Fall/Winter 1992

Coping with diversity

by Officer Ken Saxon

Eugene Department of Public Safety

Eugene, Oregon, is the second largest city in Oregon, with a population of 116,000, and only 1.3 police officers per thousand. Over the past few years, our police division has been shifting into Community Policing and has three major experiments currently underway.

The Community Response Team (CRT) is a cooperative effort, operating out of city hall, which involves the police and local community service providers. The Whitebird Clinic, a local service agency, now operates CAHOOTS (Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets) which responds to many of our calls for service involving intoxicated subjects or persons with mental disorders. We also have contacts with the local mental health hospital and detoxification facility.

With the CRT up and running, our next step was to establish our first storefront "substation." We felt that the best location would be the epicenter of our high call-load area, in the Whiteaker neighborhood. Following months of hard work involving dozens of community meetings, we have now firmly established a base in the neighborhood. Services include not only traditional police assistance, but Spanish translation, and information and referral services by volunteers as well. Our Latino liaison has initiated drivers license classes for the local Spanish-speaking population and is using that as a vehicle to introduce officers on an individual, non-threatening basis.

Our third experiment was to establish a fixed, three-by-four block foot patrol beat in the University of Oregon business district, thus responding to the need for extensive police attention in that area. In contrast to our storefront area, the foot patrol area has a much higher density of foot traffic, a large number of nuisance complaints such as intoxication and panhandling, and a large, vulnerable student population. There is also gang activity - local youths acting out as gangsters - Crips, Bloods, and Skinheads.
Working with the university and area businesses, the city established a joint funding arrangement whereby each party contributes one-third of the officer's salary. An area bank donated office space for the project.

Getting started

As the first officer assigned to the University project, I anticipated working with college students, street people, and businesses. I did not anticipate working with several culturally diverse groups within these populations as well. While recognizing that there were going to be several barriers I would need to overcome to succeed in this assignment, I looked forward to it as a great opportunity to do Community Policing.

Wearing a uniform, as an act in itself, can be controversial, especially because it may reinforce stereotypes of police. However, it also has its advantages. My presence in uniform helped develop a perception of enhanced safety in an area in which criminal activity was prevalent, while avoiding a possible charge of "going undercover" in the area. The uniform was necessary, but the way I conducted business gave me many options. Some perceived me as a necessary evil, others an infringement of their freedom, and finally, there were those who were truly grateful for my presence.

From the start, I recognized that Communications (with a capital C) with all types of people would be a high priority. In order to effectively curtail criminal activity, I needed to talk with people in the community. Initially, I contacted students, business owners, and the people on the street to get an idea of what the problems were.

Body language was important - I postured myself as receptively as possible to help facilitate communication. I wanted to be viewed by all as a friend and not an adversary. Initially, I would walk up to groups of people on the street and introduce myself, explain my objectives, and ask them for input on how best to proceed. I talked to people the same way I like to be addressed - by telling them my first name, trying to break down the formality of "Officer X," and helping them get to know me on a more informal basis. I evolved into a liaison officer between many groups which did not normally communicate with each other.

Officers working in a patrol vehicle may conduct business in a different way than officers on foot patrol. Mobile officers know that when they finish intervening in an incident, although the individuals may end up involved in other criminal activity in the future, the same officer would probably not be dealing with the same individual again. Working my assignment, chances are great that I will be seeing people again. Most of the people I arrest I see within a few days back in the area. I treat people with that expectation and make a special effort to communicate with a longer-term relationship in mind. I believe all people, regardless of social standing, color, gender, age, national origin, religious background, or sexual orientation, want to be treated fairly and with dignity. I have made a conscious effort to make this clear to the people I serve. As a result, the word on the street is that I am a fair person, citizens are more receptive to working with me, and I am more capable of being of service.

While working in a patrol car, officers are in a bubble. The public sees us, but we are insulated from the communication outside of the often tense exchanges that come with conventional police work. We often see citizens act their worst or under a great deal of stress. The safety of ourselves and the citizens we serve takes priority over having a friendly exchange. Citizens see most of us as macho police officers and draw on their stereotypes based on those superficial observations.

Benefits of foot patrol

I find many advantages to foot patrol. Other officers may wonder why I would put myself in such a vulnerable position. Some may feel that what I have been doing is not police work but "just providing another social service." From my perspective, foot patrol, while in the short-term making me more vulnerable, in the long run makes me safer by building personal support among my constituents. It also makes me more effective because I
am more familiar with the area I patrol. Citizens have an opportunity to meet me as a human being, and I have an opportunity to get past stereotypes regarding my identity and my intentions.

Breaking down many social barriers was a 19-month process. I still get some name calling, but that does not bother me. The way I look at it is the name calling is due to the uniform I wear, and since they do not know me personally, I do not take it personally.

Actions do speak louder than words. People see me doing business and championing problems for the street people, as well as other parts of the community. We all live here and we need to get along. To be seen in a more supportive role, I have attended meetings on campus, neighborhood meetings, business association meetings, meetings with social service agencies, and dinner meetings with chapters of the Greek organizations. I have tried to effectively communicate with all in order to creatively and humanely resolve conflicts.

**Chronic problems**

As police officers, we need to be creative and expand our vision to find new options in resolving problems, going beyond the traditional police response. I often look for options other than arrest to resolve problems. When I was first assigned in the University area, there were many complaints from businesses regarding transients sitting, sleeping, drinking, and generally being obnoxious in and around their businesses. Customers complained of being harassed while trying to enter these facilities. I contacted all of the involved stores and we had a meeting where the business owners were given an opportunity to explain the problems they were facing. I facilitated the meeting and together we brainstormed the possible solutions. The result was that all the businesses agreed to post "No Trespassing" signs in their store windows. In turn, we actively supported them in this restriction, discouraging transients who, during business hours, chose to stand on the business properties and cause problems. It did not take long for the message to get out that this behavior was not acceptable. A consistent, unified stand by the involved businesses made application of the law much easier.

Another situation occurred during the summer in which large groups of self-identified "counterculture" individuals frequented one of the busy street corners. Groups would sit in an area 10 by 100 feet of public property. Their sitting in this area was not illegal. The business community and customers complained of being harassed and aggressively panhandled by these individuals. This area had at one time been landscaped with numerous types of plants. The plants had somehow disappeared and there was just dirt remaining. Again, a meeting was called and collectively it was agreed that chicken manure and heavy fertilizer should be spread in the area in preparation for later replanting of vegetation. Our parks department cooperated in carrying out the task early the next morning. For a couple of days, that area had a strong odor, but with a creative policing approach and the cooperation of many involved parties, the problem was largely resolved.

These solutions might suggest that I come down heavily on the disenfranchised. In fact, these types of actions are balanced by other activities. For example, I make a point of attending meetings with street people and bringing their concerns back to the more financially stable community. This resulted in some jobs being created for street people, a port-a-potty being placed in a local park, and, most important, greater credibility for me in furthering mutual respect and communication between all of those involved in the area.

Trust and accountability are important elements in what I do to break down barriers. People need to trust us and we need to be accountable to the customers we serve. We build this trust one brick at a time, initially building a reputation as trustworthy and fair. People then become comfortable sharing their concerns with us.

I champion problem-solving for all, not just a certain class or race. This way I earn respect from all. Some of the street people in my area do not like me, but I still communicate with them and include them in discussions and decision making. This has helped me establish my reputation as fair, and I believe I have gained their respect.
Overall, my advice to my fellow officers, is that Community Policing is worth it. The potential aggravation that comes with heightened interaction is a worthwhile investment, and one that, for me, has resulted in a more personally rewarding and professionally effective approach to police work.