St. Louis’s Efforts to Strengthen Police Community Relations

The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department’s Bureau of Community Affairs has several projects underway in the Metropolitan St. Louis area to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the community that it serves.

At the direction of Police Commissioner Sam Dotson, the Bureau is attempting begin a line of communication between the Bureau and community members and leaders through a holistic approach to policing. The Bureau’s Commander, Ronnie L. Robinson, who is also Deputy Chief of Police, commented in August 2016: “We can no longer have the mentality of ‘us versus them’ when we have interactions with the public. This direction does not dictate that we soften our approach to crime problems within our community but rather communicate the reason why we do what we do and how we operate.”

Below are several projects that Bureau lieutenants are carrying out to encourage these conversations:

**Operation Polar Cops** - On June 16, 2016, the St. Louis Police Foundation assisted the Community Outreach/Organizational Development Division (CEODD) of the St. Louis Police Department in purchasing an ice cream truck. The St. Louis Police Foundation was formed as a 501(c)(3) organization in July of 2007, and it supports programs, initiatives, and projects that are strategically focused to complement the Bureau’s policing strategies to ensure the highest level of police service to the St. Louis community. The Police Foundation assisted in purchasing the truck for $16,000, and an additional $500 was donated for miscellaneous costs. This project, titled “Operation Polar Cops,” was created after the CEODD reached out to the Boston Police Department, which shared its overwhelming success.

A factor in the high crime in some St. Louis neighborhoods is a lack of cooperation by the community, stemming from a lack of trust in police. The Boston Police Department found a simple act of kindness, police giving children free ice cream on a hot day, went a long way towards melting the hostility we sometimes see. The Boston Police Department started “Operation Hoodsie Cup” in 2007, in which their officers went out and participated in a simple act of kindness. “Operation Hoodsie Cup” has become so popular that the Boston Police Department is in the process of purchasing a second truck.

After the truck was purchased, Switch, an experimental marketing agency headquartered in St. Louis, designed the exterior of the truck at no cost. Prairie Farms Dairy donated over 6,000 units of ice cream treats and frozen novelties. After the initial donation, Schnucks Markets agreed to allow the Bureau to purchase future products at a discounted rate.

Operation Polar Cops kicked off on July 26, 2016. Since then, the CEODD has participated in multiple community events with overwhelmingly positive feedback. The CEODD has also received numerous requests for the ice cream truck to attend their community events. "Operation Polar Cops" gives away ice cream to everyone, kids and adults alike. Naturally, during the hot summer months, the treats go quickly. While our main focus is maintaining a sufficient supply of ice cream and frozen novelties, the CEODD intends to use the truck year round to support other
programs, including utilizing the truck as a mobile "Coffee with a Cop" and giving away coffee and hot chocolate.

This truck allows the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department not only to engage the community, but also to partner with outside businesses and organizations to regain trust. Operation Polar Cops provides a fun and easy-going environment for all kinds of people to have positive interactions with our officers. The Bureau hopes that the truck will start a critical conversation between the police and the community. It is a display of the City’s investment in itself and the people in it.

**Coffee with a Cop**- The Coffee with a Cop program was launched by the Hawthorne Police Department in Los Angeles, CA in 2011. The program was designed to improve trust and build strong relationships between police and the community. Since its inception, Coffee with a Cop events have been hosted across the United States, and in Canada, Nigeria and Australia.

The Metropolitan Police Department hosts its Coffee with a Cop event once a month at various locations throughout the city. It believes that building strong community relationships is paramount to having safe, sustainable neighborhoods, and that Coffee with a Cop promotes citizens and police working together to better the community.

The public is invited to join officers for coffee and conversation in an informal atmosphere. This event provides a great opportunity for officers and citizens to engage in constructive dialogue, ultimately leading to stronger community relationships.

**Citizen’s Academy**- The St. Louis Metropolitan Police Citizens Academy is a 12-week course with one night of instruction per week. Through the course, citizens gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the Bureau through instruction in the Bureau’s history and structure, predicting and analyzing crime patterns, gang intelligence, homicide investigations and community policing techniques. Nearly all instruction is provided by commissioned police officers.

The graduates of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Citizens Academy have joined together to form the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Citizens Academy Alumni Association. The Alumni Association brings together the Citizens Police Academy graduates and others to promote and enhance relations among the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, local businesses, residents, and visitors, assures and implements community awareness of the criminal justice system, and provides volunteer support for law enforcement activities that affect the community.

