COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA: Officers become neighbors through Police Home Loan Program  
by Tina McLanus

Editor's Note: Among the most controversial issues in policing are residence requirements for officers. This article details a novel voluntary approach that offers police officers the carrot of low-cost home ownership instead of the stick of rules and regulations.

Imagine the aftermath of a massive earthquake in San Francisco. Other than the obvious chaos of the fires and mass destruction, one sociologist realized that an even larger problem was that - most of the firemen and policemen reside outside the city limits. In San Francisco, that means that they most likely live across the bridge from where they would be needed most in a catastrophe such as a major earthquake.

It isn't just the lower cost of housing that attracts middle-income public service workers to the suburbs and outskirts of cities in which they work. Often-times, the suburbs reflect the values of the workers, whereas the chaos and crime of the inner-city do not. People think of suburbs as safer for their kids - which in and of itself, speaks volumes about the threat that crime poses. The tax and business dollars flow where the money is spent - more money is spent by those workers at the local malls and grocery stores than in the city where they work - so business flourishes in the suburbs, rather than the city, where jobs and money are desperately needed by the low-income city dwellers. As well, those people with the resources and talent to solve the problems of the inner city often do not live there and therefore have no sense of ownership of those problems.

Columbia, a city of 105,000 located in the center of South Carolina, isn't in the center of any major earthquake activity, but they do have their share of crime and deteriorating homes to shake up their inner-city neighborhoods. The Columbia Police Department realized that it was important for their officers to have a sense of ownership in the communities that they serve, and they have developed incentives to keep their officers living in the place where they work.
The Police Home Loan Program takes abandoned or condemned houses or seized crack houses and offers them to police officers at a low-interest and low-mortgage rate. The program is part of the overall concept of Community-Oriented Policing in Columbia, designed to promote better neighborhoods and to fight crime. The city had already had a program to create homeownership by providing low-interest, low-mortgage rate loans for city residents to purchase homes, and giving this opportunity to police officers seemed a logical extension of the Community-Oriented Policing idea - a way to put problem-solvers back in the neighborhoods.

Chief Charles Austin says that there are other reasons other than crime prevention to encourage police officers to reside in the city. The Police Home Loan Program is bringing a sense of stability and credibility to those areas that had been stereotyped as being high-crime. It also makes the officers more accessible in ways other than law enforcement - as fellow citizens and neighbors. Due to their work, police officers are more likely to see signs of trouble in a community before a problem occurs. "When someone within the community structure has a problem," says Austin, "if it's identified early on, the likelihood is that alternative solutions can be developed to keep it from growing into an even bigger problem.

Terms and requirements

The operation of the program is similar to a mortgage bank, and in fact, the City of Columbia has a loan officer to handle the loans in their Community Development Department. In order for a police officer to obtain a home, he or she must qualify by having a low- to moderate-income level for the household and agree to live on the premises for as long as the loan is active. Once the police officer selects the home, he or she is responsible for negotiating the purchase price with the seller. The Community Development staff assists the police officer in obtaining cost estimates for the rehabilitation work and a contractor is selected. The Community Development loan officer submits the loan to a committee for approval, and, if approved, the loan closing takes place. After the rehabilitation work is completed, which is covered in the cost of the loan, the officer moves in and the payments begin. Loans are given out with the following terms:

- 4% rate of interest
- fixed rate
- 20-year term
- $0 down payment
- all closing costs financed
- $65,000 maximum loan amount (can be waived by the loan committee)

The program is currently funded entirely by a Community Development Block Grant; however, program income will be added in the future with bank participation.

Giving officers a stake

Chief Charles Austin states that the police officers are happy with the program. So far, seven officers have qualified for the program, and five are currently living in their homes. They cannot keep up with the supply for the demand - at this time, 12 officers are on a waiting list to qualify for homes.

"Young police officers otherwise would have to wait years on end before they could afford their own homes," says Austin. "This way, they get an early start on a first home. Secondly, I look at it like someone who buys stock in a major corporation. That is, if you're a vested partner in the community structure, then the level of interest that you'll take beyond that which is required as part of your daily duties is going to be much more significant."

The sense of ownership that police officers living in the city feel toward their work and turf is evident, and the City of Columbia has responded by offering a further incentive - a $500 bonus is paid to officers who choose to
live in the city and not opt for the suburbs. The Columbia Police Department is developing a program where they will offer "take-home" vehicles to officers living in the city.

Austin feels that police officers will gain a new respect from the city residents when they realize that the person who has provided their service is a neighbor and not just someone who goes home to the country or suburbs and doesn't have to deal with the inner-city problems except in their work.

A program of this type could be replicated in other cities, Austin thinks, but there has to be a strong sense of commitment from the local leaders. In Columbia, the mayor, city managers, and city council, as well as Chief Austin are proponents of the Police Home Loan Program. Mayor Bob Coble of Columbia is a very strong proponent of home ownership, believing that all citizens should have the opportunity to enhance their quality of life through having a home that they own.

So far, no problems have surfaced in the Police Home Loan Program, but as Chief Austin warns, there's a critic in every crowd. "Just as in Community Policing - if ever there was an idea that is vulnerable and open to daily scrutiny, Community Policing is."