

Entry Name: Hot-Spot Crime Reduction Through Community Partnership

Entry ID: 341

Population Served: 19,496

Executive Overview

Columbia Heights is a first-ring suburb of northeast Minneapolis. It has an ethnically diverse population of 19,496 with a poverty rate 3% higher than the state average. As an older, primarily residential community, Columbia Heights shares many of the crime and public safety issues of neighboring Minneapolis.

In 2007 the Police Department faced ever-increasing crime rates and shrinking resources. Entire neighborhoods seemed plagued by crime and disorder. Many of the department's proactive programs had been discontinued or curtailed as the city struggled under steadily decreasing LGA funding from the state.

Recognizing that community involvement is essential for significant and sustainable crime reduction, the department sought to marshal community resources in a strategic proactive effort to restore order and reduce crime. After identifying "hot spots" – concentrated areas of crime and disorder, the department engaged in a comprehensive community-involved effort to identify and mitigate the contributing factors involved.

Through community partnerships, information-sharing, and new and revitalized programs, the department collaborated with other community stakeholders to work in reclaiming these hot-spots of crime and disorder, and in restoring a sense of security. Problems were identified through initial scanning based on input from the community and crime analysis. Community stakeholders were identified and worked with the department in developing and implementing responses.

Criminal activity and disorder dropped in the hot-spot areas, restoring a sense of security and public safety while strengthening community involvement and shared responsibility. Improved partnership between the community and the police department resulted in earlier problem identification and more effective, synergistic solutions.

By the end of 2011, crime rates plummeted for four years to an unprecedented twenty-five year low as the department continued to grow and strengthen community partnerships, building on initiatives including Neighborhood and Business Watch, and Youth and Multi-cultural Outreach programs.

Framework Questions

Past efforts toward complete organizational integration of community policing were only partially successful for several reasons. Officers assigned to community policing details encouraged the misperception that community policing was only the responsibility of those assigned. When funding for these positions ran out, they were often reabsorbed

into general patrol without significant organizational integration of community policing.

In 2010 Columbia Heights Police implemented an innovative and significant change in the department's organizational structure in an effort to integrate the community policing philosophy throughout the department's service model with limited impact on resources. This was accomplished through the creation of a COP Coordinator position. Completely different from past COP Officer assignments, the coordinator serves as a vital link across shifts, divisions and patrol teams as all officers actively engage in community policing regardless of their shift or division assignment.

The department's commitment to community policing starts with the department's mission statement affirming the commitment "to active partnerships with the community". This commitment is reinforced through the department's strategic plan. Revised annually, the strategic plan incorporates community policing as an integral part of the department's service model. This is articulated in the strategic objective to "Forge collaborative community and regional responses to the City's crime problems" by involving "community partners in policing efforts in order to provide successful communication of information, problem solving, and sharing of responsibility for action and decision-making".

Practical application of this strategy occurs through a series of action steps articulated in the strategic plan, linking the community policing philosophy to actual services and activities performed by the officers. With all officers responsible for accomplishing the action steps identified in the strategic plan, officers working on shared initiatives are often separated by shift or division assignments. The COP coordinator serves as the hub of the community policing wheel, with all department members serving as the spokes of the wheel – each responsible and accountable for specific action steps necessary to meet this goal and strategy of the strategic plan. These action steps often overlap and intersect with other areas of the strategic plan, resulting in a comprehensive community policing implementation and successful model for providing public safety services to the community.

The department has four Neighborhood Watch Liaison Officers who work with block captains and watch groups to identify current public safety concerns and share information regarding current crime trends. Two other officers provide a similar service to the business community as liaison officers for the Business Watch program.

As part of the department's Cultural Outreach program, officers have developed relationships with members of religious and educational organizations that serve the Islamic and Hispanic members of our community. Together they've had a number of information-sharing forums where members of those communities could share their concerns and learn about the service that the police department provides.

