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Columbia Heights police officers get out into the community

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Columbia Heights' crime rate was spiking when Scott Nadeau took over as the new police chief in 2008.

Robbery, burglaries and vandalism were all on the rise. The call-and-response way the department conducted business left officers chasing the problem, Nadeau realized.

"It was that 1960s and 70s model of rapid response and investigating crimes as opposed to trying to look at where you have issues in the community and working with community stakeholders to try and bring about change," Nadeau explained.

"You can't arrest your way out of a problem. You have to have a more proactive approach."

Determined to reduce crime and renew the public's confidence in the police, Nadeau analyzed crime data for hot spots and started talking to community members. The department plugged into social media to better connect with the public. The chief pushed his 27 officers out of their squad cars and into school gymnasiums, storefronts and church potlucks.

By 2012, the city's crime rate dropped to a 25-year low. The results are so dramatic the department received the 2012 International Association of Chiefs of Police Community Policing Award. The city won in the category for cities under 20,000.

"I am proud of the whole department," said Columbia Heights Mayor Gary Peterson. "We are more proactive. Police knocked on doors in problem neighborhoods. They made contact and shook hands so people would see who the police are. Our community knows our police better and knows they are there as a service to them."

Nadeau's community policing initiative doesn't involve just meet-and-greets. Officers have started more than 10 ongoing community policing partnerships. The department:

- Pushed through a city ordinance that forces problem landlords to either work with police to clean up their act or pay \$250 for each excessive 911 call to their properties.
- Assigned three police officers to schools.
- Started an anti-bullying program where officers read and visit with students.
- Created a Big Brothers-Big Sisters program at Highland Elementary, where 10 officers and staff members mentor 10 selected students.
- Hosts weekly open gym time at schools. More than 3,500 children and teens attended last year alone.
- Set up a Facebook page where residents can read about crime alerts, accidents and crime prevention tips.
- Posts weekly crime stats on its website.
- Reinvented the city's Community Watch program with training and year-round outreach, rather than solely focusing on National Night Out.
- Started a Business Watch that works with local businesses to prevent crime.
- Met with local churches and community groups with multicultural populations to discuss police tactics and concerns about racial profiling.

"It's been an absolute whirlwind. It wasn't too long after Chief Nadeau took the reins that certain philosophical shifts were occurring," said Officer Terry Nightingale, community policing coordinator and 27-year veteran of the department. "I find him an individual that thinks very globally. He has lots of energy and has lot of ideas on how to address our core missions, one of which is to reduce crime."

Robberies have dropped from 48 in 2007 to 18 in 2012. Thefts have been nearly cut in half from a high of 836 in 2007, and vandalism has fallen from 437 offenses to 147 during that same time period.

Nadeau, who came from the Brooklyn Center police department, said employing community policing strategies doesn't lessen the officers' ability or commitment to traditional policing tactics when necessary.

"We balance it with enforcement. Sometimes people have to go to jail, and sometimes people have to be convicted," Nadeau said.

Officers are trying to change perceptions, and many of their community policing efforts focus on changing perceptions among children.

"It's not our job to arrest or harass or intimidate. We challenge some of those perceptions," Nadeau said. "It helps us to get in and show them our job is to serve people."

Officers regularly visit Highland Elementary. They're part of the anti-bullying program, the DARE drug prevention program and Big Brothers-Big Sisters.

"We just have an amazing relationship with the police department," said Highland Elementary Principal Michele DeWitt. "It's really engaging for the students. I have gotten a lot of positive feedback from the parents that it was meaningful for the kids."

Officer Tessa Villegas helped set up the Big Brother-Big Sister partnership with police. She is also a big sister to a 10-year-old girl. They eat lunch together in the school cafeteria and then play board games, color and chat.



Columbia Heights Police Capt. Lenny Austin played a game of Connect Four with Derrick West, a third-grader. Ten of the department's 28 officers are part of the "Big Brother-Big Sister" program, meeting with the kids at Highland Elementary for lunch and games. Austin said he enjoys his time with the kids.

Richard Sennott, Star Tribune

"It's nice to have someone always happy to see you... It's nice to know you are a strong female role model for somebody," Villegas said. "It will be interesting to see her grow as a little girl and a person."

The department's community policing efforts hasn't been all smiles. Nadeau said there have been a few hiccups along the way.

In an effort to lower the number of pedestrians struck by vehicles on Central Avenue, police began ticketing jaywalkers. That move had even members of the City Council grumbling, so Nadeau eased the policy. "We kind of have to roll that back and make sure everyone gets one warning," Nadeau said.

The department has reached out to immigrant communities, who were accustomed to military policing and corruption in their countries of origin and are suspicious of the American justice system, Nadeau said.

Several officers attended a potluck at Church of All Nations and were questioned about racial profiling and police tactics. At the potluck, Hispanic church members told officers they felt intimidated when squad cars idled in the church parking lot.

"There were some emotions and suspicions. It was a good conversation. We appreciated the honesty of being able to talk with them," said Dana Caraway, pastoral assistant. "They were very kind about it."

Police stopped idling in the park lot. Church members feel the relationship with police is now a work in progress, Caraway said. "We are grateful now we have a relationship," she said.

Police invited church members to the tour the new police station. The neighborly gesture struck a chord with Caraway and others.

"It was good. We hosted them. They hosted us," Caraway said. "I personally appreciated knowing people in the police force. If we do have problems, I know people that I can call."

The chief credits the community as much as his department for lower crime rate and better police-community relations. "It's not just the effort of the police but the entire community coming together," Nadeau said. "It's the collaboration that made the difference."

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