Kids, Community, and Cops Come Together

INSPIRATION

By Robin Smith / June 9, 2017

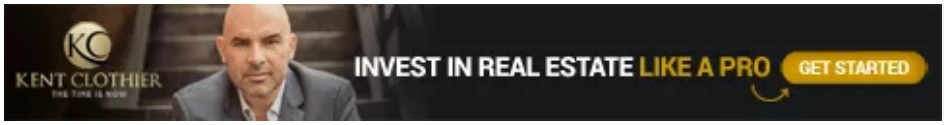
The growing number of premeditated acts of violence against police officers has departments scrambling to figure out solutions to bring their officers and their communities together. As mistrust accelerates and police recruitment numbers decline, some police departments have innovative programs already in place and others are holding events to build faith between officers and the communities they protect.

Chief of Police Scott Nadeu in Columbia Heights, Minnesota, who initiated a program in his community called Cops-N-Kids, is profoundly disturbed and dejected after each ambush incident.

“It is a sad day for not only law enforcement, but for all Americans when one of our protectors is killed simply because he chose a profession of service to others,” the chief from the Midwest says. “As officers go about their jobs, a difficult and dangerous job, they should have the support of the community.”

In 2016, 21 police officers died in ambush attacks. The most gruesome occurrence happened on July 7, 2016, at a rally march in Dallas, Texas. The march ended when a civilian sniper took aim at Dallas police officers, killing five and injuring nine. The deadly assault was the largest police officer death toll from a single event since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, which resulted in the death of 72 officers.

The assault against police officers continues into 2017. On May 3, two Chicago officers were severely injured after they were stalked and attacked by gunmen with high-powered weapons. Many of the attacks against police officers are in response to real or perceived cases of police brutality.



“Those officers who do wrong should be held accountable,” Nadeu continues, “but with the negativity in the media, to include social media, the officers who are trying to do their job have a much more difficult time, and these types of incidents are the result.”

Community And Cops Coming Together

In 2009, in order to create trust and transparency between his officers and citizens, Nadeu’s Cops-N-Kids program began after a “forum for youth” between the police department, the school district, and community partners. The city leaders wanted to find a way to serve the kids in their community.

The outreach program is organized and guided by police. It includes weekly open gym programs, basketball tournaments, and visits to elementary schools where officers read stories to children about pertinent topics like bullying.

Initially, all sides were apprehensive about the community outreach activities.

“Many of the officers were skeptical and did not see it as part of their job,” Nadeu says. “The community seemed a bit reluctant about why the police were reaching out and what it had to do with policing.”

Columbia Heights police officer Jason Piehn and community service officer Zahra Almosawi at a high school "open gym" night.

After eight successful years, minds have changed, according to the chief. The program has gone from a few hundred hours of organized activities a year and a few dozen attendees to more than 4,000 hours a year and hundreds of people attending the events.

"Officers who were at first reluctant to participate now enjoy communicating and interacting," he says. "It allows them to have positive interactions with our kids and community."

Other communities have now picked up on the idea. On May 20, a police department in Lexington, Kentucky, had its inaugural Picnic with Police. This event came to fruition after "Coffee with the Chief" meetings between Lexington Police Chief Mark Barnard, the Lexington Human Rights Commission, and community members.

> *"We wanted people to see the men and women behind the uniform as people rather than 'police'," Ray Sexton, executive director of the Lexington Human Rights Commission, says.*

“We also had kids in mind, and planned the event around having as many kids there as possible. We didn’t want kids in the community to see police officers and be scared and run the other way.”

The Lexington Human Rights commissioners secured sponsorships for the event, which provided for all of the cost of food and activities.

A good will embrace between a Lexington police officer and community citizens at Picnic with Police.

Officers came to the picnic in civilian clothes or uniforms, and brought their families with them. The community’s citizens came to mingle and share good will in a relaxed environment with those assigned to protect them, according to Sexton.

“The event ended up surpassing our vision,” he says. “We had officers and the public in fellowship with one another, laughing, hugging. I saw members of the community getting to know the officers that are patrolling their neighborhood.”