Officers partner with the school district as part of our Youth Outreach/Mentoring program that builds relationships with the diverse student population. This interaction helps identify student concerns and interests, helping to improve service delivery to

juveniles, many of whom are at-risk youth who participate in the open-gym program

The department has developed a strong working relationship with the local domestic abuse shelter, Alexandra House, to more effectively deal with victims of domestic abuse.

The department has strengthened its relationships with other city departments including the fire department, parks and recreation, and community development in an effort to coordinate the delivery of services to the community.

The department took a leadership role in developing a resource-sharing database with other county agencies, resulting in a comprehensive resource list that agencies can share with each other, thereby improving service delivery at a reduced cost.

The department partnered with Southern Anoka County Assistance, the fire department and Anoka Sheriff's Office to increase food donations at the local food shelf. Other officers worked with the DEA and Lino Lakes PD to provide a Prescription Drug Take-back Program for proper disposal of old prescription drugs.

Whether brought to the attention of the police department by crime analysis or by members of the community, the police department identifies the stakeholders involved and meets with them to further analyze the problem in an effort to seek solutions that work for everyone involved.

All officers were trained to use the SARA problem solving model, and are encouraged to regularly demonstrate its application. This changed their primary role from call-taker to problem solver. Officers have been given the autonomy to solve problems they encounter by working with the community partners and stakeholders involved.

Officers utilize relationships with rental property owners, community development, and the fire department to create a partnership for identifying causal factors for crime and disorder occurring on rental property, and to find solutions through shared responsibility and problem solving.

The department actively seeks available forums for community interaction and information exchange, including leveraging information technology developments such as Facebook, Twitter, and other Internet services such as email and websites. These forums have become a significant tool in fostering partnerships. The department maintains a website and Facebook page where citizens and other stakeholders frequently interact with officers and each other regarding public safety issues. Neighborhood Watch members and other groups regularly exchange information with officers through these forums. The department also works with local newspapers and other publications to keep the community informed on public safety issues, and on how concerned citizens can participate.

Initiative Questions

In 2008 police operations changed significantly under incoming Police Chief Scott Nadeau. Through the implementation of modern crime analysis and strategic planning it became apparent that the increase in crime rates was not citywide, or even neighborhood-specific. Initial analysis suggested that “hot-spots” - areas of increased crime and disorder, existed throughout the city, each area having unique contributing factors.

Several hot-spots were areas with high concentrations of rental property. Areas with higher than average juvenile involvement were, not surprisingly, concentrated near schools and parks. Some hot-spots were businesses with a high number of theft or disturbance incidents. Finally, incidents such as domestic assaults had little or no geographic pattern, yet had a significant impact on public safety and crime rates. The police department took a leadership role in bringing together community stakeholders to further analyze these hot-spots in an effort to identify the sources of the problem and seek solutions.

Officers began by surveying residents in affected areas. The responses gave officers a general sense of who was living in the area and their level of commitment in improving public safety in their neighborhood. The department also sponsored annual community picnics at city parks, and charity events for the local food shelf and athletic boosters. This provided an opportunity for the residents to share their concerns with officers, and helped identify potential allies in restoring public safety.

Officers also met with representatives from other city departments including fire, public works and community development. The departments formed a coalition that worked together to concentrate public service resources on hot-spots in several neighborhoods where they were needed to improve living conditions and public safety. This partnership also proved effective in presenting a unified request for action to the city council.

Community Development worked with police officers to identify foreclosed property and sought to redevelop the property to restore a healthy balance of owner-occupied and rental property in affected neighborhoods. The fire and police departments worked together to ensure that city codes related to housing maintenance and fire safety were enforced, and that areas of blight were addressed. Public works worked with the police to install or repair lighting as necessary to discourage criminal activity.

Rental property owners partnered with police through regular landlord meetings. Standards were established for consistent background checks on prospective tenants. The process for accomplishing these checks through public-access Internet sites was shared with all rental property owners. Ordinances were passed by the city council to encourage responsible home and rental property ownership. This resulted in less crime, improved perceptions of public safety and more stable and long-term rentals.

