Community Policing and Cultural Change: An Officer's View
by Officer Wayne Kuechler, Portland Police Bureau

In 1990, the Portland Police Bureau and the City of Portland adopted the "Community Policing Transition Plan," whose objective is to make the transition to a "department-wide" Community Policing philosophy over the next five years. Now, a little more than one year into the transition, it has become apparent that the most difficult part is changing the way officers approach their jobs.

This resistance to change may be one of the determining reasons for adopting a smaller "project-oriented" approach like those employed by other departments (such as the Experimental Policing District in Madison, WI; Police Area Response in Aurora, CO; and Foot Patrol Districts in Baltimore County, MD). In these examples officers volunteer to participate and are not likely to resist the modification of duties and responsibilities due to a high degree of ownership in the programs. But where these programs may be successful in one area of town or within a small group of involved officers, this encourages a separatist view by other uninvolved officers.

Total involvement

Portland was the first major city in the U.S. to involve all employees in the implementation of Community Policing. All employees have been trained on basic components of Community Policing and in problem-solving skills like those employed in Newport News, VA, and San Diego, CA. Many officers have taken this training and have solved neighborhood problems ranging from vandalism to drug dealing. The officers who have put the philosophy and the training into action have accepted the idea that what they are doing now is more like the original intent of law enforcement. They also realize that there is a great amount of similarity with what they have tried to do all along. As one of the officers said at a recent community meeting, "What I do now isn't that different...I'm doing what I've always done, but I'm able to get more done because of the involvement of the citizens." These officers have welcomed this approach to policing where the residents of a community take an active role with the police in solving its problems.

Resistance within the ranks
Portland's Community Officers have reaped the benefits of success through the praise of citizens, political leaders, and police officials. However, their peers have not always been supportive of Community Policing. The longstanding police culture that exists within law enforcement agencies often focuses on the failures of Community Policing rather than the successes, and conflicts develop. These may even take the form of teasing, direct ridicule, and group exclusion.

Within Portland, a strong union has existed for many years. Although the union and its long-time president have worked hard to receive an excellent pay and benefit package, it has also reinforced that all officers get the same pay, regardless of how productive they may be. The union president has stated several times that Portland cannot do Community Policing until we have 300 to 400 more officers. These kind of statements have served to reinforce the cultural belief that we don't have enough police to do good police work, let alone Community Policing. Yet the ideas behind Community Policing are still valid regardless of how many police you have. As Portland's Chief has told his officers, "You still have to do some kind of police work, why not do the most effective police work possible, Community Policing?"

Despite the resistance, there are many examples of the success and effectiveness of Community Policing, in Portland and throughout the U.S. and Canada. Hopefully, as these successes increase and more officers become involved, the culture will be modified and peer influence will reinforce the effective application of Community Policing.

**Managing Change**

Many within law enforcement resist any change. At a recent in-service training, an officer made the comment that he thought he was going to be told that what he had done for many years was wrong. This is not the case. Rather than to admonish and abandon tradition, Community Policing seeks to expand the reach of traditional law enforcement and is not a replacement, but rather an enhancement, of the system in place. Law enforcement will always have the responsibility to protect life and property, and it will still be counted on for immediate interdiction in crisis situations.

As law enforcement seeks to improve the service we provide to the taxpayers of our communities, the question is not whether to change but how that change will take place. Most strategies for change fall into either the project-oriented model or, as in Portland, the department-wide model. Cultural resistance will exist regardless of the model chosen. The project-oriented approach may reinforce the idea that Community Policing is different from "real police work" because only some officers are involved. The uninvolved officers are left to develop their own perceptions of Community Policing. The department-wide approach is far more difficult to implement, but seeks to break down the cultural resistance by reinforcing that Community Policing is "real police work" and that all officers can do Community Policing. A project-oriented model may show faster, short-term results, but a department-wide model seeks long-term change and lasting results.

Any change is difficult to implement, particularly so with the cultural resistance that exists in law enforcement. Departments that plan to make the transition to Community Policing should be prepared for resistance and a few mistakes along the way. The foundation for change should include all employees, and the goal should be to break down the cultural resistance. When an effective strategy overcoming the resistance is developed and maintained, the change will have an opportunity to occur.

Below are some suggestions to follow when making a department-wide change to Community Policing:

- **Involve everyone** - If Community Policing is a valid approach, then it's good for everyone in the agency. Don't send the message that Community Policing is something special that only a select few can do. This includes the involvement of citizen and non-sworn employees as well.
- **Change means enhancement** - Reinforce that change doesn't mean that previous policing efforts were wasted. Traditional skills will still be needed. Community Policing should enhance the skills that they have already learned.
- Be patient - Don't expect things to occur overnight and don't mandate immediate change. It has taken many years for law enforcement agencies to get the way they are now, and it will take many years to change what is already in place.
- Be consistent - Officers look for inconsistencies and use them as justification for resistance.
- Don't try to change everything at once - Start at the top and work your way down. Don't expect officers to change what they do if their superiors haven't changed.
- Expect and address resistance - It is normal that change brings resistance, so be prepared for it and develop unique strategies to address it from the start.

Community Policing is a very effective approach to solving community problems. If your agency has not already adopted the Community Policing philosophy, you may be doing so in the future. The approach you choose can determine the success and effectiveness of Community Policing in your department. Planning strategies before making a change may minimize resistance within your agency and lead to a smoother transition for all.

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