

Innovation Award Application 2014



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*An Innovative Approach:* *Geographic Policing*

*Made Stronger Through Social Media*

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Describe the Program/project/ product/ service innovation:

Community Oriented Policing and Problem Solving (COPPS) has been a traditional policing strategy utilized by law enforcement agencies for decades. Community oriented policing is loosely defined as a policing philosophy that emphasizes the creation of community partnerships and proactive problem solving to address the causal effects of crime. The intended result of this policing philosophy is that by developing and supporting community connections, crime, as well as the fear of crime, decreases.

The Sacramento Police Department has taken one of the key tenants of COPPS which is community connection and engagement, to a higher level by embracing geographic policing and Nextdoor. Nextdoor is a new social network that brings neighbors together and provides tools for police to communicate directly with residents in geographically defined neighborhoods. It is a social media platform that also acts as a “virtual neighborhood watch” in which neighbors collaborate with each other.

By partnering with Nextdoor, the Sacramento Police Department has the ability to deliver public safety information, crime prevention tips, and community activities to specific Nextdoor sites, or to larger areas within Sacramento. It differs from more traditional social media platforms in that postings made between neighbors are viewed only by that neighborhood and are not visible by the police.

Like many police departments, the Sacramento Police Department was a devout practitioner of COPPS and had several teams of officers called Problem Oriented Policing Officers, or POP Officers as they were commonly known, dedicated to their community oriented policing efforts. These POP officers were tasked with fostering and supporting community contacts to help solve neighborhood problems. However, during the fiscal crisis that lasted from 2008-2012, deep budget cuts forced the Sacramento Police Department to deconstruct the department. This resulted in the elimination of the traffic division, selected investigative divisions including narcotics and vice, numerous dispatchers, and eventually all of the POP teams. Ultimately the department budget was reduced by 30%, and over 200 civilian support positions and 180 police officer positions were eliminated by attrition and two years of layoffs.

With the elimination of the POP teams community engagement began to suffer. The previous POP model allowed for the deployment of over 60 uniformed police officers whose primary function was to work with the community and solve neighborhood problems. The downside to this practice was that the remaining 275 to 300 patrol officers relied on the POP officers to handle community engagement and complaints while they handled the routine calls for service. As a result the department’s ability to have meaningful connections to neighborhoods and businesses was significantly diminished when the POP teams were eliminated.

In 2013, as the recession began to subside, the department began to rebuild itself in a systematic manner with a primary focus ‘Making Sacramento the Safest Big City in California’ and connecting and interacting with the community. The department adopted a geographic policing model which differed from the traditional COPPS model that was utilized in Sacramento for over 20 years. Geographic policing is focused on breaking down geography or policing jurisdictions into smaller and more manageable pieces. Officers, supervisors, and managers are then assigned to these areas for extended periods of time enabling them to form partnerships with their communities and develop personal commitment and ownership in their areas of responsibility. In the original model of COPPS, specialist officers (POP officers) were the problem solvers and the “communication bridge” between their assigned neighborhoods and the police department.

The innovation of combining geographic policing with the use of Nextdoor’s social media application enables officers to communicate and partner with city residents in a highly efficient and effective manner. The partnership between Nextdoor and the Sacramento Police Department has been a tremendous success not only for neighbors and neighborhoods but it has contributed to a significant decrease in crime by 10.1%.

Short description of the importance, internal impact, and community benefits:

Overall Impact: The Sacramento Police Department suffered a 30% budget reduction over 5 years during the fiscal crisis. Despite having fewer resources, the police department’s progressive efforts in partnering a geographic policing model with a geographic social media strategy, is a contributing factor in the overall reduction of crime by 10%.

Benefits to the Department: The Sacramento Police Department truly understands the power and effectiveness of partnering with citizens. However, in the past, this was a time consuming and difficult task that fell on a select few police officers who could only reach the neighbors who elected to attend meetings or those who the officer’s specifically visited. Today, on Nextdoor, and in less than six months from adoption, the Sacramento Police Department can reach nearly 12,000 residents in a single click. Division commanders and their officers can easily stay connected with all neighborhoods in their areas of responsibility or communicate with just a single neighborhood as needed.

Benefits to Community: With the new geographic policing model and use of the Nextdoor platform, residents are more active, involved members of their communities. Neighbors have gotten to know one another and have developed a strong sense of community, and that feeling has permeated throughout their neighborhoods. Through Nextdoor, they have also gotten to know their geographically assigned police staff and are developing an ongoing relationship with these officers.

What makes this a quantum leap of creativity?

Merging the geographic policing model with Nextdoor has been a quantum leap in creative policing. This is the intersection of two disciplines, policing theory and technology, to help build community. Most police departments across the country are now embracing social media. Facebook, Twitter, and Nixle are useful communication tools to broadcast messages to subscribers of these services. Nextdoor, however, allows law enforcement agencies to target communication to geographically distinct regions. Nextdoor connects law enforcement agencies to residents and the neighborhoods in which they reside. Equally as important, Nextdoor connects neighbors to each other, which fosters a stronger sense of community and empowers residents to feel responsible for the safety of their neighborhoods. In the “new normal” of limited resources, it is important for residents to take an active role in keeping their neighborhoods safe.

Who benefits?