Quarterly rental property meetings have become a popular forum for police and rental property owners to exchange information, identify new concerns and develop collaborative solutions. Speakers with expertise on a variety of rental property issues

are invited to present important information at each forum.

The department wished to increase citizen participation and responsibility for keeping their neighborhood safe. This was accomplished by revitalizing the Neighborhood Watch Program, and restructuring how the program was implemented. The city was divided into quadrants with each quadrant assigned a Neighborhood Watch Liaison Officer. Each NW officer had attended a two-day training course on managing effective neighborhood watch programs.

This provided each area more interaction with their NW officer while strengthening the officer's connection to the groups they were assigned to. NW officers offer several community meetings annually besides National Night Out. This includes a Block Captain Appreciation Dinner, and training events covering topics such as identification and reporting of suspicious activity.

Officers notify watch groups of crime in their neighborhoods, providing crime-alert fliers to be distributed to members not linked by Internet or email. The program continues to grow with twenty new block groups formed in 2011, bringing the current number of Neighborhood Watch groups to eighty-three. The department continues to develop this program by working on ways to identify and recognize block groups whose efforts prevent crime or increase public safety.

The department partnered with the local business community to develop a Business Watch Program. Modeled after the successful Neighborhood Watch program, this program focuses on hot-spots of crime affecting businesses. Two officers assigned as Business Watch Liaisons work with the business community to share information regarding current criminal activity. Officers distribute posters containing photos and descriptions of suspects wanted in connection with business crimes. This enlists the entire business community and the customers they serve in helping to solve business crime, and serves as a deterrent for would-be criminals who don't want to see their photo posted on local businesses. The posters are generic Business Watch Member Alerts and don't name the business where the crime occurred, minimizing business owner concerns that connecting crime incidents with specific businesses would hinder sales.

Business liaison officers network with business owners who have successfully reduced crime or public safety problems and share that information with other businesses so that they can also benefit. In several cases the officers worked to reduce the number of larceny calls at businesses by reviewing the types of merchandise being stolen, environmental factors that contribute to increased theft, and even the policies related to how employees handle theft incidents.

The department partnered with local domestic abuse prevention and women's shelter, Alexandra House, to analyze domestic abuse issues and develop a coordinated response. The result was a collaborative initiative launched in 2009 that also included the Anoka County Sheriff's Office, city and county prosecutors, and Anoka County

Courts and Corrections. This initiative, called Lethality Assessment Protocol (LAP), is a research-based program that helps to identify victims of domestic assault who are likely to encounter a serious or lethal domestic assault unless they receive immediate domestic abuse prevention services or shelter. The program was so successful that it was expanded countywide in 2011.

Officers are currently working with Alexandra House on developing a Domestic Abuse Response Team. This team will concentrate on repeat domestic calls, working with those involved to identify and utilize available resources before future incidents can escalate to an assault.

At the high school students were surveyed and officers collaborated with school staff at all levels to identify factors that contributed to crime and reduced the perception of public safety. This partnership resulted in a number of programs including Cops-N-Kids, which provides weekly afterschool activities for students at the high school and at the middle school. These activities include open gym time, movies, and board games. At the middle school a teacher volunteers to tutor students having trouble with math homework. This program continues to expand as additional activities are included based on student interest. In 2011 the program served over 3000 students during the school year.

The department and school district worked together to add additional School Resource Officers (SRO's) at the middle school and the Alternative Learning Center (ALC) after the SRO at the high school proved so effective in working with students and staff to ensure a safe learning environment. The SRO's oversee the Cops-N-Kids program for the police department, serving as mentors as they coordinate the various activities offered.

Starting in 2010 the police department worked with the school district to increase positive interaction between elementary school children and police. This led to the development of the Anti-Bullying Reading Program at one of the city's elementary schools. Sixteen members of the police department, including non-sworn staff, took the opportunity to read a book to students about anti-bullying, followed by a question and answer period where students ask questions about police work. The program was so popular that the program was expanded in 2011 to include a second elementary school, reaching over 500 students in kindergarten through second grade.

