.

The group was very unruly and tormented other park users. Soon

(cont. on p. 3)

## Alcohol-Related Crime Drops by 80 Percent

by James B. Wood

Barrow, Alaska, is one of eight villages that make up the North Slope Borough, which occupies the upper third of Alaska's geography and covers more than 90,000 square miles. The North Slope Borough Department of Public Safety exclusively provides police services throughout the borough, including its eight incorporated villages with an amassed population of about 7,000 people.

Last year, the public safety department used a problem-solving approach to address a high number of alcohol-related crimes in Barrow.

### Scanning

About mid-July, 1994, the North Slope Borough's mayor, responding to increased public concern, asked his public safety director what might be done to curb the tragedies caused locally by alcohol abuse. Since 1990, the public safety department recorded 87 rapes by drunken men, 26 of which

(cont. on p. 2)

*(Alcohol, cont. from p. 1)*

had victimized children; 675 drunken assaults, 109 of which were felonies involving weapons; 503 disputes between drunken spouses; 388 arrests for drunk driving; and 229 arrests of intoxicated children.

Additionally, public safety officers dealt with 2,057 incidents in which they took people into custody who were too drunk to care for themselves. In 1,757 of those incidents, the inebriated person was detained in jail because he or she was too violent for the local detoxification center. Citizens had called officers to remove drunken people from their homes 2,891 times, and had summoned officers 2,433 times to check on inebriates because they or others were afraid or worried. Additionally, 22 of the 36 area deaths, eight of them suicides, were attributed to alcohol. The tragedies of alcohol abuse had become epidemic. About 95 percent of the alcohol-related problems occurred in Barrow, the borough's largest city and seat of the borough government.

Public health, too, was under attack. During the same period, 522 people voluntarily entered treatment for alcoholism at the Substance Abuse Treatment Center in Barrow, and another 536 were ordered there by the courts. Substance abuse counselors expended 209,887 hours, at a cost of almost \$7 million in borough dollars. Successful treatment was rare. During this period, 44 percent of 600 birth mothers consumed alcohol into their second and third trimesters, and local physicians projected that as many as 23 babies each year would be affected by either fetal alcohol syndrome or fetal alcohol expo-

sure. Again, the majority of problems occurred in Barrow.

Economically, alcohol abuse in Barrow, which had voted "damp" in 1977 (barring only the sale of alcohol), was costing consumers an estimated \$350,000 every month, considering product cost plus the cost of air freight from retail outlets hundreds of miles away (Barrow is not connected to a road system). The money spent on alcohol was not being reinvested in the community. Bootlegged liquor cost \$50 per 750-milliliter bottle in Barrow, and \$100 a bottle in other Borough villages.

---

### **The community's quality of life continued to deteriorate despite all of the public funds and professional assistance available to combat alcohol-related problems.**

#### **Analysis**

From the outset, it seemed that everything possible had been tried to alleviate the problems of alcohol abuse in Barrow. **But** enforcement had not worked. Treatment had not worked. Education had not worked. Nor had social nor economic sanctions. Nothing had worked, and the community's culture and **quality** of life continued to deteriorate despite all of the public funds and professional assistance poured into the effort to alleviate alcohol-related problems.

Inquiries to substance abuse treatment providers revealed that, although the man-hours expended in counseling and the costs of treatment were relatively high,

their efforts were directed toward a relatively small number of clients. Many of the clients during the five-year period under study were recidivists. Only about half of the total number in treatment during the period were involved in disorders that had required the intervention of public safety officers.

Before the problem-solving project, the prevailing assumption was that most alcohol-related crime was caused by chronic alcoholics intoxicated on bootlegged liquor. This assumption turned out to be incorrect. In reality, most of the disorder was due to the effects of legal alcohol in the community. Public safety officers discovered this by interviewing the people involved and studying alcohol-freight records. These records revealed that those involved in crime and disorder had legally imported their alcohol. Also, street intelligence from informants identified only a small number of bootleggers who served a small number of repeat buyers.

Officer observations and a review of incident reports revealed that a large number of calls involved intoxicated people who had been going to or from, attending or hosting social engagements that catered to multiple attendees. Most of the liquor available at these engagements was legally purchased and imported into Barrow.