The Sacramento Police Department has benefited in a number of significant ways. First, strong partnerships were formed in almost every neighborhood within the city. Officers are developing great relationships with citizens, who in turn have become their partners in reducing crime. Second, officers can “target” their public safety communication to specific neighborhoods as opposed to sending out information to the entire city via traditional media outlets. Residents benefit by getting to know their neighbors, connecting with their greater communities, and feeling more connected to the police. The city benefits as well because all of this is accomplished with fewer resources.

How was the program/project/product/service initiated and implemented?

As the Sacramento Police Department began its geographic policing transition it sought out technology solutions that would enable the department to greatly expand its social media reach and to better connect with the community. Department employee Jena Swafford, a supervising dispatcher by training and assignment, who had a passion for social media, was tasked with finding a communication vehicle to assist the department in this endeavor. After extensive research she determined that Nextdoor was a perfect social media platform to advance community communication and geographic policing. Meetings were held between the police department’s public information team and Nextdoor Senior City Strategist, Justine Fenwick to learn the product and service. Chief of Police Sam Somers Jr. approved of the direction and partnership and an implementation plan was developed. A department wide roll out plan was discussed and drafted and a city-wide media campaign was launched. The Sacramento Police Department and Nextdoor partnership was publicly launched via a press conference and extensive local media coverage. Community education was initiated with neighborhood meetings in all of the eight Sacramento City Council districts and numerous follow up meetings were requested and are still ongoing.

What risks were taken?

Most creative solutions involve taking some risks. The beauty of this creative effort was that it involved taking very reasonable risks. The risks in shifting the geographic model of policing:

•Law enforcement agencies typically are resistant to large scale change. However this change was mitigated by the Chief and his executive team who took the time to communicate the vision and benefits to staff in a variety of venues.

•The police officer’s union was and is still resistant to allow the officers to alter their annual long term shift sign ups to support a geographic model. While this is an ongoing process, this risk is being reduced by the Chief and his staff working closely with the police union to educate them on the benefits of this policing approach.

Risks of adopting Nextdoor:

•Residents would not use it. This risk was mitigated by soliciting residents’ opinion before officially launching Nextdoor.

•Residents’ expectations of police service would become unreasonable. This risk was mitigated by explaining police participation up front and through ongoing reminders, like “Nextdoor is NOT an emergency reporting tool, please call 911 in an emergency.”

•Police staff would find the site difficult to use. This risk was mitigated by having Nextdoor train staff and by working with Nextdoor product design to make the product more police friendly. This risk was further mitigated when officers saw the tremendous public support for police interaction on the site.

All of these risks have been minor compared to the benefit of improving police and community communication and lowering crime with fewer resources.

What, if any were the costs and/or savings?

The transition to geographical policing and the adoption of Nextdoor did not require any up front costs or fees or additional hires. Nextdoor, like Facebook and Twitter, is free. However, the implementation of these new practices did require planning, execution and training time, totaling roughly 100 hours from a couple of key staff members on the communication team. The adoption of the geographical model of policing involved more time because it required a fundamental philosophical shift in the way the department was policing and, as a consequence, the Chief and executive staff needed to spend time explaining the vision and getting organizational buy-in. It also required some minor reorganization of staff.

What are the lessons learned that other local governments can learn from?

As with any fundamental change in practice, there were lessons learned throughout the transition of integrating Nextdoor into geographic policing. The Sacramento Police Department’s roll out of the partnership with Nextdoor was done through a press conference, media release, and eight community meetings conducted by council district. In retrospect, we would add to that a more comprehensive plan to educate the community on Nextdoor as well as department employees.

Additionally, Nextdoor is structurally very different from many other forms of social media in the sense that the police do not ever have access to the neighborhood side of Nextdoor. This purposeful format enables neighbors to communicate only with their own neighbors but sometimes there is a misconception that the police can see their posts. This issue has been addressed by reminding the community that police cannot see neighborhood posts and if neighbors wish to share crime information with police they have to do so deliberately, by reaching out to the police on Nextdoor or through other avenues.

What department and/or individual(s) championed the innovation? If a contractor was used, please list the name and their contact information.

Police Chief Sam Somers Jr., who took office in early 2013, championed the transition to the geographical model of policing. Assisting in the deployment and education of the transition were his three Deputy Chief’s; Ken Bernard, Dana Matthes and Brian Louie. The Sacramento Police Department public information team, Social Media Coordinator Jena Swafford and Public Information Officers Doug Morse and Michele Gigante, championed the roll out and adoption of Nextdoor.

The Nextdoor city team worked closely with the Chief and communications team to support their efforts to use Nextdoor the support of the new geographical model of policing.

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Any additional information you would like to share?

Here is what our residents have to say about the partnership of the Sacramento Police and Nextdoor:

“Nextdoor has made a difference in terms of how people feel about safety and about their connection to the Police Department and it makes them more open to reporting activity that they think is suspicious. It really supports the work of the Police Department and people feel safer because of it.”

Pat Freitas, Nextdoor Member in Sacramento

Here is what our police staff has to say about the adoption of geographic policing and using Nextdoor to stay connected to residents:

"The essential key to long term success with Geographic Policing is genuinely connecting & partnering with members of the community.  Nextdoor.com has provided an outstanding cyber environment for me to connect with a large number of citizens in a manner that is timely and responsive. This consistent contact has built trust between us and the community and this has resulted in a number of neighborhood safety successes. Nextdoor has definitely been a big component in my overall effort to help ‘Make Sacramento the Safest Big City in California’ ”.

Lieutenant Charles Husted, Sacramento Police Department