One of the primary goals for the police department was to create a comprehensive service model that fully integrated community policing, creating community partnerships to identify public safety problems and develop shared responses. Partners came together with the shared goal of reducing crime and increasing public safety in the affected hot-spot areas where they were stakeholders. Those involved also hoped to replace those hot-spots with sustainable low-crime areas through shared responsibility and community involvement.

In addition to solving immediate crime problems, we worked to complete long-term

objectives such as building relationships within the community, including investing in our youth. We worked to change demographics to support healthy neighborhoods such as encouraging a balance of rental and owner-occupied property. We worked to build new relationships and strengthen existing ones with other stakeholders and resource providers to improve efficiency.

When possible objectives are quantitative such as crime rates or number of participants involved or served. Statistics related to hot-spot areas are tracked weekly and monthly along with regular crime rate statistics. This data, along with crime-mapping is shared with the public on the department's website so that residents can follow changes in criminal activity in their neighborhood. When necessary the department uses surveys to identify changes in perception of public safety, and areas of concern or levels of interest. In every case we strive to create "win-win" situations where each partner contributes and benefits.

Extensive use of modern technology including social networking, crime analysis and mapping provides a system of constant feedback and community input. This allows the status of all initiatives and programs to be regularly assessed, and changes to be made as necessary to improve effectiveness or meet changes in the dynamic public safety needs of the community.

Several challenges were encountered while attempting to reduce or eliminate crime hot-spots. These challenges often involved building trust with, and enlisting the support of, the community partners that were integral in the problem-solving process.

In the case of the rental property hot-spots, some rental property owners were concerned that they were being singled out, and that new ordinances would be burdensome or punitive. Officers worked with these rental property owners to review the crime problems on and around their rental property, including frequency and types of problems.

It became apparent to those property owners that the difficulty they were experiencing in renting their property to quality tenants was the result of a few irresponsible or inexperienced rental property owners who owned adjacent rental property. The majority of the rental property owners began to see the police as their ally in maintaining safe and crime-free rental properties.

Owners who were consistently having difficulty controlling crime and disorder at their rental property met individually with officers and collaborated on crime mitigation plans. These plans articulated specific actions and areas of responsibility that both the police and the property owner would take to improve public safety at the rental property. The plan included additional meetings to assess the success of the mitigation plan, and provide an opportunity to adjust the plan to increase effectiveness.

Another challenge came as the result of a different hot-spot control effort. A church serving the local Hispanic community expressed concern about increased police

contacts with church members. When officers learned of these concerns, they partnered with church leaders to create an information-sharing forum. This forum was so effective at dispelling misperceptions regarding enforcement efforts, and in improving police/community relationships, that the department expanded it into a formal Multi-cultural Outreach Initiative that includes other multi-cultural religious and educational organizations.

In the past two years officers have held approximately a half-dozen multi-cultural outreach forums that have strengthened the department's relationship with the diverse community we serve, including the growing Hispanic and Somali communities. Organizations have requested additional forums and sometimes present the officers involved with questions posed by their members in advance of the meetings. These questions are often related to observations of police activity and perceptions or conclusions drawn by members based on their observations. The forums provide a non-threatening environment where those involved can ask questions and express concerns.

Initiative Evaluation

The department had an objective to fully integrate community policing through the creation of a comprehensive service model built on community partnerships to identify problems and create shared solutions. This objective was very successful based on the number of partnerships created or strengthened, stakeholders identified and involved, and the results achieved.

Organizational restructuring so that all officers could work across shifts, teams and divisions – seamlessly coordinated through the community policing coordinator position, played a significant part in the success. Having officers trained and accountable for problem solving in a variety of assignments in addition to their regular patrol duties was also integral.