Analysis of police records revealed that citizens were most likely to be involved in inebriated disorder immediately after they received their bimonthly paychecks, **and** that, between paydays, disorder generally diminished.

Inebriates often told officers that if they had a bottle of liquor, they would drink a bottle. If they had a case, they would drink a

*(cont. on p. 6)*

(Park, cont. from p. 1)

no one was using the ball diamonds for fear of problems arising. No one was using the shelters for gatherings because they did not want to deal with the group. As time went on, the group, whose members ranged from six months to 50 years old, got larger. Very young children would run around late at night, surrounded by drug use, beer drinking and chaos.

The police and park personnel tried a variety of responses, including the following:

- **Park patrols by park employees** The group did not recognize park employees' authority, and therefore did not respond to them.
- **Park patrols by police** This worked only while an officer sat with the group. As soon as the officer left, the problems started again. This was also very time-consuming and expensive for the police department.
- **Floodlights-Bright lights** made it possible to photograph or videotape crimes in progress. Though lights allowed police to observe more effectively, the problem remained.
- Use of part-time officers on directed **patrols** When a squad car pulled in, the group would disperse. But the instant the **squad** car left, the group returned.
- **Scheduling of girls' softball and other high-attendance events for the park**-This helped by filling up more of the **parking** lot, but also

meant **that** vehicle **damage** occurred more often.

## Analysis

In March of 1993, the five members of the POP Unit began watching the group, gathering data to get a clear picture of what was happening. This lasted for three to four weeks.

**Next, they interviewed the group. At first, the group was suspicious of having cops hanging out with them, but over time they grew tolerant of the officers' presence and answered questions.**

---

## Interviews with the party group and other park users helped the POP Unit to analyze the problem.

---

The officers asked the group why they gathered in the park, and why they chose the ball diamond/parking lot area. The group cited the following factors:

- secluded/out of sight,
- two exits,
- large parking lot,
- *few police* patrols,
- low park use in that area, and
- good visibility to spot police arriving.

The officers discovered that it was not only **Mankato** people in this group, but also people from surrounding communities. Some used alcohol **and** some did not. Group members were not sympathetic to complaints; they believed **that they had a right to use the park in this manner.**

Next, officers interviewed other park users to find out why they did not use the ball diamond/parking lot area of the park.

They said that they were intimidated by the group and felt ill at ease in that area. They came to the park to enjoy the serenity, not to party. No one liked having the group there, but no one offered any realistic solutions.

The officers also gathered data on days and times the ball diamonds were used and on how much of the parking lot space was filled. They researched the amount of time the shelter was being used, and by whom. They discovered that many groups were asked to use the shelter when they had an event, but all refused because of the group's presence.

The police then held a public forum to discuss the situation. Officers heard the community's complaints and frustrations. Community members suggested a ban on alcohol in the park as one solution to the **problem.**

**The POP Unit then met with** the city parks director to review possible solutions. They decided that alcohol was not the cause of the problem, but only an extension of the problem. Many other park users drank alcohol without causing problems. The officers and parks director concluded that the group was drawn to the park because of the huge, little used parking lot in a secluded area.

## Response

The response strategy was to make this area less **appealing** to the group. All parties understood that the group might simply relocate to a different area of the park, but they decided they **had** nothing to lose by trying this **approach.**

(cont. on p. 4)

(Park, cont. from p. 3)

In formulating the response, the officers considered the following factors:

- The park had, over the years, evolved from the tournament headquarters park for softball to an ancillary field used occasionally.
- As park use changed over time, there was less of a need for a huge **parking** lot. The lot could be **significantly reduced** in size while still serving the needs of park visitors.
- The massive size of the **parking** lot attracted those inclined to loiter in the park for other **than "park reasons."**

---

### **The massive...parking lot...attracted those inclined to loiter in the park for other than park reasons."**

---

- The traffic flow in the parking lot was unrestricted, enabling those gathering there to drive unsafely.

The solution became obvious—redesign the **parking** lot while ensuring that **adequate parking** space **remained** for visitors.

