

LOS ANGELES COUNTY:

A Sheriff’s Vision For Community Policing

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The Advancing Community Policing Grant

Background

Community policing efforts in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) include officers working in patrol, custody, court services, detective, or administrative functions. The department has patrol deputies assigned to the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Bureau to address problem-solving and community policing activities. Part of the Advancing

Community Policing (ACP) grant money went toward bringing in more staff to help develop LASD's COPS Bureau.

The ACP grant also provided overtime funds that were used to pay for 300 sergeants, 100 lieutenants, and other sworn and nonsworn managers to attend the Community Policing for Supervisors and Managers course offered at the California Regional Community Policing Institute (RCPI) at Los Angeles. "Misconceptions about community policing were addressed in the training," said Lieutenant Bruce Pollack, RCPI's director. "Many mid-level managers who were initially very much

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**ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE
CATEGORY:** ORGANIZATIONAL
CULTURE

AMOUNT FUNDED: \$250,000

SITE VISIT: JANUARY 3, 2001

DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Los Angeles County is one of the Nation's largest counties, with 4,081 square miles, including the islands of San Clemente and Santa Catalina, and a 76-mile coastline. The county has a population of 9.5 million, the largest single-county population in the nation. The population is 44.6 percent Hispanic, 31.1 percent white, 11.8 percent Asian, 9.5 percent black, and 31 percent other.* Approximately 29 percent of California's residents live in Los Angeles County.

* U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) is the largest sheriff's department in the world, with 9,000 sworn and 6,000 civilian members in 21 separate policing stations. The department is responsible for the enforcement of all laws and regulations as required by statute. The department participates in programs for rehabilitation, crime prevention, and delinquency suppression; directs and coordinates emergency services; maintains security for and supports the functions of the superior and

municipal courts; and operates county detention facilities. These law enforcement services are provided throughout the unincorporated areas of the county and within 42 incorporated cities that contract with LASD for services.

LASD is unionized. Two unions represent the sworn members of the department and one represents the civilian personnel. No one is obligated to belong to any union as a condition of employment within the department.

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Many deputies have admitted that they did not initially support the program but participated because it was the new policy. After learning and practicing the philosophy of the COPS Bureau, however, they discovered that it did not mean that the department was going "soft on crime." Instead, it was redirecting its approach to community problems and involving community residents to a greater degree in addressing criminal matters. After participating in the department's community policing efforts, these deputies have become "believers in the program and philosophy and are convinced that this is the manner in which law enforcement

agencies should function," says Deputy Dan Waidner.

The Project

Major elements of LASD's ACP project included:

- The COPS Bureau
- The Vital Intervention and Directional Alternatives (VIDA) program
- The Nuisance Abatement Tracking System
- The fiscal system
- The Activities Tracking System

The COPS Bureau. Sheriff Leroy D. Baca made community policing a centerpiece of his administration when he was elected in 1998. LASD's COPS Bureau is responsible for all community policing activities within the unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. "The Bureau was created in an effort to unify the services provided by all of the COPS deputies under one command," says Commander Paul Tanaka. "The primary objective of the COPS Bureau is to have each station's team develop a rapport with the residents of its specific community. The goal is to give the community an opportunity to become acquainted with the deputy sheriffs who police their area and, in turn, obtain information regarding the community's needs." The COPS Bureau now has five specialized

programs departmentwide and 309 deputies and 41 sergeants assigned to 35 COPS teams in 20 stations.

Prior to the development of the COPS Bureau, residents of the unincorporated areas of the county received basic law enforcement services from the department. Patrol deputies, whose primary function was to answer calls for service, provided most of these services. Due to the large number of calls and a shortage of officers, patrol deputies did not have the time or resources to respond effectively to every community problem. As a result, patrol deputies spent most of their time handling such higher priority crimes as violent felonies. Lower grade crimes such as illegal drug activity, prostitution, drinking in public, and quality-of-life issues had not been thoroughly addressed, and problems such as vacant properties, abandoned vehicles, illegal vending and dumping, and curfew and truancy violations were often completely ignored.

