City administrators need to see what CP can do for them

by Robert Trojanowicz

Working on my latest book forced me to look back at the pilot foot patrol program in Flint, Michigan, an early precursor of what we today call Community Policing. A grant from the C.S. Mott Foundation in 1978 allowed the Flint Police Department to experiment with what was then called directed neighborhood foot patrol. When I directed Michigan State University's evaluation team, no one had any idea that we were on the cutting edge of dramatic changes that would forever alter the face of modern policing in this country. Those of us involved with the innovative Flint program quickly began to see that this unique new form of policing had tremendous potential. The research showed not only a drop in crime (that may or may not have been a direct result of foot patrol), but also a reduction in fear of crime, improvement in race relations, and enhanced job satisfaction and perceptions of safety among foot patrol officer.

Those auspicious findings might lead you to suppose that Flint remains an ever-evolving example of what Community Policing can do. But Flint was both a cradle of Community Policing and a crucible of the pressures that test its survival.

Why Flint Failed

While others might dispute my analysis of why the department's ambitious effort was disbanded, most would agree that the city's financial problems caused part of the dismantling, but that lack of support from city administration undeniably played a role.

Admittedly, Flint foot patrol was launched during the recession, when the city became famous for having the highest rate of unemployment in the nation, 25%, which meant one of every four workers was out of a job. What this also meant, of course, was that the city faced incredible pressure to find enough money to maintain services, especially since rising unemployment also meant rising crime rates.

Despite requirements that the grant money had to be used to pay for additional officers for foot patrol, a look at the records show the overall number of officers in the department never grew. And this pattern continued even
after the program made the transition from being supported by grant money to being funded by a new millage. Flint voters have now passed this extra millage earmarked for foot patrol three times, by ever-larger margins, a tremendous tribute to its broad popularity, even though the program is not yet what it once was.

Along the way, police chiefs have come and gone - and majors, too. Many observers say that Flint's young new Mayor Matt Collier defeated the incumbent because his predecessor was perceived as gutting foot patrol. Yet even Collier and Police Chief Fay Peek III have not yet been able to completely restore the initiative to its previous strength and scope. To paraphrase President Eisenhower, perhaps someday politicians will get out of people's way and let them have the government they want. But also, as Canadian Community Policing advocate Chris Braiden, superintendent in Edmonton, says, maybe Flint had to "throw itself on the barbed wire so that other programs could go over the top."

Flint serves as an object lesson that even a program that has tremendous grass-roots support with voters also needs equally strong support from top city administrators and power brokers in the community. Without that support, even the most successful chiefs risk becoming an endangered species - and their most progressive efforts can disappear with them. This underscores the often neglected but vitally important challenge that police administrators face in building support for Community Policing among the power brokers in the community. The Flint experience proves that it is naive to suppose that strong grass-roots support for a successful Community Policing efforts ensures its long-term survival.

**CP means freedom**

Indeed, the Flint experience also proves that the Community Policing approach can make politicians nervous - sometimes for good reason. For one thing, Community Policing allows line officers greater opportunity for autonomy - which implies allowing them the freedom to make embarrassing mistakes. In Flint, a foot officer rewarded youngsters in his area with an outing to see a movie at the mall, but the aging school bus he used to transport them began to act up on the way. He therefore decided to stay outside and cobb together some repairs, which meant he couldn't be inside supervising what the kids actually did. So it wasn't until later when irate parents began phoning the department that he learned the kids succeeded in gaining entry to an X-rated version of Pinocchio - the kind of episode that makes politicians wince unless they understand why such freedom is crucial to Community Policing's success.

Politicians can also feel threatened when they see their constituents turning to their Community Policing Officers (CPOs) for the kind of help that they previously counted on their elected representatives to provide. Part of a CPO's job is to help people cut red tape - prod the city to pick up the garbage on time, repair potholes, tow abandoned cars, and demolish abandoned buildings. It's easy to see why the CPO would enjoy being a hero, while elected representatives might see them as upstart competitors for the voters' approval.

Once obvious solution is to solicit input and cooperation from elected representatives, especially since their support and participation can provide crucial help. Police officials and supervisors must be sensitized to the importance of taking the initiative in building bridges to elected politicians, to ensure that elected officials clearly understand how Community Policing works. Politicians with good instincts usually have little trouble understanding the benefits they can derive from aligning themselves with a new effort that proves so popular with voters. But the mistake is that many departments do not have a structured way to reach out for this support, and failure to do so can allow jealousies and animosities to fester.

**Enlisting cooperation**

The point is not to manufacture cooperation if none exists or to manipulate politicians into providing their support. The ethical and crucial goal is to maintain communication and cooperation between politicians and police, so that they can work together to allow Community Policing to flourish. Ignoring their concerns, those that are valid and those that result from misunderstanding, is not only unfair but it poses a serious threat to Community Policing's future.
Take the case where a police chief who is a noted advocate of Community Policing was horrified to hear the mayor announce, in response to a recent tragedy, that henceforth the police would make every effort to arrive no later than 15 minutes after any call for service is received. The chief had given up many evenings at home to make speeches to community groups explaining why non-essential calls would no longer be answered immediately, so officers could be freed to immerse themselves in Community Policing initiatives. Imagine his frustration at seeing his patient efforts swept away by the rush of events beyond his control.

As a different police official said recently, it's the most far-sighted and progressive chiefs who inevitably face such dilemmas - it's chiefs who just keep doing the same old thing who never make waves. The most innovative chiefs are typically faced, at least once during their careers, with a situation where they must decide whether to risk their jobs by openly taking a principled stand. Yet as this person said, the ultimate good of the department may be served by the chief who chooses to swallow his pride, hold his tongue, and continue to work behind the scenes to get the effort back on track. Such decisions are ultimately a matter of personal conscience, but open confrontation, though sometimes unavoidable, may often simply mean that innovation ends when the chief leaves. The challenge is to find ways to head off an impasse, and that means chiefs who believe in Community Policing must do all they can to ensure building bridges of support with those who have power over the police agenda.

The message is clear that police chiefs who value Community Policing - and their jobs - must take every opportunity that comes their way to show power brokers how Community Policing can benefit them. Why, despite the increased risk of mistakes, Community Policing makes the best sense as a way for the police to involve people in the process of policing themselves and how problem-solving techniques provide people and their police new opportunities to make community life safer.

The danger is that police administrators often assume that Community Policing sells itself - because it often does such a good job of making friends among average citizens who can clearly see what it can do. But the real challenge can lie with persuading an influential store owner (and campaign contributor) who sees his prior level of service cut how he's benefitting directly from Community Policing, too.

Perhaps at a Rotary or Chamber of Commerce meeting that person learns that many shoppers nowadays choose to buy from catalogues, because they are afraid to leave their homes and shop. So Community Policing's demonstrated ability to reduce fear of crime offers the promise of revitalizing the local economy with a wave of new, local consumers. The challenge lies in making the connections that can show everyone in the community why they have a vested interest in seeing Community Policing survive.

Only with the support and understanding of the most powerful people in any community will Community Policing be able to have a chance to demonstrate all that it can accomplish. Without that support, even the strongest grass-roots support will not ensure its future. Community Policing's ultimate success therefore requires that everyone in the department, from top to bottom, must become an outreach specialist, carrying the message that this new form of policing needs their support.