While most partnerships were successful, positive experiences, occasionally reluctant stakeholders made collaboration difficult. Ordinances requiring compliance with reasonable calls for service and conduct on rental property provided consequences for irresponsible management of property – whether owner-occupied or rental. In many cases consequences were waived as reluctant partners realized that their investment in partnership offered greater returns.

The objective of reducing the overall crime in the city was an unprecedented success. In 2011 the overall crime rate dropped for the fourth consecutive year, reaching levels not seen since 1985, and significantly below those seen in regional, state and national indices. The link to this historic drop in crime and the community policing partnerships related to the hot-spot initiatives can be seen by reviewing how each of these initiatives contributed to that crime reduction.

One hot-spot neighborhood comprised predominantly of rental property saw a 45 % decrease in police calls for crime and disorder since 2007. Periodic assessments were

made quarterly by all stakeholders at the quarterly Rental Property Forums, with owners having difficulty controlling their rental property meeting monthly with officers as part of mitigation plans.

The objective of sustainable crime-free rental property was only partially met. Relatively crime-free rental property is possible, but sustaining it takes continued vigilance on the part of all stakeholders involved. When officers and rental property owners first began working together on rental property hot-spots, it was not uncommon to find 35 calls to a single property in a quarter. Currently, regular monitoring for identification of hot-spots helps alert officers and property owners of potential problems at rental properties after just a few calls. The frequency of these types of rental hot-spots have been reduced as each stakeholder understands their role in maintaining public safety at rental property.

The police department and community development continue working with city leaders on long-range planning to improve the 34% ratio of rental to owner-occupied housing throughout the city. By the end of 2011 the city has worked to replace 38 substandard rental units with owner-occupied housing. Given the significant cost, timing and effort involved, it will take years to fully realize this objective.

Collaboration with the school district and mentoring youth through the Youth Outreach Program has resulted in a drop in crime at the hot-spots related to juvenile crime. Thefts at the high school dropped over 50% in 2011 compared to the previous year. Additionally, juvenile arrests dropped by almost 50% during the same period. Assessment of Youth Outreach is done annually based on students served. Stakeholders from the police department and school district review the success of the programs based on interest level and participation.

The partnership with Alexandra House Domestic Abuse Shelter and other stakeholders has resulted in a significant increase in efficiency of services provided to abuse victims. In 2011 seventy-six victims were evaluated during this process with 71% screening in as high-risk for a serious or lethal future assault without further intervention. Courts and corrections are using the results of these screenings tools to help make decisions regarding bail and sentencing. Warrants are issued for suspects in domestic assault cases much more rapidly than before the program was implemented. Officers continue to work with Alexandra House advocates on establishing a Domestic Abuse Response Team to support victims and provide resources before an assault can occur.

Neighborhood Watch continues to grow in size and effectiveness through social networking and increased interaction with the police department. Five new watch groups were added in 2010 when the revitalization process started, and twenty more new watch groups were added in 2011, bringing the total watch groups to eighty-three. Social networking through the Internet has played a significant part in providing forums for information exchange for neighborhood watch and other community initiatives. Having four NW liaison officers working together, yet each with their own geographical area, has allowed the officers to spend more time adding value to the program, including increased crime-alerts and training related to crime identification and

reporting, and home security. They have held a second annual Block Captain Appreciation Dinner, and are working on a Watch Group Recognition initiative to recognize actions by individual groups that have enhanced public safety in the community.

The Business Watch Program began informally at the end of 2011 with information-sharing on best practices among hot-spot businesses and the police department. At that time officers worked to reduce thefts at two businesses and disturbance calls at two others. It became clear that partnering with businesses would allow all businesses to benefit from best practices when dealing with specific public safety problems, and that the businesses brought much of the expertise to the table regarding shoplifting prevention, and how adjustment of staffing levels based on external yet predictable events, such as end of the school day or end of football games, could affect crime prevention efforts.

