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Problem Solving Through Community Policing: Making the Critics Believers

by Rodney Hill

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, my family lived on Loyola Northway in West Baltimore, MD. While we played in the street every day, a Baltimore city police officer would stop by and chat with us. We enjoyed these visits, and would inundate the officer with the typical questions young children ask. Sometimes we saw these same officers arrest the "bad guys" in the neighborhood. We knew the officers' names, and they knew ours. That was the norm in our neighborhood back then—that was community-oriented policing in its infancy.

However, in an effort to reduce crime, the police community employed a shift in tactics during the mid-'70s, when police departments throughout the country incorporated the Rapid Response method. In an effort to increase their response times, departments took officers off the foot beat and placed them in two-manned vehicles. In some areas, two-manned vehicles were converted to single-manned vehicles. This increased the number of first responders.

Police departments were able to reduce their response times, but people were still committing crimes. Officers lost touch with the community as the police cruiser became a barrier between the public and the police. Unless residents became crime victims, they had little contact with the men and women who protected their homes and families.

During the 1980s, a theory-problem-oriented policing-emerged that combined modern police tactics with traditional operation methods. Community groups and police administrators immediately embraced the concept.

However, many of the street cops failed to buy in to the concept. Officers erroneously defined community and problem-oriented policing as soft on crime and criminals, and giving in to every public demand.

If community and problem-oriented policing are properly introduced, marketed and defined, many of their critics will accept them. Below is one example of how, with the support of my supervisors, Lieutenants Evelyn Cahalen and Diane McCarthy, I was able to both effectively apply the principles of community-oriented and problem-oriented policing and get the officers to believe in it.

Rosemary Hills

In September 1998, I took over as beat manager for the the Montgomery County, MD, Police Department's Delta One Beat in the Bethesda District. The beat was a relatively quiet one, with the exception of the Rosemary Hills community. where residents routinely complained to the police about an assortment of criminal activity and quality-of-life issues. After several months of reactive type enforcement, my lieutenants and I decided to put together an effective plan using non-traditional enforcement.

The Rosemary Hills community is located in the southwestern portion of Montgomery County. It borders the north-east quadrant of Washington, DC. Rosemary Hills is different from other communities in the beat because it is both racially and ethnically diverse. The community has four apartment complexes, three high-rise apartment buildings, numerous single-family homes, one recreational facility and no businesses.

During the 1980s, three of the four apartment complexes had notorious violent crime rates. We received calls for strong arm and armed robberies, stabbings, shootings, domestic disputes and a multitude of property crimes. During the mid- to late-'80s, crack cocaine arrived in Montgomery County; each of the properties suffered from the residual effects of the drug, including drug distribution, increased drug usage, and the violence associated with both.

We decided we should gather as much intelligence as we could about the problems. We did not want to jump into anything without fully knowing what we were dealing with. The district commander agreed to the temporary formation of an Uniformed Tactical Team made up of four officers and a supervisor. The team's objective would be to work closely with the community to reduce the crime in the neighborhood.

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The Challenge and Solution

Some of the beat officers and officers on the team made sarcastic comments about community and problem-oriented policing. My challenge was to get both the beat and tactical team officers to discover the value of these legitimate law enforcement approaches.

I had my supervisors' support to develop whatever plan I thought would be effective. Because I appreciated and respected my supervisors for their confidence in me, I knew the officers would feel the same way. I told them that we were going to reduce the number of calls for service and the amount of fear and violence that plagued that community. I told them that we, not the station brass, would develop an action plan.

I knew that once the officers saw what effective community and problem-oriented policing was really like, they would be sold.

Several years prior, while commanding a similar tactical team in another district, I confronted a similar problem. An officer under my command made frequent sarcastic comments about community policing. Regardless of the counterpoints I made, he refused to accept the concept and felt the beat cop had no time for those tactics.

One evening, he was dispatched to a home for a returned runaway. A half-hour later the officer called me at the station requesting a telephone number for the county social service office. An hour passed, and the officer—still on the same call—called back requesting phone numbers for similar agencies. Since it was a slow evening, I did not question the amount of time he was spending on the call, although I was very curious about what he was doing. When another half-hour passed, I drove by the residence to ensure that he was still on the call—he was. Later that evening when he cleared the call, I asked him to meet with me.