**Police Athletic League** - The St. Louis Police Athletic League serves over 740 young people annually. It works with kids 18 years and younger providing them with a safe and structured environment to grow and learn. It teaches sports, but it also teaches character. Over 40 youth teams gather through sports programs to advance confidence, competence and a sense of belonging – key ingredients for a positive self image. It is important for young children to have access to structured activities beyond school hours. PAL teaches children healthy behaviors and pairs them with mentors from the communities in which they live and play. All PAL programs are free for youth!
Many of the young athletes PAL coaches are from communities where risks to their well being are real and constant. Some of these neighborhoods are among the most distressed and under resourced in the St. Louis area. PAL strives to help children develop the personal strength necessary to become productive adults. We do this through the guiding influence of the volunteer police officers who serve as coaches and mentors to St. Louis youth. The goal is a reduction in crime achieved through supervised athletics as well as educational and social development activities that work to foster self-esteem in addition to respect for law and order.

In order to stay eligible for PAL activities, children must be between the ages of five and 18, have satisfactory grades and attendance, and not be involved in criminal or delinquent behavior.

**Internship/Volunteer Program** - The Internship/Volunteer Program was implemented to provide students with an opportunity to gain college credit, learn resourceful skills, and allow the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department an opportunity to recruit while also partnering with the community. The Internship/Volunteer Program accepts students from all over the country who are looking to get hands-on experience and develop real life skills to use in the future. The program provides an opportunity to work within the Bomb and Arson Unit, Intelligence Division, and the Department Laboratory. These divisions provide an opportunity for specialists in the field to mentor students who have an interest in law enforcement and/or forensic science.

**Police Choir** – The Metropolitan Police Department Choir is one of only a few of its kind in the country and is comprised of commissioned and civilian employees. Also included in the choir are citizens who volunteered as well as a volunteer choir director. The Department Choir performs at various events, including 9/11 commemorations, and can perform upon special request.

**Police Chaplain Program** - The Police Chaplain Program creates a partnership with various faith-based leaders of a community to respond to and assist the police and other law enforcement agencies provide an overall better quality of life to the citizens of that community.

The goal is that by having the police and clergy working together during times of crisis or incidents, a more comprehensive response will be given to those in need. The faith-based leaders will perform tasks of a more emotional, social or spiritual nature while the officers handle those tasks that are of a law enforcement nature.

The role of the Chaplain is to be the ‘balancer,’ supporting both police officers and civilians. Chaplains are there to provide appropriate assistance, advice, comfort, counsel and referrals to those in need who may request support.

**CrimeStoppers** - CrimeStoppers is an Anonymous Crime Tip Hotline that takes the public's crime tip information 24/7. CrimeStoppers does not have Voice Mail, Caller ID or Email Tracing so that all tips sent into its website, texted or called into its hotline are always anonymous. CrimeStoppers never ask for personal information, address, or phone number.
CrimeStoppers covers a 20-county area in the bi-state area of Illinois and Missouri. Since 2006, CrimeStoppers has logged 12,000 tips that were delivered to regional law enforcement agencies. If the tip helps police make a felony arrest, the tipster is offered a cash reward of up to $1000. In homicide cases, the reward is increased to up to $5000 for information that leads the police to make a felony arrest. CrimeStoppers is a non-profit program that runs on private donations.

**Intervention and Compliance Unit** – A Bureau sergeant has begun coordinating efforts with community stakeholders, local and federal law enforcement agencies, and community leaders, and all entities are ready to move forward with this initiative. The primary focus will be to reduce the recidivism rate among those who have been recently released from prison and who have the highest propensity for violence. This will be accomplished be having the parolee directly involved in his/her future plans for employment, education, and rehabilitation. Parolee’s family members will be involved and home visits with both the parolee and his/her family members will be conducted.

The Bureau is working in partnership with Dr. Richard Rosenfeld’s team at the University of Missouri, St. Louis and Nancy McCarthy’s staff at Missouri Probation and Parole to measure the success of the Unit. Dr. Rosenfeld’s team will compile all measurable statistics.

**G.R.E.A.T Program** - This past year, the Bureau was able to train 24 officers to present the G.R.E.A.T (Gang Resistance Education Training) Program in various elementary schools around the city. During the past school year, the program was presented in 18 different schools, with some officers presenting to multiple classes in a single school, and reached 700 kids. For this school year, the Bureau is again presenting the G.R.E.A.T program and has added a research component to measure the program’s effectiveness.

The Bureau is in the process of planning a G.R.E.A.T families program, which will bring the families of G.R.E.A.T students together and work with them to reinforce the principles taught in the class and to be a better family. This program will take place in neighborhood community centers.

**S.T.O.P Program** - The STOP Program is intended to break down barriers and dissolve stereotypes of both citizens and law enforcement while cultivating open communication. The program focuses on children of middle school age. The feedback exchanged in such conversations can help young people better understand the police and help the police interact more positively with young people. Four juvenile detectives have been trained in the program and have implemented it in seven different schools, with some schools having multiple programs at the same time, and have reached 162 students.

The S.T.O.P program has a research component built into it. A professor from the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee came to St. Louis to conduct the research. The Bureau is currently waiting for the comprehensive report on the program’s effectiveness.

