The Orlando Police Department’s Implementation of Community Policing through Community Engagement

The Orlando Police Department (OPD) has a rich sense of community engagement and enjoys the collaborative relationship it has developed with the local community. In an effort to ensure this relationship remains stable and sustainable, the recommendations outlined within the Interim Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing were closely examined. Detailed below are the efforts and activities conducted by OPD in relation to those recommendations. In particular, OPD has focused intensely on Pillar Four: Community Policing & Crime Reduction. This pillar is extremely important in our effort to reduce crime and build public trust.

The Orlando Police Department actively promotes strategies that support community partnerships and proactively implements techniques to address the issues of fear of crime, social disorder, and crime rates. Like many other cities throughout the nation, Orlando has seen a decrease in overall crime rates over the past several years. In an effort to continue this trend, and further reduce both property and violent crime in all segments of the population, OPD has implemented strategies to concentrate efforts in intervention and prevention.

One of the problems OPD is addressing is how best to decrease crime and the fear of crime within those communities that are not experiencing the same overall reduction in crime seen citywide. There are neighborhoods within Orlando that still are troubled by a higher crime rate than the rest of the city. Fear of crime is increased in these communities and social disorder is of concern. OPD has implemented a multi-part, community policing-focused strategy to address this issue. The goal of this strategy is to improve community relations and build trust through community engagement. One objective of this goal is to hold community engagement events to identify problems, improve transparency, build trust, foster better relationships, and improve community outcomes.

This strategy is directly in line with the Task Force’s Recommendation 4.5: “Community policing emphasizes working with neighborhood residents to coproduce public safety.” “Law enforcement agencies should work with community residents to identify problems and collaborate on implementing solutions that produce meaningful results for the community.” Action Item 4.5.1 refers to scheduling regular forums and meetings where the community and police can interact and the community can influence programs and policy. OPD is doing exactly that by holding numerous forums and meetings.

Along with the Mayor, City Commissioners, and the Valencia College Peace and Justice Institute, Police Chief John Mina began a community series called Orlando Speaks. These are workshops designed to strengthen relationships and trust between officers and residents. Their purpose is to increase awareness and understanding of police practices, strengthen relationships through story-sharing and personal experiences, develop trust and sensitivity, and expand citizen engagement. The first workshop was held at the Orlando Citrus Bowl, in the heart of the city, and drew 160 attendees. The second, held at a local high school, had over 100 attendees. The workshops also gave the community opportunities to express their opinions on problems and on the resolution of those problems.
Along with Orlando Speaks events, the Chief and City Commissioners have been holding Town Hall Meetings in the community on various topics of potential concern to citizens. For example, a meeting was held to discuss the implementation of OPD’s body-worn camera program. It included City Commissioners, the State Attorney, Police Chief Mina, additional law enforcement agencies, and community members. Commissioner Samuel Ings is quoted as saying, “It is imperative that we bring the police and community together to have a frank and candid discussion about the use of body cameras. The community’s safety, trust, and treatment are paramount, and we want their voices heard.”

Action Item 4.5.2 describes how “law enforcement agencies should engage youth and communities in joint training with law enforcement, citizen academies, ride-alongs, problem solving teams, community action teams, and quality of life teams.” There are various engagement efforts conducted by OPD that embrace this action item. Chief Mina conducted two Community Leadership Police Academies (CLPAs) this year, with 35 participants. The CLPA teaches citizens more about how OPD works to protect residents, visitors, and businesses. This is a seven-week program that provides residents with a behind-the-scenes look at the Department. OPD personnel inform participants on topics including communications, technology, investigations, and SWAT. The Department also conducts the Teen Police Academy, Senior Police Academy, Citizens Police Academy, and Hispanic Police Academy (HPA). HPA is conducted in Spanish to engage Orlando’s large population of Hispanic residents; this program has generated significant interest, with 55 graduates this year.

The Teen Police Academy is designed to foster relationships between the police and youth in the community. Thus far in 2015, 46 teenagers have graduated. During this academy, teens hear from officers and tour the Police Department, Fire Department, Police Academy, and a local college; they also complete a community project. Numerous additional youth programs, such as a basketball program titled Ballin’ After Dark, Teen Forums, and Operation Positive Direction all focus on youth crime prevention tactics and youth engagement. Ballin’ After Dark is a program that partners with Parramore Kids Zone; Families, Parks and Recreation; the NAACP; Omega Si Phi Fraternity; and Downtown Orlando. On Friday nights, from 8:00 until Midnight, OPD officers host local youth for a night of basketball at a local community center. Some officers join in the game while others stay in uniform to hang out with the younger kids and answer their questions.

All of these efforts demonstrate how the Orlando Police Department is actively building positive relationships with the community. Early indicators reveal that these meetings, forums, and youth-focused events are giving officers a better understanding of the culture and quality of life issues of the community they serve. At the same time, residents are being helped to understand police processes, roles, and functions.

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