Menlo Park’s Local Partnerships to Revitalize Community Policing

The integration of a strong community presence, an engagement philosophy, and the establishment of core personnel within the Community Relations Unit can have remarkable results in a very short period of time. The City of Menlo Park, California, considers its model a community policing success story.

The City of Menlo Park is regarded as one of the most culturally and economically diverse populations in Silicon Valley. While nationally recognized as the epicenter of venture capitalism and home to Facebook, one Menlo Park neighborhood, Belle Haven, has not shared in the region’s economic success. Instead, Belle Haven has been plagued with gang violence and associated crime since the 1970s.

In 2012, community frustration over crime problems led to a “town hall” style meeting with the Menlo Park Police Department (MPPD). At that meeting, City officials committed to improving the neighborhood’s quality of life. The City held a series of community meetings known as the Belle Haven Visioning Process. The Process and the resulting implementation of the Belle Haven Neighborhood Action Plan aimed to create a safe, healthy and vibrant community.

Robert Jonsen was hired as the City’s Chief of Police in February 2013. His top priorities were to reduce gang violence in Belle Haven and strengthen the public’s trust. Even though the mission was very straightforward, accomplishing it was not simple. The Police Department’s plan to reduce violent crime and increase community trust was intertwined with the Visioning Process, focusing on top community concerns of gang activity, traffic, and the lack of community involvement in public safety strategy development.

Crime data for 2010-2013 indicated that a majority of shootings originated at three properties within Belle Haven. Police personnel, including Community Service Officers (CSOs) trained in code enforcement, were assigned to each address. These teams contacted the property owners and tenants and worked together with them to eliminate the problems at the properties. Following implementation, calls for service decreased and gang activity subsided. MPPD then had more time to focus on traffic concerns, juvenile issues, and enhancing relationships.

The first steps MPPD took to become successful in creating a safer community and to earn public trust were to connect more closely with those living and working in the community. The Department formed a “Community Advisory Group” of residents and business owners from throughout the city. The group meets monthly and is a forum in which members identify crime and community issues affecting them. It collaborated to develop comprehensive and coordinated plans that targeted neighborhoods with the most pressing concerns. Traffic was identified as a leading issue and this group formulated the Department’s strategic plan on traffic safety that includes daily traffic enforcement around all schools and traffic safety education for all students and parents.
The Advisory Group also helped identify residents interested in being Block Captains for Neighborhood Watch Programs, and these partnerships have generated greater community involvement. CSOs trained Block Captains to maintain communication with MPPD through personal contact, an email-based reporting system, and with a crime-tip telephone hotline. The Advisory Group also has become the sounding board for many projects, including the transition to new model patrol vehicles, Taser deployment, tactical vests for officers, and policy design for “body cameras.”

The Department offers a “Citizen’s Academy” to ensure that residents understand MPPD’s community policing philosophy. Residents learn how local government provides service and how all partners, including the community, need to work together to make the city a safer place to live. All graduates are now actively engaged in their neighborhoods, and the program’s success has led to the development of a Youth Academy for teens.

MPPD is committed to public/private partnerships, and the staff works closely with nearby public safety agencies. Our involvement with federal, state and regional task forces and community-based organizations has allowed for greater understanding of community needs and police operations. Significantly, MPPD has been a pioneer in developing a true public/private partnership with the largest employer within the city, Facebook. This partnership has become a major factor in our success in reconnecting with the community. The establishment of a service center had failed over time due to lack of funding and an appropriate location. Facebook learned that the Police Department was considering a site in Belle Haven and funded the project. It also funded a full-time police officer who works with at-risk youth, provides “active shooter” training for officers, and also provides a representative on the Advisory Group. We believe MPPD is the first law enforcement agency in the country to have a full-time officer position that is privately funded.

Without this partnership, the MPPD could not fund a Community Safety Police Officer (CSPO) to work specifically with at-risk teens. The CSPO meets weekly with at risk middle school students and addresses everyday issues these students regularly encounter. The CSPO coordinates monthly speakers from local agencies and recovered addicts and former gang members who discuss students’ concerns. This class gives students an opportunity to talk with law enforcement and learn positive ways to cope with their problems. The CSPO meets with all elementary grade students each semester, discussing important topics such as cyberbullying and gang awareness.

The resurrection of community policing within MPPD has led to the widespread practice of community policing’s core principals throughout the Department. Commitment to community policing is evident in all aspects of enforcement, and it is clear that all stakeholders are active participants in making Menlo Park a safer place.

In addition to the dramatic increase in community engagement throughout Belle Haven, the decline in the community’s crime rate has also been impressive. The overall number of crimes within Belle Haven declined 47 percent between 2013 and 2014; for the city
overall, crimes declined 12 percent during this period. For the first time in over a decade, there were no gang-related shootings in the city.

MPPD has been recognized by the League of California Cities, which awarded the Department the Helen Putnam Award of Excellence in recognition of the success of best practices that resulted in continued decreases in crime and lack of shootings through 2015. The MPPD model is a prime example of how to utilize the community policing philosophy in a combination of partnerships and city resources to solve problems and increase the public’s trust. Menlo Park’s community policing strategies rely on collaboration with residents, public and private entities. Our model successfully took a fragmented community and transformed it into a vibrant and safer place to live, work and play.

_For additional information, contact Dani O’Conner, Assistant to the Chief, Menlo Park Police Department, at 650-330-6326 or DO’Connor@menlopark.org._