All COPS Bureau deputies are selected from the cadre of patrol deputies assigned to a specific station. As openings within the COPS Bureau occur, any station deputy can rotate out of patrol into the COPS Bureau. The basic difference between the two roles is that, unlike deputies in the COPS Bureau, patrol deputies answer calls for service and do not have time to investigate or handle problems that require long-term solutions.

The COPS Bureau deputies work as a team. They address problems at specific locations that can vary from barking dogs or excessive trash accumulation to hardcore gang or narcotics activity. When patrol deputies notify COPS Bureau deputies of a problem, the COPS deputies take on the problem as a dedicated mission.

"Many mid-level managers who were initially very much against the COPS Bureau and philosophy became some of its most ardent supporters."

Lieutenant Bruce Pollack

As deputies rotate through the program, LASD expects that, eventually, every member of the patrol force will have served within the COPS Bureau and will know how to address more complex and varied community problems.

Each deputy assigned to a COPS position is responsible for a particular reporting district, community, or neighborhood. This is to reduce the size of service areas to smaller, more manageable communities. COPS deputies assigned to these communities identify and develop solutions to problems in conjunction with community members and neighborhood leaders. Three types of

COPS teams work within LASD: COPS, Special Prevention and Intervention (SPI), and High Impact Target Area.

SPI COPS teams typically work in bicycle patrols, which have been effective in both apprehending criminals and allowing officers to get to know neighborhood residents. SPI teams work throughout the station area on both mission-specific patrols and saturation patrols, and they act as additional support for other COPS teams.

The High Impact Target Area COPS teams operate at each station and work within specifically targeted areas for short periods of time (approximately four to nine months, depending on the area and community problems encountered). These target areas are selected based on such criteria as overall criminal activity, specific gang activity, calls from residents identifying problem locations, and other outside influences. These teams begin targeted community projects by surveying the community and asking the residents to identify their concerns and, if possible, locations where criminal activity occurs. These results are tabulated and problem locations are identified as specific missions that the entire team combats.

When the High Impact Target Area survey is complete, the COPS team discusses the results of the survey with residents in a townhall meeting. Community leaders are invited to meet with the

team to discuss the project's outcome. Any mission that is not completed during the project time period is turned over to the regular COPS team and the appropriate COPS deputy continues to work toward solving the problem. Other COPS deputies are assigned to community relations duties and to the VIDA program.

The VIDA Program. "The VIDA program is the only program in Los Angeles County that deals with at-risk youth before they become just another inmate in the juvenile justice system," says Sergeant Arlene Berner, the VIDA program coordinator for the department. The program utilizes community volunteers (such as U.S. Marines based in the Los Angeles area) to teach discipline and instill healthy habits through physical training. The program allows deputies to become mentors and positive role models for troubled youths.

VIDA program deputies work with youths at 12 sites in Los Angeles County. The 16-week program is a collaborative effort between LASD, community-based organizations, the juvenile courts, the probation department, schools, and parents.

VIDA focuses on youths between the ages of 11 and 17½ who have no serious law enforcement contacts but have exhibited such antisocial behavior as truancy, incorrigibility, threats of violence, or affiliation with street gangs. The juvenile courts, the probation department, the Department of

Children's Services, schools, parents, and law enforcement refer youths to this program. More than 600 youths have graduated from the VIDA program since it was expanded countywide in January 2000.

"The VIDA program is the only program in Los Angeles County that deals with at-risk youth before they become just another inmate in the juvenile justice system."

Sergeant Arlene Berner

The Nuisance Abatement Tracking System.

The Board of Supervisors has created a Nuisance Abatement Tracking System in conjunction with LASD. The purpose of this system is to track the progress of nuisance abatements.

Deputy sheriffs respond to citizen complaints of nuisance problems (code enforcement) in their area of responsibility. They can access the Nuisance Abatement Tracking System website and check on the status of any property in the county. This system provides a history of past inspections (if applicable) and whether the location has been a safety concern in the past. The system gives the user information about the owner and

the names of informants. The program has a built-in email capability, which allows deputies to forward information to specific contact people at designated public agencies who can respond to a problem or complaint. The program also can generate statistical reports that satisfy monthly report and grant requirements. The system is user friendly with pulldown menus, FAQ guides, and help programs. The website, which is located on Los Angeles County's intranet, can be accessed by personnel from county agencies. The system is currently used in two of the five supervisor districts.

