Walnut Creek institutes Beat Designing
by Sgt. Thomas G. Soberanes and Sgt. Robert K. Perry

For several years, the Walnut Creek (California) Police Department has recognized a need to involve patrol officers with members of the community. As a result, we have encouraged our officers to participate in school, community, and crime prevention programs, and have arranged for them to represent the police department at meetings with business and professional organizations. Despite these efforts, our success was limited, because we found that this informal system continued to give us only a narrow perspective of community needs and limited community participation by patrol officers.

Robert Perry and I were charged with developing a better program. To accomplish the goal of increasing officer and citizen participation, we designed a program compatible with our modified style of policing, in which officers work in teams of one sergeant and up to eight officers, with the same schedule and same beats for six-month periods. In 1986, we developed the program, Beat Designing.

The program

Target groups: We began the Beat Designing Program by first identifying target groups within the city. We found that information about representatives from homeowner associations, neighborhood watch, business associations, service groups, county crime prevention committees, and the schools was readily accessible, and we believed that these people could accurately represent the needs and concerns of the community.

Survey: We then developed a survey that solicited information from the target groups. Three-hundred-seventy citizen surveys were mailed to target-group representatives; 48% were returned. Responses gave us a good understanding of the community's perspectives on crime and traffic and gave us some indications of community police-related priorities. To supplement the survey results, we solicited information about beat problems from patrol officers.

Beat meetings: The beat summaries and citizen surveys were disseminated to beat officers who then met in individual beat meetings to review, analyze, and discuss the information. From these discussions, groups of beat officers were then asked to develop group plans with goals addressing and resolving common beat problems.
The next phase of the program asked officers to make a commitment to the program by submitting written plans. The plans allowed officers to design solutions to the problems intrinsic to their beats. The officers then submitted these plans to their supervisors, who reviewed the plans and monitored progress. To aid supervisors in this process, officers were asked to provide them with monthly updates.

Informing the community: To encourage the citizen-survey participants to keep beat officers informed of ongoing concerns, we mailed them a letter that gave them the names of officers working in their area and stressed the importance of continued cooperation.

**Evaluation**

Program effectiveness: The monthly updates submitted by the beat officers were used to monitor program direction and aided in evaluating program strengths. At the end of the first six-month cycle, we found that our beat officers became more responsive to community needs and, in many cases, designed solutions that effectively addressed problems.

We repeated the process during the next six-month cycle. The same cluster groups were surveyed, and officers again developed plans to solve problems on their beats. After completing this survey, we found that many members of the community felt more comfortable with the process, and their responses generally reflected good feelings toward the survey and the Police Department.

We also found that some of the problems identified by the community could be addressed immediately. In such cases, members of the community were contacted by beat officers who worked with these people on an individual basis.

After a year, we formally evaluated the Beat Designing Program, identifying both the positive and negative aspects associated with the program and their effects on our organization. The program had several positive results. We immediately noticed that beat officers became aware of the community's perspective on crime and traffic. We found that citizens began to share a sense of responsibility for solving community problems. The program provided a vehicle for citizen input, and officers had an opportunity to directly impact problems associated with their beats.

Some negative results also were found. Because we surveyed only target groups, we found that community representation was limited. We also found that because the program goal was unclear to some supervisors and officers, they lacked commitment.

To strengthen the program, we have made some changes that will be implemented in this, our second year. To increase commitment, we have restated the goals of the program to supervisors and officers and have demonstrated the program benefits to them. To increase the survey base, we have asked beat officers to distribute surveys randomly to citizens not associated with target groups, and we hope one day to survey the entire city population.

**Conclusion**

We feel the Beat Designing Program has demonstrated to the community that the Walnut Creek Police Department is responsive to its needs. The program has given the police department, particularly beat officers, a better perspective on community concerns and has made our organization more effective in solving problems.

Robert K. Perry and Thomas G. Soberanes are both sergeants with the Walnut Creek (California) Police Department who are currently assigned to patrol. Perry has been with the department for 12 years, Soberanes for 13.