The plan was to restrict traffic flow to one direction **and** make the parking lots smaller **and** more **regulated**. The POP Unit **decided** to create two smaller lots out of the one large lot—one in front of the ball **diamonds**, **and** one near the shelter. Both lots would be sized to meet the projected needs for park activities.

At the same time, the officers found a place for the group to go. **They picked a municipal parking lot in a high-activity** area down-

town, which was not being used for any other purpose. The officers put picnic tables and a portable toilet on the lot for the group's use.

The police could easily monitor this high visibility lot. A city ordinance governed alcohol usage in the lot. The parks **department** volunteered to maintain the lot if the police could get the group to move.

The **changes** to the Sibley Park parking lots were made in the spring of 1994. At the same time, **Municipal Lot #1** was made available for the **displaced group**.

### **Assessment**

The group started to use the municipal lot, but slowly weeded itself down to the "motorheads" and other car enthusiasts. The police have had minimal problems with the group since they moved, **and** the group has not gathered in Sibley Park since.

In the area where the group used to hang out, young families now use the **playground** equipment, and people sit in the shelter to read. Young children use the diamonds for ball games, and groups regularly use the shelter. The lot reconstruction cost about \$5,000. This small investment has returned Sibley Park to families wanting to use the city park without fear of those loitering in the area.

The 30-, 60- and **90-day** evaluations of the park project have affirmed the initial findings. The park redesign **and** reconstruction is a successful example of problem-oriented policing providing a long-term solution to a community problem.

**Glenn Gabriel is director of the Mankato Department of Public Safety.**

## **Submissions**

---

**PERF invites submissions of articles describing successful problem-solving projects. When submitting descriptions, discuss the four phases of your effort scanning, analysis, response, and assessment. It may help to answer the following questions:**

- **What was the problem?**
- **Who was affected by the problem, and how?**
- **How has the department handled the problem in the past?**
- **What information was collected about the problem, and from what sources?**
- **What was the goal of the problem-solving effort?**
- **What strategies were developed to reach that goal?**
- **Was the goal accomplished?**
- **What agencies assisted the police department in achieving the goal?**
- **What would you recommend to other agencies interested in addressing similar problems?**

Send submissions to  
Problem-Solving Quarterly  
1120 Connecticut Ave. NW  
Suite 930  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 466-7820  
FAX (202) 466-7826

# How Police Managers Contribute to Successful Problem Solving

By Arthur D. Wiechmann

## The Problem

The police profession is undergoing a dramatic change. The pioneers of community-oriented policing and problem solving have provided sufficient evidence of success to the law enforcement community that even the most traditional and skeptical agencies are changing to accommodate this new approach to policing.

As these changes unfold, departments emphasize mission statements, goals and objectives, and structural changes. They have focused less on how first-line supervisors can facilitate implementation. Successful problem solving relies on those officers who will modify department practice to fit the real-life situations they face daily.

Upper-level managers must address several critical elements that will help first-line supervisors and the officers they work with to implement problem solving.

## Line-Level Input

Patrol officers are difficult to monitor. They work in environments that do not allow for constant, close supervision. Because of the unique nature of the job, patrol officers have considerable discretion in how they perform their duties, which laws they enforce and which policies they follow. If the expectations or guidelines of a new departmental approach are misunderstood, officers' lack of knowledge could lead

to inefficiency and limit an otherwise effective approach.

One way to prevent such problems is to involve first-line officers in the planning and design stages. The more officers involved in the project, the more voices lend credence and support throughout the agency. Supportive line officers facilitate learning for their peers. Early involvement fosters the commitment of officers, who then encourage others to get involved.

---

## Sharing power and responsibility with officers is the single most important thing that managers can do to implement effective problem solving.

Involvement of line personnel from the beginning also protects the process from sabotage or unwarranted modifications during implementation. The people who will do the work often have knowledge critical to successful implementation that upper-level managers—who are distanced from the line-level responsibilities—do not. By including line officers during all phases—planning, implementation and evaluation—minor problems can be solved as they come up, using the officers' knowledge of real situations. Otherwise, officers may customize the policy on their own to fit the realities of street-level police work, leading to inconsistency and inefficiency.

