



Successful Practices & Strategies

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Vallejo Police Department

Vallejo, California

http://www.ci.vallejo.ca.us/city_hall/departments_divisions/police

Community policing element

Community partnerships, problem solving, and organizational transformation

Problem/issue

Violent crime and a critical staffing shortage

Problem description

After emerging from bankruptcy, the City of Vallejo was eager to get back to providing proper levels of service to the community members of Vallejo and to stimulating economic activity and growth. Of paramount concern was the safety and security of Vallejo’s community members. Violent crime continued to stand in the way of progress and a healthy business environment. In 2012, the police department identified the reduction of crime and the fear of crime as a top priority.

After declaring bankruptcy in 2008 and with declining sworn staffing, the department began to reorganize by collapsing divisions and pulling officers back from special assignments. The staffing situation deteriorated by the day with reorganization occurring on a regular basis. The community policing and youth services programs were among the first to go. Everything in the department was cut to essential operations only. By 2012, the department had a small patrol division, five detectives, a professional standards division, and command staff.

Community policing strategies implemented

Despite its limited resources, the department was on a mission to rebuild, reconnect, and look for ways to say yes to the community. The chief realized that in order to reduce crime and the fear of crime, the department had to do two things in short order: reconnect with the community and increase the critically low staffing levels. In order to reduce crime and the fear of crime, the department had to come up with creative ideas to get the job done. The department had become very efficient at providing police services to 118,000 residents in 53 square miles with only 77 officers. However, while being very efficient, the department still needed to strengthen its ties to the community.

The department established the Community Services Section (CSS) and hired a local community organizer to run the program. CSS connected with all of the neighborhood watch groups and then began teaching other neighborhoods how to organize their groups. In addition to managing the police



department's presence on Nextdoor.com, CSS also began attending community meetings with patrol officers and command staff. There are now over 200 neighborhood watch groups in the City of Vallejo.

At the same time, the City of Vallejo established the Neighborhood Law Program (NLP). Two NLP attorneys are assigned to handle issues that impact quality of life for residents such as squatters, blight, and nuisance properties. The NLP attorneys have been successful in handling a variety of issues by communicating directly with banks and other property owners to abate issues. CSS works with NLP to identify and follow up on problem properties and areas.

In 2013, staff implemented a directed patrol operation in hot spot areas called Operation Safe-net.

Operation Safe-net was designed to be flexible, visible, and responsive. The operation was scheduled to run eight days a month, and the days were randomly selected. With limited staffing in patrol, we had to fill open patrol spots first. On some days there were only four officers working Safe-net, and on some days there were as many as 15. We maintained flexibility by designing the directed patrols on how many officers we were able to sign up for the day. We maintained visibility by keeping Safe-net officers in black and white patrol cars and in full uniform. In this way, Safe-net was better able to infiltrate problem areas, because criminals were used to seeing busy patrol officers simply drive by on their way to calls. By the time Safe-net came into a hot spot area, there was no time for the criminal element to react or vacate the area. In addition, with a large contingent of Safe-net officers on the street, patrol officers were able to capture more suspects with tighter perimeters and more officers immediately available to respond to in-progress crimes.

Operation Safe-net is extremely responsive. With information from CSS, Neighborhood Watch groups, crime stats, and direct input from community members to the Safe-net commander, Safe-net is able to quickly converge into areas where robberies, shootings, and gang activity are trending. Community members are able to see their police department doing more than just answering calls for service and the efforts are well received by the public.

Our goal with Safe-net was to address gun and gang violence at the street level. Our Safe-net efforts disrupted the activities that led to shootings, robberies, and theft. In years past, our crime suppression teams had been focused on drug activity with a great deal of time spent on surveillance. Operation Safe-net sought to make it very difficult for criminals to conduct their operations on street corners by changing the immediate environment that had created the conditions which led to violence.



Change and/or impact as a result of these community policing efforts

From its founding in January 2014 through November 14, 2014, here are the statistics for Operation Safe-net:

- 1,807 traffic citations (the majority of which were moving violations)
- 2,121 field interviews
- 465 arrests
- 351 vehicle impounds
- 31 arrests for possession of firearms

Operation Safe-net has been a successful operation. As of November 2014, we were on track for a 20 percent reduction in Part 1 crimes by the end of the year. With Operation Safe-net in full swing, we continued to listen to community groups who asked for the return of bicycle patrols at the downtown farmer's market. The bike patrols, operating as part of Safe-net, have been very popular with business owners and residents alike. In fact, the longtime owner of a downtown coffee shop said, "Bringing back the bike patrols was one of the best things the city had ever done for the downtown merchants."

According to our citizens, there is a palpable feeling of positive change on the street. We believe the community will benefit greatly from our partnerships and Operation Safe-net efforts.

Lessons learned through program implementation

The Vallejo Police Department has learned many lessons operating with critically low staffing. As we continue to rebuild, we are now more responsive to the needs of our community. We are also enmeshed into the very fabric of our community like never before.

We learned that we could be successful in our crime fighting efforts despite what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. We also learned that Operation Safe-net was a huge morale builder for our officers. Our officers want to be impactful and make a difference in our community. With a high call volume and low staffing, prior to Operation Safe-net, officers were simply responding to one call after another. Safe-net gave officers the opportunity to provide a greater level of service to the community and allowed them to be proactive again.

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