The Fiscal System. All of the COPS funds are incorporated within the department's budget and earmarked for the COPS Bureau. Due to the many requests for specific financial details from the County Board of Supervisors and federal, state, and local grant agencies, the COPS Bureau created and maintains a fiscal tracking system that can quickly produce reports that are tailored to each agency's need for information.

The Activities Tracking System. The Activities Tracking System consists of the statistical records of COPS deputies' actions. It summarizes the activities conducted within each community, team, station, supervisor district, and Field Operations Region and in the COPS Bureau. Additionally, a one-page narrative is included for each team to highlight its most recent accomplishments.

This allows deputies to express themselves beyond what mere numbers can portray. This type of report, in which the narrative and the statistical sections complement each other, effectively addresses requests for information about the COPS Bureau.

Department Observations

Challenges

When LASD was creating the COPS Bureau, there were many misconceptions, including different ideas about the duties of the newly assigned deputies. Some thought that this would be only an extension of the community relations function and that no “true police work” would be involved. Others saw this as a “fluff” assignment not worthy of a deputy who wanted to do “true police work.” Because most LASD deputies enjoyed protecting communities by being very proactive in law enforcement through the apprehension of criminals, many deputies did not want to be associated with this very different kind of program.

As it turned out, the sheriff wanted a COPS Bureau in which the deputies would be very proactive against gangs, narcotics activity, and

general lawlessness, in addition to being in close touch with community residents. This included addressing the criminal activity that was important to the residents rather than to the deputies. When the true nature of the COPS Bureau and the philosophy were made known, and when communities eagerly accepted this new approach to law enforcement, deputies became less critical of the program.

Benefits

The COPS Bureau has allowed deputies to form community partnerships that have benefited both the community and the department. Placing deputies who do not have the responsibility to handle radio calls in the community can provide long-term solutions.

Nuisance Abatement Teams are examples of such partnerships. Members of the COPS team meet monthly with representatives of the code enforcement, building and safety, and health departments. The meetings address safety and nuisance issues that are beyond the scope of law enforcement, but are brought to the attention of police almost daily.

Another example of a working partnership is the Azusa Law Enforcement Group (LEG). Members

routinely attend meetings and work on projects together. The Azusa Police Department, West Covina Police Department, Covina Police Department, San Dimas COPS Team, Sheriff’s Department, Operation SafeStreets, state parole department, and county probation department all provide representatives. Joint LEG operations have resulted in many arrests. Sharing of information within the group benefits each participating organization. The county areas that the San Dimas station serves are within several cities. Criminals do not recognize jurisdictional boundaries; they may live in one area and “caper” in others. LASD now can share information, which allows it to thwart the efforts of such criminals.

LASD also has built relationships with the local schools. Although many schools are outside the county area, the students who attend them live in the county area. The students see LASD deputies in and around the campuses and soon realize that COPS teams can cross jurisdictional boundaries. An example is Sierra Continuation High School in the Azusa School District, which is across the street from a county park. LASD found that good truancy enforcement reduces daytime burglaries, so it works in partnership with the school. The school gives the department the names of habitual truants and a team from LASD picks them up.



LASD has formed good relationships with the Board of Supervisors' staff field deputies. They have provided information, support, and, in some cases, resources. Their ability to get responsive action from other county departments has been a valuable asset.

According to Deputy Dan Waidner, an unintended outcome of the department's COPS Bureau and philosophy is somewhat like the proverbial "double-edged sword." He says:

On one hand, our COPS Bureau and philosophy has been amazingly successful in bringing communities together, decreasing crime and the residents' perception of crime, enhancing residents' quality of life, creating nicer looking neighborhoods, forming partnerships with other county agencies, intervening with 'at risk' youths, and being able to address and handle almost any type of request for service.

But, on the other hand, Waidner notes that "because the program and philosophy have been so successful, COPS Bureau personnel are being inundated with service requests." The community has become accustomed to the increased level of service, and LASD is finding it difficult to continue at this pace.