The officer told me that that particular teenager runs away three to four times a month. He said officers spend countless man-hours either taking the initial runaway report or the subsequent returned runaway report. He wanted to find a solution so the police could spend more time on other more pressing matters. After that comment, I reminded him of our talks about community and problem-oriented policing, and explained that he had just spent two-and-a-half hours doing just that. He smiled and said that he understood what I had been saying.

I knew that my Delta One beat officers also would accept these concepts once they saw that they could work if properly managed and delivered.

Gathering Intelligence

I told the officers that before we went into action it would be prudent to gather as much intelligence about the neighborhood as we could. We attended numerous community meetings and discovered that the community's problems were larger than we thought. We discovered a large percentage of crime going unreported. The residents lived in fear and often mistrusted the police.

We checked with residents, beat officers, resident managers and the crime analyst to identify the main players committing crime. We checked with the district's gang officer to identify specific groups active in the area.

While walking the beat, we spoke with frightened residents who told us of drug usage and distribution. We learned that many of the gang members were harassing, robbing and intimidating many residents in the neighborhood.

The foot patrols and community meetings also provided us with information we could not learn behind the barrier of a police cruiser. The residents pointed out the hiding places where the criminals hid their weapons and drugs. We also discovered the vantage points the dealers used to conduct their counter-surveillance activities.

The most crucial bit of information we discovered was that the suspects did not fear the police and the court system. Many of the suspects either were able to elude the reactive police tactics or did not worry about what happened to them when they were caught. When they were arrested, it was usually for minor misdemeanor offenses. They knew the jails and courts were overcrowded. Overcrowding led to many cases being dismissed, or the defendants receiving a light punishment.

Springing Into Action

After discussing different methods of response with the team, I elected to try some untraditional methods of proactive enforcement. I wanted to attack the problems from a psychological standpoint. I knew that the criminals had little fear of the court system, and I wanted the team to enforce the law using unfamiliar methods.

First, I instructed all the officers to dress identically. If one officer wore a baseball cap, everyone wore a cap. If one wore a jacket or commando sweater, everyone wore a jacket or sweater. This visual uniformity had a strong psychological impression on the targeted criminals. Once we implemented this tactic, several of the officers commented on how subdued the suspects were when we confronted them. Previously, officers had been the targets of all types of verbal insults from the gang members when police confronted them.

I invited the beat officers to join us. We split up into teams of two, and made two to three foot patrol rounds in all the apartment complexes. After one team finished walking through a complex, another one was right behind it. The drug dealers were not used to this continuous police presence. We began to throw them off balance and disrupt their drug operations. We walked through laundry and storage rooms, checked the surrounding wooded areas and made numerous citizen contacts.

The citizen contacts proved to be extremely useful. The increased presence made the citizens feel comfortable and increased their trust in the police. Several

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arrests were made for subjects using and dealing drugs, committing lewd sex acts and loitering.

Second, Lieutenants McCarthy and Cahalen and I met with the State's Attorney for Montgomery County Douglas Gansler. Gansler was a strong proponent of both community policing and community prosecution. He knew that if we all worked together, we would be much more effective. He informed us that his office would aggressively prosecute cases the Delta One officers brought forth. They were committed to making every case stick.

We targeted specific individuals we knew were responsible for a majority of the criminal acts. We enforced anything and everything that we could. Initially the suspects laughed the arrests off, claiming their cases would be dismissed as usual. They were surprised when the State's Attorney pressed for convictions.

We made history when we won a conviction and 90-day jail sentence for a subject charged with loitering. This was the longest jail sentence anyone had ever received for that offense in Montgomery County. I explained to the officers that the work they were doing was community- and problem-oriented policing. Instead of ridiculing it, they wanted to do more of it.

We were effectively reaching out to the community, but still not reaching everyone. Lieutenant Cahalen came up with an idea to pass out flyers explaining the police department's efforts. The State's Attorney agreed to have his staff design the flyers in English and Spanish. The flyers mentioned the tactical team, listed the number of arrests made, and encouraged residents to call the police if they witnessed criminal activity.