The success of the event and future integrated events has opened minds and started discussions about difficult topics. The culmination of this, Sexton believes, will lead to trustworthy relationships.

“We have a great police force in Lexington with great leadership,” he says. “I think we can only continue to grow as a community and ultimately you’ll see a more symbiotic relationship between the police and the public. As a result, I think you’ll see a decrease in overall crime numbers and less internal complaints against officers.”

Out in California, Police Sergeant Chris Cognac, the man behind the Hawthorne Police Department’s Community Affairs Unit, has put in place a series of innovative programs, some of which have evolved to an international level.

Hawthorne police officer Chris Cognac at a local practice.

In March 2011, the Hawthorne Police Department followed suit with its first Coffee with a Cop event. Since its inception, the idea has grown to include departments in all 50 states and 14 countries. The U.S. Department of Justice used the program to establish a National Coffee with a Cop day that is held each year on the first Wednesday of October.

The program is an initiative to bring the community and police officers together for a cup of coffee

at local coffee shops. Barriers are broken down at the events as officers and citizens chat about community issues or their daily lives in a productive and non-threatening way.

“You engage the community and become a part of it, and the result is that you become more than an occupying force,” Cognac says.

Sergeant Cognac’s community of Hawthorne is part of the Los Angeles basin. The city was once a “whites only” settlement, a true “sundown town” during the 1930s, when signs warned black people to be out of the town by sunset. Today, the city’s diverse population is 53 percent Hispanic, 27 percent Black, and 10 percent white. In addition, 20 percent of the city’s population falls below the poverty line with a per capita income of $15,022.

Most difficulties arise in low-income communities, where there is a shortage of police officers and a high demand of radio calls, so police officers do not have the time to engage properly with their community, according to Cognac.

“The issue with mistrust is systemic,” he says, “so creativity is a must in order to do more with less.”

In Hawthorne, Cognac has developed a “non-traditional” sports program to bring the community and the police force together.

The Hawthorne Force ice hockey program is the centerpiece of the initiative. Since 2013, the project has given kids in the community the opportunity to play hockey under the tutelage of Hawthorne police officers who run the program, and coach and mentor the children.

“In most cases, the only kids who can play ice hockey are the wealthy ones because hockey gear and ice time cost a lot of money,” Cognac says, “and I needed to figure out a way to bring this great sport to the kids in my community.”

Cognac began making phone calls, eventually landing at the National Hockey League Players’ Association office. He learned about the NHLPA’s Goals & Dreams fund, and quickly submitted a grant proposal. The result: 20 complete sets of hockey gear. His department raised additional funds to rent spaces for the kids to practice and play, and the program was on its way.

Hawthorne detective Derek Limbacher, Los Angeles Kings’s player Matt Greene and Ben Scrivens, and Hawthorne police officer Darnel Wallace award the kids medals after a Hawthorne Force game.

“When you play a non-traditional sport, you are going to get people who are open-minded and willing to learn, and the learning creates bonds,” Cognac says.

Police Officers and kids come together to learn to ice skate and play hockey, and the parents in the community come to watch them.

“They see police officers teaching their kids how to skate, and they also see officers learning how to skate next to their children,” he said. “So, when their little girl or boy falls, they see a 40-year-old policeman fall as well, and they also see them pick each other up from the ice, and essentially, that is what community policing is all about.

Cognac says the result is that the perception of police as oppressive occupiers changes, and evolves to a more significant relationship that builds community trust. The program is at 80 kids now, and the Los Angeles Kings hockey franchise and the Wayne Gretzky Foundation provide funding for the cause.

Additional programs have blossomed from the Hawthorne Force initiative, including a futsal league. Futsal is a derivative of soccer, played in much the same way but on basketball-style courts. In Hawthorne’s case, the community transformed unused tennis courts into futsal playgrounds through funds donated by the Los Angeles Galaxy professional soccer franchise and Chevrolet. Gyasi Zardes, a member the L.A.