## Training

Training is a critical element in altering the organizational environment and helping officers to understand the problem-solving concept. Organizational develop-

ment (change) requires commitment from top to bottom. Commitment from the bottom can be achieved through effective, relevant training.

In the early stages of implementation, lower-level employees must understand not only what they will be doing, but also why they will be doing it. For a transition to problem-solving policing to be successful, the agency must give priority to intensive, formal training for line personnel during the early stages of implementation.

## Understanding Tools of Change

Managers who train officers in problem solving may send the message that traditional policing methods do not work. When officers feel that they must defend the way they have done their jobs in the past, they are reluctant to embrace a new method. In trying to sell the approach, managers may overemphasize the message that traditional crime fighting is ineffective to justify a change to the problem-solving approach.

Managers should instruct officers that traditional policing methods, though effective at times, do not work consistently for all situations, and do not address the full spectrum of problems that confront law enforcement today. With shrinking budgets and reduced personnel, efficiency by working smarter is critical. By understanding that a combination of traditional and problem-solving methods is more effective than traditional methods alone, agencies can avoid the personal struggles officers may experience when their value systems are challenged.

(core. on p. 6)

(Managers, cont. from p. 5)

## Management Considerations

Successful problem solving requires changes in philosophy and management style. The quasi-military structure of many police organizations can make it difficult to use a participative management style. The problem-solving approach allows managers to use a participative style to an extent that was not previously possible.

Sharing power and responsibility with officers is the single most important thing that managers can do to implement effective problem solving. Officers will then feel truly empowered, for they will have control over and responsibility for their work environment.

For a police agency to be effective and efficient, managers must identify the unfulfilled needs of their subordinates. Problem-solving policing allows officers to gain satisfaction and esteem, which results in higher motivation. Successful problem-solving policing requires true leadership that inspires officers to tap their full potential. Without such leadership from managers, officers are limited to the mastery of daily routines.

Unless managers are truly committed to change, evidenced through line-level input, intensive training and officers' accurate understanding of the problem-solving philosophy, first-line supervisors and officers will be ill-equipped to ensure that the **organizational** change will be successful.

**Arthur Wiechmann is a patrol sergeant for the Fullerton (CA) Police Department.**

(Alcohol, cont. from p. 2)

case. If they had none, they would drink none. Citizen statements at town meetings also substantiated the fact that physical addiction to alcohol was not a problem for most inebriates; they could take it or leave it as the moment suited them. Medical and ambulance records, as well as reports from officers and correctional staff, showed that most of those detained for drunkenness did not suffer from alcohol withdrawal while they were confined.

---

## **Barrow's inordinate amount of disorder involved binge drinkers, not chronic alcoholics. This realization prompted a new way of looking at the problem.**

Public safety officials eventually agreed that local disorder seemed less a matter of *why* or *when* people drank, than of how they drank. It appeared that Barrow's inordinate amount of disorder involved binge drinkers, not chronic alcoholics. This realization prompted a new way of looking at the problem.

After analyzing previous prevention and intervention strategies, public safety researchers concluded that only abstinence had not been tried. From that conclusion, an initiative was born. That initiative was to put before Barrow's electorate, during the October general election, ballot questions that would give them the opportunity to **ban** the importation, sale and possession of alcohol in their community. Title 4 of Alaska's statutes allows any municipality within the state, by a majority of registered voters dur-

ing a special or general election, to choose to limit access to alcoholic beverages or ban them entirely.

An initial poll of Barrow's citizens, conducted by a professional Anchorage-based research company, revealed an even split between citizens who supported a total ban on alcohol and those who did not. Forty-five percent said they would vote for the ban, while 45 percent said they would not. Ten percent of citizens were unsure how they would vote on the initiative.

## Response

The public safety director approached the borough's mayor with the idea, and the mayor officially adopted a pro-ban policy. He appointed the public safety department to coordinate the education of Barrow's citizens about the deleterious effects of alcohol in their community, and to gain public support for a total alcohol ban. Likewise, the mayor of Barrow embraced the pro-ban policy, and both mayors championed the cause.