Then Lieutenants McCarthy and Cahalen; Thomas Eldridge, Assistant State's Attorney; and I met with the three resident managers in the community. We discovered that many of the apartment leases contained language allowing for evictions if residents were arrested on the property. We agreed to provide them the

necessary information they would need to file for the evictions.

The managers quickly agreed to the plan. They knew that fewer criminals meant fewer complaints from the other tenants. The managers also agreed to issue trespass notices to subjects who had no business on their property.

The evictions were a big success. Within weeks, the first few families received eviction notices. Those notices sent shock waves throughout the community. The actions of the criminals now affected their families. This put pressure on them to either conform or move out. Several families elected to leave on their own instead of fighting the evictions.

The trespass notices proved to be equally as effective. Drug dealers who did not live on a certain property were issued trespass notices and informed not to come back on the property. When we saw them on the property, we were able to make physical arrests. These arrests allowed us to search the dealers and recover an assortment of drugs and weapons.

Now, both the tactical team officers and the beat officers were excited. They were enjoying this policing tool and began to get creative.

Many of the community leaders and residents complained to me about two particular drug dealers. All of our arrest efforts failed until Officer Richard Grapes suggested a plan. Through the contacts he made from the neighborhood foot patrols, he learned that one of the dealers was selling pit bull puppies without a license—a violation of the Montgomery County Code.

Officer Grapes gathered the necessary probable cause information, and with the help of the State's Attorney's Office, obtained a search warrant for the dealer's apartment. We executed the warrant with the assistance of our SWAT team. Along with the pit bull puppies, we retrieved two handguns and gained information linking the dealer to other crimes. Five days later, the dealer moved out.

The other dealer was much more chisive and crafty. Again, we tried traditional methods, but every effort was in vain until we discovered that the dealer was not a naturalized U.S. citizen. Eldridge contacted Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Special Agent Christine Carlson, who agreed to look into the case.

Carlson discovered that the dealer had a five-year-old felony conviction. Generally that, in and of itself, would not qualify him for deportation. However, Carlson also discovered that the type of status he was on expired several years prior. With that information, she was able to obtain an administrative arrest and search warrant. The dealer was arrested, evicted and deported two months later.

Finally, I requested that the officers involve themselves in community activities. Several of the officers involved themselves in the after-school homework clubs, athletic events and community meetings. Many of the visits that began as brief 10- to 15-minute conversations ended with the officers volunteering their off-duty time. They began to enjoy the role they played and the effect they had on the community.

Empowerment Equals Success

The plan merged successfully the elements needed for effective community and problem-oriented policing. The police, State's Attorney and the community banded together to defeat a common enemy. After the tactical team was disbanded, the plan continued with the beat officers. They had become so entrenched in the neighborhood that they did not want to leave. Officer Charles Welter was offered a 90-day temporary assignment with our narcotics unit, but he told me that he did not want to take that assignment because we were making such great in-roads in the community.

The public's trust and confidence in the police improved. This became apparent when several of the gang members in the neighborhood banded together and made some extremely insidious complaints to the local NAACP and the department's

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Office of Internal Affairs. When the residents in the neighborhood heard about the complaints, a series of letters were written to Internal Affairs and the NAACP supporting the officers. Once the beat officers discovered this, their belief in community policing solidified.

The officers continue to work extremely closely with the residents in the community and the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office. Once they saw the positive impact that their actions had on the

community, they have not been able to stop. Now they do the foot patrols and surveillances without being directed.

The patrols have led to a number of arrests. Recently, Officers Fran McDonough and Welter came across a peeping tom while searching a woods line for drug dealers. The suspect had an extensive record for sexual assault and indecent exposure. Arrests like this only increased the community's positive attitude toward the police.

What made this plan successful was the support I received from my lieutenants and

the State's Attorney's Office. I, in turn, supported my officers in their efforts to execute the plan. There was no micro-managing or second-guessing. Once the officers were empowered, we let them do their job. I recommend other lieutenants and sergeants employ a similar strategy if they want to ensure an effective effort.

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