Early in 2012 the first formal meeting of Business Watch was held involving owners and managers from approximately fifteen businesses, including those already working with the police on the hot-spot initiative. Since then several crime-alerts have gone out to Business Watch members and posters showing photos of suspects have been posted. The program is growing in popularity as other businesses learn about the program and how it can enhance their theft prevention efforts.

Lessons Learned

Like other agencies the Columbia Heights Police Department wrestled with organizational integration of community policing and limited resources. Change is often a difficult thing to implement in police departments accustomed to doing things 'the way we've always done it'. When it is attempted, it is usually in the form of a new program or initiative offered as a 'quick fix' for the latest problem, or a panacea for all problems that will revolutionize how we do policing. Community policing often falls into the latter category when departments fail to recognize that community policing is a philosophy and not a program, or fail to fully integrate community policing into their organization's service model. We understand...we've been there.

Programs and initiatives are necessary to provide focus, structure and organization to any service model, and some require more significant community partnerships than others. However, only a dedicated commitment to real change, perhaps in department structure – but certainly in officer training, assignments and accountability, will result in full organizational integration of community policing. Here is what we learned about one way – not necessarily the only way, of successfully integrating community policing in a comprehensive public safety service model.

Working in partnership with the community on a variety of programs requires regular interaction and continuity. With officers taking time off, changing shifts and divisions, program continuity often suffered. It became imperative to implement a model that maintained that continuity yet still ensured involvement of all members.

Creating a COP Coordinator position was a significant restructuring of the organization. Having an officer experienced in community policing with strong public relations and organizational skills serve as coordinator was integral for success. Scheduling their shift to span multiple patrol shifts, including flexing hours earlier or later as needed, ensured effective coordination and communication with the rest of the officers, regardless of shift, team or division assignment.

All officers had to be trained in problem-solving – starting with supervisors. We use the SARA model. Officers not only learned the model, but were required to demonstrate its use through written documentation of problem-solving actual incidents. They often started with small problems like a chronic runaway or an elderly person living alone needing additional care. As officers became better problem solvers they moved on to large hot-spot incidents involving many community partners.

Surprisingly, officers initially had difficulty recognizing other responsible community stakeholders, as they were accustomed to attempting to resolve every incident themselves like they would handle a radio call. As officers became more familiar with using problem solving during their regular duties, they became better at identifying the likely root problem and the stakeholders involved, including available resources. This encouraged the formation of community partnerships at all levels as the officers worked alone or in teams on problems and initiatives of varying size.

Maintaining community partnerships is a continual, active process. Like all relationships, community partnerships require contact and exchange between those involved. There also has to be a benefit for everyone involved. For those committed to keeping their community, neighborhood or property safe, the prospect of increased public safety alone was sufficient for active partnership. Programs such as Neighborhood Watch and Rental Property Forums can be enhanced through value-added components such as appreciation dinners and awards for activity that increase public safety. Training and information that is of interest and useful to the membership will also keep programs competitive with the myriad other activities that compete against your program for a member's valuable time.

Perhaps the most important lesson was the significant impact we were able to make, and the accomplishments we achieved in reducing crime and increasing public safety, when we worked together in partnership with other community stakeholders in developing a shared solution to the problems we identified. That this could be accomplished without significant additions to personnel attests to the synergy and momentum that community partnerships provide.

A public service model built on community partnership and problem-solving creates an agile organization – a department with the ability to quickly adapt to change. Problems are quickly identified by officers trained to identify them and notify other stakeholders. Partnerships are in place where contact persons are known, as are the resources they can bring to the table and their capacity to assist with a given problem. Solutions can be quickly developed and implemented.

Keep in mind that Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither will an agency's organizational integration of community policing. Some change, such as organizational restructuring, will be big. But many changes occur incrementally – building on successes while maintaining momentum and forward progress. Several times we had to slow down so everyone in the organization could catch their breath. But there is always forward progress, and the iterative process of assessing current programs and initiatives that keeps us responsive to the needs and public safety concerns of the diverse community that we serve.