Public Housing and Community Policing: A Team for Success

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If you were to ask the residents of any city or town to give their impression of low-income housing "projects," they would probably respond:

- "a dangerous place"
- "no place to raise a family"
- "poor people"
- "drug and alcohol problems"

To many people, low-income housing means poor, non-working people living in a neighborhood of violence, drugs, and abuse. But, in several communities across the United States, the residents of low-income public housing and the police are joining forces to turn the image around.

The Mineral Springs Challenge

The Dover (NH) Housing Authority's (DHA) low-income housing area, Mineral Park, houses 550 residents in 184 units. With the efforts of the residents, the DHA, and the Dover Police Department, the image has changed from bad to good.

Success didn't come overnight - it was preceded by years of tenuous to non-existent control of the three streets that make up the Mineral Park area. For years, the drug dealers and the criminal element controlled the area and its residents. Fights, thefts, and alcohol-related offenses were common, and there was very minimal cooperation between the residents and the police. Because of fear of reprisal, people were reluctant to share information with the police. Eventually, some of the residents began to get fed up with the drug dealing, crime, and disturbance, and one by one they came forward, the silent majority, to share information with DHA director, Jack Buckley. Buckley approached the Dover Police Department requesting assistance, and the decision was made to move an undercover officer into Mineral Park posing as a new resident - a traditional response to the problem.
After three months of undercover work, the officer had earned the reputation as a "drug dealer" and had successfully gained not only the confidence of the residents, but those who came to Mineral Park to buy or sell drugs. In late August 1988, the "sting" ended. In one night, the Dover Police swept into the area and arrested more than fifty people and confiscated several types of drugs and paraphernalia, returning the streets of Mineral Park to the silent majority.

A new solution to the challenge

About a year later, however, the drug activity and all of the problems that come with it had returned to Mineral Park. A long-term solution was needed, and the DHA and the Dover Police decided to try Community Policing.

Community Policing requires not only the cooperation of the police department, but the community that is being served. Without this cooperation, Community Policing won't work. To gain the cooperation of the residents, officers went door-to-door handing out crime prevention pamphlets and explaining what we would be doing in Mineral Park. The residents were told that I would be assigned as a full-time Community Policing Officer and that my only tour of duty would be to handle the calls within the housing area.

As I went door-to-door to explain Community Policing to the residents, I received a varied response - from enthusiastic about a "a full-time cop" being there to help, to having doors shut in my face before I could explain what I was doing. Several residents later admitted that they were afraid to answer their doors when they saw it was a police officer, because past experience told them that the police only came when something was wrong.

Eventually, the more time I spent in Mineral Park, the more cooperation between the residents and the police increased. As the residents began to trust that I was there to help people, not just to arrest them, calls for service began to increase, and, with them, people were volunteering their names and addresses. The residents began reporting drug and criminal activity without fear of reprisal. I reinforced the old adage that there is "safety in numbers" and the residents slowly began to believe this, realizing that it was only a handful of the residents that had controlled their lives and their neighborhood all these years.

With the residents working as a team with the police and the DHA to keep the streets safe for their families, the public image of Mineral Park began to change. Because of the success of this cooperative effort, the residents have joined forces with the rest of the community to host annual clean-up days, to sponsor a community Children's Parade, and to hold a Haunted House as a fundraiser for their recreation committee. Abandoned playgrounds have been rebuilt by the residents (the DHA gave them the materials), and the resident-run DHA Recreation Committee has built two more playgrounds with the money that they have raised through the haunted house, car washes, and yard sales. Where dirt, trash, and criminals used to gather, the residents are now planting flowers and grass and cleaning up the areas around their homes.

The local Head Start program has a new building on the DHA property, and approval has been granted to construct a major city recreation area that will include a baseball field, basketball court, and running track on DHA property located behind the Mineral Park area.

A sense of neighborhood pride has been restored to a housing area formerly known as "the worst part of town," and its restoration was inspired by the Community Policing effort. In the four years since the neighborhood was reclaimed from the criminal element, Mineral Park has surpassed other Dover neighborhoods by becoming the first to be recognized as a Neighborhood Watch area. With its improved public image, the city of Dover is looking at Mineral Park as a success story and a model for improving other city neighborhoods.