The deputies' workload has increased so significantly that the end result could be a reduction in their ability to respond. The irony is that this is similar to the situation the department faced before it formed the COPS Bureau. Personnel were so busy handling calls for service that they could not provide adequate service to the communities. Now the department is providing all of these services, stretching itself to its limits in doing so. Executives in the department are attempting to address this concern.

Panel Commentary

The panel chose to include this grant for study for several reasons: It allows discussion and consideration of the difficulties involved when implementing community policing in a sheriff's department, as opposed to a municipal police department; a large number of initiatives already under way were supported and enhanced by the training this grant provided; and the size of the agency raised questions of how to get the most for its money. This case is another example (like Longmont and Boston) in which the department had already engaged in a strategic process to expand community policing and the grant funds furthered that plan.

One might assume that providing \$250,000 in ACP grant funds to the largest sheriff's department in the nation would have little effect. LASD, however, demonstrated that the specific amount of grant money is secondary to the catalytic effect of applying for, receiving, and expending a grant. Many agencies evaluated by the panel reported that the process of applying for the ACP grant occasioned often intense analysis of programs and goals and reinvigorated the agency's commitment to community policing.

While the ACP grant represented a minute percentage of the overall LASD budget devoted to community policing, it was clearly instrumental in supporting two objectives: to make training possible for 400 sergeants and lieutenants and, as part of the financial package, to create and define the COPS Bureau. It is laudable that LASD had the foresight to wed the training initiative to both community policing in general and the COPS Bureau in particular, because there was resistance in the critical ranks of sergeant and lieutenant to both the general philosophy of community policing and the creation of a specific bureau. The use of grant funds for training sergeants and lieutenants was well-advised and quickly allowed LASD to develop a common understanding and language of community policing among a large group of supervisors and command officers.



The panel applauds the choice of RCPI as the training venue for the Community Policing for Supervisors and Managers curriculum attended by LASD sergeants, lieutenants, and managers. The RCPI network needs this kind of recognition and engagement. The concept of the RCPI network is a good one and worth supporting.

The challenge of designing a community policing approach in a county sheriff's agency is both profound and unique. The logistics of transforming an organization charged with policing an area of more than 4,000 square miles are daunting, to say the least. For this reason, the panel believes that Sheriff Baca's efforts have national significance. LASD is a unique laboratory, and its successes or failures may have significant implications for the overall future of community policing in non-metropolitan areas.

Sheriff Baca has made a dramatic long-term commitment to community policing. The department's plan that all deputies and supervisors will eventually rotate through a community policing assignment is impressive. This rotation will create a broad-based understanding of practical problem-solving skills among the key individuals in the department who can make community policing

successful. Rotation can do much to offset the difficult separation some agencies feel when they adopt a model that dedicates some officers to community policing within a cadre of patrol officers who have limited or no community policing expectations. The rate of calls for LASD patrol officer service was described as so high that it prevented patrol deputies from engaging in community policing problem solving. It will be interesting to see how LASD balances the increasing demand for problem solving within the community with an already taxed patrol force. If effective, community policing could contribute to a decrease in calls for service, thereby allowing more patrol deputies to join COPS Bureau deputies.

One answer to the mandate to meet rising expectations is to focus on the "community" part of "community policing."

One of the more important insights advanced in the LASD summary is the need to plan for success. LASD believed that if the COPS Bureau met or exceeded its goals, there would be "unintended

outcomes," some of which would be negative. But this is a common dynamic: success gives rise to higher expectations and increased demands. Overwhelming success can have significant human, budgetary, and time management implications. At the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, LASD may have a long way to go in the area of community empowerment. One answer to the mandate to meet rising expectations is to focus on the "community" part of "community policing." The community's expectations suggest a one-way service dynamic, instead of the shared responsibility between citizens and police that is the cornerstone of community policing.

The Nuisance Abatement and Tracking System is a highly valuable tool that also has been used in a few other departments. LASD seems to have been successful in integrating its system into city and county systems. The department's use of the system of accountability is laudable. It ensures that projects are coordinated and that they benefit from the greatest possible amount of information. We recommend that LASD share both the process used to develop the system and the specific format and structure with other departments. This model will be helpful to any agency that wants to create such a system.