

CARTHAGE TEAM POLICING

by Greg Dagnan

For many years the Carthage Police Department has enjoyed a reputation for strong involvement with its citizens. This is due, in part, to the city leaders, mayors, councilmen and police chiefs who have been devoted to the true service of its citizens and community needs. Out of this ideal, Team Policing was born in 2011. Police commanders noticed that most calls for service were coming from an area in town that consisted of about 500 houses. Within this area, most calls came from approximately 200 of these homes. The Department began to wonder, what would happen if we put a police officer in and around those 200 houses all day every day?

Team policing is an enforcement concept that involves finding community stakeholders and making them a part of a "team" in fighting crime. The police department imagined an officer one day identifying a house where drugs are dealt and partnering with the detective division, the drug task force, and the patrol division to eliminate crime. This same officer might call a church the next day, asking for help to replace a roof on an elderly citizen's house; the next day the officer might be talking to a resident about getting the lawn mowed since the tall grass had become a neighborhood problem. The concept of Carthage team policing was born.

The team policing officer was assigned to go to each residence and



After police listen to concerns, a block party is held to signal the beginning of the problem-solving phase.

introduce himself, handing out a business card with his cell phone number on it. The Carthage Police Department created a survey asking for very general information about the resident: How long have they lived in the home? How many times would they have considered themselves to be the victim of a crime? Are they scared they might soon be a victim? The survey ends with a scale asking them to rate their fear of crime from 1-10 and includes a section for them to make narrative comments. These surveys

were filled out by the resident or with the help of the officer.

On the back end, the Department created a spreadsheet with a line-entry for each house within the target area, the survey results and the history of calls for service that were recorded for the last year. Most projects involved approximately 200 residences. The vast majority of citizens were happy to participate in the survey and to talk with the officer. Those who did not want to answer the door were put on a list and the Department continued to try to contact them.

As the surveys were compiled and the community concerns started to become clear, the Department held a block party for the residents, announcing the beginning of the problem-solving phase. Local business and churches participated. The event included food for all, games for the kids and plenty of positive, informal interaction with the team policing officers and other members of the police department.

After the block party, the real work began for the team policing officer. The team policing officer responded to any call for service in the assigned area and made personal follow ups with anyone who called the Department while the officer was off duty. In addition, the officer was asked to create a plan to address citizen concerns described on the survey. Most of the problems listed were quality of life problems. The Department learned that a house on the list (for example, one with a high-

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call history or one that was suspect in selling drugs) wasn't often a concern of the community. Citizens were far more concerned about abandoned cars, high weeds, parking and speeding issues. Residents were worried more about graffiti or stolen yard ornaments than they were about the drug dealer next door, unless the dealer was actually interfering with their quality of life by parking in front of their house or doing something that affected them directly.

The Department partnered with the city's public works department and helped them contact the homeowners in violation. They were given flyers about programs that might help them if they were unable financially to take care of their own issues, and were given a timeframe in which to fix these problems, usually several months. The officer made notes identifying those residents who were not physically or financially able to fix their properties. As the project progressed, the officer continued to focus on homes where criminal activity was occurring and simultaneously coordinated partnerships with other organizations, like churches and community groups, to make sure there was continuous improvement in the target area. The Department found that as problems were fixed that were normally considered insignificant, the neighborhood started to improve dramatically, both in appearance and lowered crime rates.

Seven town policing projects have been completed so far. Each has been in a different geographic location and has been completed in a six-month timeframe.

Toward the end of each project, the Department organizes a community work day to help those residents who still have code enforcement issues - usually those citizens who were physically or financially unable to make repairs. Churches and community groups, along with the Department help haul off debris and repair homes. There is usually one abandoned house torn down during the work day. The day becomes a big media event and many citizens who live in the targeted community help. As the project is wrapped up, the officer delivers the survey again. The Department also conducts an internal audit of calls for service and crime reports to be sure that an impact was made. At the end of the project, officers ticket or arrest anyone that is not in compliance.

Typically, calls for service in the area are reduced by approximately 30 percent compared to the same six-month period the year before. Reductions have been as high as 46 percent. Fear of crime scores are typically reduced by around three points on the scale. For example, in one area the fear of crime

was surveyed at a 3.85 (1-10 scale) and was reduced to a 1.89 in the 6-month project time frame. The last two projects have been at apartment complexes, combining what was learned about team policing with the "crime free housing" program.


The numbers are impressive, but the lasting impact this program has made on Carthage's community is immeasurable. Roofs have been put on houses, doors and windows have been replaced, and huge trash piles eliminated. A church group built an entire house for an elderly lady in one targeted area. Drug dealers and felons have been arrested. The hallmark of this project is that it creates ownership by the community. When citizens take care of their homes, they take care of their community. They find unsafe neighborhoods unacceptable. They understand that the police and the community are a team, dependent upon one another for success.

Note: The City of Carthage has a population of about 15,000. There are 45 employees in the police department, 29 are commissioned officers. The Team Policing Officer is a full-time position. □

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Churches and community groups help haul off debris and repair several homes.



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A condemned house (top) was rebuilt. Police found that as problems were fixed, the neighborhood started to improve dramatically, both in appearance and lowered crime rates.

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