Galaxy and U.S. National Soccer team, who grew up in the tougher neighborhoods of Hawthorne, is now involved in the program.

“We are a microcosm of the rest of the country, and these programs break down barriers,” Cognac says. “It is not just about coaching, and it is more than just learning a sport; we a re empowering these kids to be leaders and good citizens with a sense of charity.”

Summer Heights police officer Paul Bonesteel talking to a group of teens at this “Teen Academy”.

Cognac says that it is especially crucial in his community to break down barriers and create trust because of Hawthorne’s large population of Hispanics immigrants, many of which are undocumented.

“After the election, many parents were worried that there were going to be immigration raids in our community,” he says. “We talked to kids and parents and were able to dispel a lot of false information and explain that there would not be immigration check points and people would not be deported for reporting a crime, and that they can trust us.”

Chief Nadeu agrees that police and community initiatives are important to build faith as the nation's demographics continually transition.

Through Columbia Heights programs, which include bullying and violence prevention, mentoring, a teen academy, five weekly open gym programs, and other strategies, their community's kids see their officers frequently in positive interactions.

"Our youth know that our police officers are there to help them," Nadeu says. "Crime rates typically associated with youth have plummeted and our city has the lowest crime rate in over 40 years, declines that are well ahead of national, state, and regional indices."

Another positive statistic is a decline in youth arrests in Columbia Heights, which has gone from an average of 250 arrests per year in 2008 to less than 100 per year.

"Our officers are great at finding the kids that need help," he says, "and getting them help before problems occur, which lands them into the criminal justice system."

Nadeu believes that while there are legitimate concerns within some police forces, media representation of police officers is often sensationalized and lacks balance.

“I think that the media’s focus on police misconduct, which often includes erroneous information, has tended to create a narrative that is not reflective of what is really happening in most of our communities,” he says.

Ray Sexton also believes that police portrayal in the media is slanted, which makes community and police programs and events crucial in order to generative positive headlines.

“We rarely hear about the great things that police officers are doing across the country,” Sexton says. “The only time we hear about the police is when something bad has happened such as excessive use of force by the police.”

He is mindful that police brutality and oppression does occur and says that communities should address the issue in positive ways that lead to productive change.

“The use of the force needed is dictated by the perpetrator,” he says. “I think if it’s clearly unnecessary force or force used that does not match the

Columbia Heights police officer Terry Nightingale and his “little brother” during their weekly Big Brothers and Sister lunch visit.

situation, then that would cause questions and be a valid reason for protest."

Nadeu says that in some communities the police clearly need to do a better job of adopting 21st Century Policing philosophies and improving their partnership with the community. However, in some situations, there can be influential leaders who misrepresent concerns, or there is media coverage that continually displays negative prejudices towards police officers.

"In any case, police and citizens have to be working together to have the 'difficult conversations' about policing, bias, crime, use of force, and other issues in a manner that is productive, transparent, and meaningful in order to move forward," he says. "In many areas of our country, police and other groups seem polarized and resort to finger-pointing, which is ultimately unproductive."

The chief says that his community has done a lot of hard work over the course of the last eight years to include the entirety of their demographics, but more work needs to be done as the demographics evolve.

"Ensuring that you have a safe, vibrant and connected community takes a lot of work but the payoffs are huge and justify the effort," he says. "Whether it is building relationships, involving others in our strategic planning, hosting dialogues, working with kids, or implementing best practices such as body

cameras and de-escalation we need to continue to work towards how we can best serve our community."

Commissioner Sexton says it is easy to sit in the comfort of our homes and second guess a situation where a police officer had to make a split-second decision, so it is essential that citizens in the community learn more about their local police departments

"We need to go through the citizen police academies, go on ride-alongs, take a few turns on the shooting simulators," Sexton says. "Then and only then can you start to understand decisions being made on the streets of America."

He continues, "Do we have officers who skirt the law? Absolutely. We need to learn how to register complaints regarding our local police departments, hold them accountable, and get rid of the bad apples. However, complaining blindly about everything without having a foundation of knowledge to base those criticisms gets us nowhere."