Aurora infuses the entire department with the Community Policing philosophy

By Bonnie Bucqueroux

In many of the police departments that have embraced Community Policing, the responsibility for developing and implementing creative, proactive projects falls almost exclusively to Community Policing Officers. In Aurora, Colorado, Chief Gerry Williams and Division Chief Ron Sloan are committed to the concept that Community Policing is everyone's job. They believe that treating Community Policing as a specialty, rather than as the way the entire department should operate, only adds to internal tension.

Aurora, a city of 250,000 people, has its Community Policing Officers, called Police Area Representatives (PARs), who act as the department's community outreach specialists, but they operate as part of the cohesive team that includes patrol officers and investigators. PAR beats and patrol beats now correspond, so the PAR officers, patrol officers, and investigators can work both independently and as a unit on problems that the community considers priorities. All three can occasionally rotate assignments, not to solve scheduling problems, but so that each can be exposed to what the other jobs entail.

That commitment to infusing the entire department with Community Police philosophy goes far beyond rhetoric. The department has organized a Core Team, which is a committee that reviews proposals on how every facet of the department can implement Community Policing. Both sworn and non-sworn personnel are asked to explore ways that they can make Community Policing a reality.

As an example of how seriously they take the challenge of translating their new motto, Community Commitment, into action, the department is even developing an updated telephone directory in the hope that all callers can be directed to the right person on the first try. At first glance, the new directory might seem a trivial courtesy, but Aurora recognizes the importance of breaking down the barriers that inhibit communication between people and their police. A person forced to play telephone tag, bounced from desk to desk in a maddening search to find someone to help, may simply give up in frustration. Not only does this cost the department the opportunity to receive potentially vital information, it leaves the caller feeling that the police just don't care.
Lt. Tom Cornelius, a former supervisor of the PAR program, says, "We expect that our PAR officers will generate most of the major projects that we undertake, simply because they have the most time in the community. But we also evaluate our patrol officers once a year on how well they use their free patrol time to develop new projects. Research showed that they spend 40% of their time on random (free) patrol. And we expect our investigator to become involved, too, but, realistically, they probably fall third on the list, simply because they don't have as much time in the community. But we believe that everyone must become involved."

**Fighting Drugs**

Aurora is not just the upscale bedroom community for Denver that visitors drive through as they leave Stapleton Airport. Many people still think of the suburbs as a safe haven, protected from the crime and drug problems that major cities face. However, Aurora, like many long-established suburbs, has problems of its own, particularly now that the entire Denver area has suffered a serious economic decline the past four years.

According to Capt. E.C. Phelps, who supervises 112 officers in the substation in north Aurora, the economic downturn impelled Aurora apartment managers to compete for tenants by cutting their rental fees. What they did not anticipate was that this would attract low-level drug dealers and members of the notorious youth gangs, the Crips and Bloods, looking for new turf to escape the police crackdown in Denver.

PAR officer Alan Hartsough patrols a beat in Aurora that contains roughly 35 apartment houses, and he found that dealers and gang members displaced from Denver were moving into his beat, bringing drugs and violence with them. The typical pattern was that this unsavory new element would rent an apartment, but never make a payment beyond the initial fees. When the landlord finally succeeded in evicting them, they would simply bounce to a new unit nearby, until they were evicted yet again.

To put an end to the round-robin Hartsough began holding monthly meetings with apartment managers on how to screen new tenants. They continue to meet and share information, and Hartsough also invites patrol officers and investigators to attend sessions, so that they can work together on developing new tactics to reduce the dealing and the violence.

Officer Laurie Michelson, who operates out of the same substation, patrols the northwest section of Aurora that houses many elderly residents who are particularly frightened by the new crack houses springing up in their neighborhoods. Though she is not a PAR officer, Michelson has obviously inculcated the Community Policing concept, since she was the impetus behind the new "zero tolerance" approach. It involves trying to make arrests, whenever possible, but is also includes involving officers on all three shifts in efforts to do everything they can to disrupt drug sales. Officers park outside problem addresses, issuing tickets for any parking infraction or moving violation. Feedback indicates that many dope houses suspend all activity when the police appear, and two have reportedly closed up shop and moved away.

Aurora officers are also encouraged to explore long-term solutions that focus on helping youngsters remain drug free. In addition to D.A.R.E., Capt. Phelps says that many officers take kids to see the Denver Nuggets and Denver Broncos play, and they often take kids to the Air Force Academy. Lt. Steve Harlan is working on a new effort to pair minority youngsters with cadets at the Air Force Academy, so that the young people have a new friend and confidante who can act as a positive role model.

The ambitious Aurora plan will be the focus of the next booklet in the Community Policing series, the so-called "green books" that detail the research undertaken by the National Center for Community Policing. We will also update you on Aurora's progress in future issues of Footprints.

Three members of the Aurora team will be on hand at the Community Policing & Drugs conference. Chief Gerry Williams will serve as a panelist on the forum called Different Communities, Different Drugs, Different
Problems. Division Chief Ron Sloan will be a presenter in the workshop entitled Drug Sales: Providing a Sustained Police Presence, and Lt. Tom Cornelius will be a speaker in Management's Role in Supervising New Efforts. For further details, see the article in this issue.