**J.S.S.I. - Juvenile Safe Streets Initiative** - Through this program the Bureau has set up a designated phone line for parents who believe their child has a weapon in the home. When parents call the hotline, which is in the juvenile offices, the Bureau sends a detective to their home with a consent-to-search form to retrieve the weapon and run further checks on it as a
recovered article. If the weapon is shown to have been used in the commission of a crime, the information is forwarded to the proper investigating unit.

The Bureau sets up a counseling session for further investigation into where it came from and why the child has it. It has partnered with the Juvenile Detention Center to provide services to the family if needed or requested.

**Hogan Street Youth Outreach** – The Bureau recently started an Outreach Educational Program with the Hogan Street Regional Youth Center, a state-maintained facility which houses children who have become “wards of the state.” These children have had been involved in violent or repeat criminal activity. The Bureau has visited there quite a few times to dialogue with the young men about life choices, the mistakes they made, and what it means to be a productive citizen. Officers will also be teaching life skills classes to address some of the life skills that these young men do not know exist. So far officers have visited and played a basketball game, with plans to play another, as well as a flag football game.

The Bureau is in the process of setting up barber, cooking, and other trade classes to help the young men establish a trade prior to their release from the facility, hoping that the possibility of a trade diversion will help to reduce the likelihood of their going back to what got them there in the first place. It has also partnered with Bruce Franks Jr and SLATE (St. Louis Agency on Training and Education) to help get those young men jobs upon their release.

We are also beginning a Chess Club at the Hogan Street Regional Youth Center. Currently, with the assistance of the St. Louis Chess Club, we are training officers in this activity. Once trained, we will begin participation in the Chess Club at Hogan Street with the students.

**Blue Courage Program** – Currently under development, Blue Courage is not just another training class, it is an educational process that focuses on leadership, culture, and education. Officers get the opportunity to discuss not only how to lead each other, but how to understand their culture and behavior. With this knowledge, officers that participate can learn to think differently, and evaluate the principles, practices, and philosophies of their department, as well as themselves. Most of the modules focus on nurturing officers’ heart, body, mind, and spirit, while getting them to reflect on what they want to leave behind. It consists of vibrant discussions for officers to decide what kind of officer they want to be. The Blue Courage Program helps officers reconnect with themselves and their love and passion for policing. Officials believe that by increasing the quality of life for the officer, you increase their capacity to positively engage the community.

**Community Compstat** – Within the past 10 years, the term Compstat has become a common phrase within the law enforcement community. The commanders of the Metropolitan Police Department, City of St. Louis meet once a week as a group to discuss current crime trends throughout the city. The Bureau has begun planning for a program that we are referring to as Community Compstat.

Compstat is a combination of management philosophy and organizational management tools used by police departments throughout the United States. Compstat emphasizes information sharing, responsibility, accountability, and improving effectiveness. Department executives and officers meet regularly to discuss and analyze crime problems and the strategies used to address those problems. Simply put, it is “figuring out where crime is happening, making the
connections, and coming up with ways to interrupt crime patterns.” It includes four generally recognized core components:

1. Timely and accurate information or intelligence;
2. Rapid deployment of resources;
3. Effective tactics; and
4. Relentless follow-up.

By having a system with regularly scheduled meetings and agreed-upon measures, Compstat is a catalyst for ideas and action - it allows SLMPD to identify emerging problems; to coordinate the effective deployment of resources; increase the accountability of commanders; identify community problems and develop police strategies; and foster information sharing within the agency. Compstat creates a shared sense of purpose for the Department’s strategies, tactics, activities and outcomes.

Community Compstat is a pilot approach to intertwine Compstat with that of community policing. Research by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) suggests that the two are compatible within the same department but operate independently.

Our pilot proposes a bold approach to combat the pervasiveness of violence that continues to plague our communities. Our approach is not “rocket science” – it simply means a paradigm shift of thinking – taking community policing and partnerships to a new height. Sharing real time crime data and analysis with social service providers will spark innovative and real time solutions for families that will interrupt the cycle of incarceration, thus reducing recidivism.

Area commanders will present cases to a collaborative of partner agencies that have agreed to roll up their sleeves and work in tandem with the police. Currently, like most communities, social service agencies are brought in after the “incident or crime” has occurred – missing out on opportunities to be proactive and provide preventive measures and interventions that would interrupt the cycle of violence. Agency partners will in essence serve in the same capacity of police commander – but instead of determining what type of punishment fits the particular crime – they are listening to determine what services and programs the target individual and family needs. It is a comprehensive methodology with a desired outcome to make the family whole. It will provide a shared accountability of the police along with the community to find solutions to solve crime in our neighborhoods.

For additional information on these programs, please contact Lieutenant Colonel Ronnie L. Robinson, Deputy Chief of Police and Commander, Bureau of Community Affairs, at RRobinson@SLMPD.ORG.