Public safety's team designed a campaign logo, which consisted of a stylized depiction of a face with a tear under one eye. A slogan around the stylized face read "STOP THE ALCOHOL. STOP THE PAIN." The logo was applied to buttons, posters and street banners, reminding voters to vote for the ban during October's election.

Public safety officials formed a coalition with other service providers. Together, they compiled statistics about alcohol's effects. The compiled **data** were distributed to the media and to the public via printed handbills and bulk mailers.

(cont. on p. 7)

*(Alcohol, cont. from p. 6)*

Public safety personnel presented the facts about alcohol abuse at meetings of local organizations. Media **and educational** events were designed specifically to educate the 45 percent of residents who were against a ban **and** the 10 percent who were undecided.

The coalition organized town meetings for the general public. Respected elders, politicians, clergy, and community leaders moderated discussions about the pros and cons of a total alcohol ban. The public participated from the audience.

The coalition sponsored similar panels for local radio talk shows. These panelists educated the public with statistics, **and** with anecdotes about the effects of alcohol on them, their community and their culture.

The coalition also organized the grassroots North Slope Celebration of Sober Life Movement to maximize public involvement in the prohibition effort. The movement particularly included the community's youth. The movement sponsored and participated in public meetings and social events in support of prohibition, and it entered into a **partnership** with the Alaska Federation of Natives Sobriety Movement, whose spokesperson delivered a powerful keynote address at the critical town meeting held just before October's election.

## Assessment

On Oct. 4, 1994, the electorate of Barrow voted, by a narrow margin, to **ban** the **importation**, sale and possession of alcoholic beverages in Barrow. The new laws took effect Nov. 1, 1994.

**Although** the alcohol ban is relatively new, its effects have been dramatic. Citizen requests for police services have dropped by more than 80 percent. Before the ban, the number of substance-related calls hovered around 200 per month. In contrast, there were only 32 **substance-related** calls during November, 15 **during** December **and** 15 during January. Call levels for the same months in 1993 and early 1994 were 220, 170 and 167, respectively. The two state-court judges in Barrow say that case filings since the ban are remarkably low, and that, for the first time in their memory, they have had weekends uninterrupted by **arraignments**.

---

### **Calls for police service have dropped by more than 80 percent since the ban.**

---

Since the **ban**, officers have interviewed students, parents, teachers, **principals**, DARE officers, health practitioners, justice professionals, elders, community leaders, **and** others about how the ban has affected the quality of life.

Barrow's schools report that children are attending school more regularly and are more alert. Many students claim that they are less frequently kept **awake** by **drunken squabbling** and fights, **and that their parents are spending** more time with them.

**Physicians and nurses** at the local Public Health Service Hospital say they are no longer plagued by alcohol-induced medical emergencies. They are diagnosing and treating true illnesses that are no longer masked by alcohol.

There are fewer public inebriates. The pre-ban number of

people removed from public areas due to acute alcohol intoxication, 30 to 50 per month, has decreased to three to four per month since the ban.

Generally, the quality of life in Barrow has improved since the **alcohol ban**. **Many report that they are able to provide for themselves and their families better** since they have stopped spending most of their money on liquor. Some have remarked that if they knew it could be so good to be sober, they would have stopped drinking years ago.

The North Slope Celebration of Sober Life Movement has grown to more than 80 members, and it has assumed a leadership role in preserving Barrow's prohibition status. After gaining the ear of local politicians, the movement recently prevailed over an opposing group's immediate attempts to force a second vote on the ban.

During the late campaign to make Barrow dry, opponents predicted that a **ban** on alcohol would lead to the deaths of alcoholics who were forced to drink toxic substitutes, that there would be a dramatic increase in the use of illegal drugs, that bootleggers would just get richer, and that the hospitals and treatment centers would be flooded with people suffering from alcohol withdrawal. They **proclaimed that prohibition had not worked before, and it would not work now**. Apparently, they were wrong. None of their predictions has occurred, and it seems that, perhaps, prohibition on a local scale does work.

---

**James B. Wood is a captain with the North Slope Borough Public Safety Department.**

---