



Successful Practices & Strategies

Vol. 1 | No. 4

Galax Police Department

Galax, Virginia

<https://www.facebook.com/GalaxPD>

Community policing element

Organizational change

Problem/issue

Police response to specific populations

Problem description

The City of Galax is one of three localities in Virginia with a verified presence of organized drug cartels. The city was also identified in the 2000 census as experiencing the largest growth of Hispanic population (per capita) in Virginia.

The language barrier was a major hindrance; there was no one on city staff who was bilingual. There are three distinctly Hispanic neighborhoods in the City of Galax, and the school population approaches 30% each year. The Galax Police Department (GPD) was confident that crime was under reported in those communities. It attributed that to the language barrier and the cultural mistrust of the police. That population was not being served.

Community policing strategies implemented

The COPS Office funded the hiring of one bilingual police officer. The GPD recruited from among the Hispanic community in the City of Galax and made a conditional offer of employment to a Galax native of Mexican heritage who lived within one of the predominantly Hispanic communities. The GPD believed that Sir Robert Peel was correct when he stated that the “ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police action” and that the “police must secure the willing co-operation of the public.”

During this bilingual officer’s field training period, he was required to contact citizens door to door and ask three questions:

1. What are the problems of this neighborhood?
2. What can the police do to make things better?
3. What are you willing to help the police do to make this a better neighborhood?

The responses were used to tabulate the GPD’s response to these communities.



The successes of the program are best summarized by the following incident, which exhibits the trust and acceptance the bilingual officer has built in the community: While this officer was assisting a neighboring agency and the FBI with a missing child case, he had translated during the initial interviews with no success. However, when the officers had left, he was contacted by a member of the community who shared the runaway child's location, where she was discovered.

The bilingual officer serves as a liaison between city government in all departments and the Hispanic community. He has assisted public works, social services, probation and parole, and mental health. He has also been instrumental in building trust between the police and Hispanic community and winning their approval. He has developed sources of information that were impossible prior to his employment. The position re-enforces the premise that crime prevention is a community-police partnership.

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

The city has benefited overall from the bilingual officer. While it may seem insignificant that he has been able to explain that it is not okay to turn water on before citizens pay for it, he has also explained the expectations of American society in regards to child care via social services.

The bilingual officer translates routinely for detectives in interrogations and interviews. It would have been impossible to adequately address complaints from the Hispanic community prior to his arrival.

The Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services mandates cultural diversity training for police personnel in Virginia. This bilingual officer has enabled members of the GPD to better understand the cultural nuances that it had misinterpreted prior to his employment.

Lessons learned through program implementation

When the agency advertised the position, it inadvertently ended up with an applicant pool that was totally Hispanic and had ties to this community. It has become apparent that hiring someone from this community was more important than the GPD originally thought. It is a cliché, but law enforcement agencies cannot practice community policing without a sense of community. The lesson was that if it's at all possible, hire from within the community.

The GPD has expended funds and time to instruct police officers in conversational language skills with varying levels of success. The lesson was that there is no substitute for a truly conversational police officer with an ability to fluently converse with the community.

The most important lesson is that if an agency is committed to the principles of community policing, that every effort must be made to effectively communicate. Without communication, there can be no problem analysis, no problem solving, no facilitation, and no conflict resolution between diverse cultures.



COPS

Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice

The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues.

The Internet references cited in this document were valid as of the date of publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author(s) nor the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services can vouch for their current validity.

Published 2014