College towns effectively change model

Comparable cities Lincoln, Nebraska, and Gainesville, Florida, moved to a community policing model that changed the departments' culture and communities but some problems remain

POLICING from page **4A**

Lincoln, Nebraska: A culture change

Lincoln's community policing initiative is one of the oldest in the country. It's not so much a program as a culture, said Director of Public Safety Tom Casady.

"It certainly didn't happen overnight," Casady said. "This culture change here started in 1977, really took root in the '80s and '90s, and now our officers really don't have a concept of what a traditional department looks like. You start making an incremental change, and it's passed off from one generation to the next."

Lincoln police are proactive in trying to find the root cause of problems, he said. The approach reduces the crime rate and allows officers to work on other tasks instead of just responding to emergency calls.

Lincoln calls it problem-oriented policing, or POP — identifying a problem early-on to prevent it from recurring by bringing together stakeholders to determine solutions. Targets of POP range from minor crimes to violent offenses.

Lincoln, like Columbia, is a college town. Parties can get out of hand with noise violations, so instead of just handing out tickets, Lincoln police worked with landlords to come up with solutions to encourage students to hold down the noise, Casady said.

"It's about trying to identify it early, and then figuring out what are the levers you can pull to make this problem better," Casady said.

That could mean working with tenants, but also working with the property owner, the manager, and "on some occasions, even the parents of the students," he said.

He said that for some crimes, it makes sense to make arrests. But there are many crimes and other problems where arrests aren't necessary.

"A far more effective approach is to prevent future crimes from occurring," Casady said. "Reduce the risk. Increase the guardianship. Reduce the provocation. Pardon the targets."

Because the department has a community policing culture that's woven into the fabric of the department, Casady said, there's no formal community policing department. All officers are expected to be involved with the community, and promotion is partly based on how involved the officer is on the beat.

Lincoln's command staff is decentralized, meaning that officers are assigned to one of five geographic teams; each geographic team has a substation with a police captain, sergeants and civilian public service officers. Each captain also has a citizen advisory group to facilitate communication with residents and act as a sounding board.

Officers are required to serve in the same geographic area for at least a year to maximize their time spent getting to know residents. Casady said some officers have spent decades in the same area.

Community policing hasn't been a panacea for Lincoln. Like Columbia, the city has a disparity in traffic stops. In 2016, black drivers comprised 10.9 percent of everyone stopped for a traffic violation, but they account for 4.1 percent of Lincoln's population, according to a Lincoln Journal-Star article. A 2015 vehicle stop report showed that black drivers in Columbia comprised 29.6 percent of people stopped for traffic infractions but account for 9.9 percent of the population.

Casady said the Lincoln Police Department has worked to prevent racial profiling. Applicants are asked about racist incidents on their required lie detector tests, and all officers go through implicit bias and impartial policing training. Despite this, Casady said, the racial disparity in traffic stops has increased slightly over the years since the department began to track the data in 2002.

ANDREA CORNEJO/Gainesville Sun

Gainesville police officer Wilfredo Perez helps Demetrius Debose, 7, pick out a toy during the Heroes and Helpers event in December at Target in Gainesville, Florida. Each year, the Gainesville Police Department partners with Target to provide more than 30 students with a $100 shopping spree for the holidays.

He said he's not sure why there is a disparity. But he doesn't think it's solely about race. Driving on a suspended license, fictitious plates and no registration or insurance are often reasons drivers are pulled over, which is related to income, Casady said.

"I'm fairly convinced that the vast majority of that disparity is being driven by disparity in income," Casady said. Lower-income drivers are less likely to afford the costs that come with owning a car, and black people have historically received lower incomes than whites.

He pointed out that the disparity in traffic stops is just one of the many racial disparities that exist here in the United States. "There's racial disparity in prenatal care, in low birth-weight babies, in childhood immunizations, in educational attainment, income, even in life expectancy," he said.

"I think it's important to look at racial disparity and arrests and citations and traffic stops in the broader context of racial disparity in virtually every aspect in American life and to think about what you can do to impact that pervasive disparity," he said.

Gainesville, Florida: Embedded in the community

Gainesville, being a college town, had a similar approach to Columbia years ago — teams of officers who focused on community engagement. But then the department decided 20 to 25 years ago that all officers should practice community-oriented policing.

Gainesville Police Public Information Officer Ben Tobias described it as "embedded in the community."

Gainesville hasn't looked back, he said. The approach has worked well and without a question has been successful. Tobias said one of the most striking indicators of its success was the community's reaction in 2016 to an officer's shooting of a 16-year-old black teenager who was holding a fake assault rifle.

"Had that happened in other cities, I think we would've had riots on hand," Tobias said. "But our community had the trust in us, had the faith in us to go, 'Okay, this is what happened, we're going to have everyone look at it to see what could have been done differently to make sure it doesn't happen again,' and I think because we did not have riots, we did not have giant protests, we did not have increased violence, I think that was one of the biggest ways I can measure that the community had faith in us and had trust in us." The department has studied how it interacts with the community. In 2012, the Gainesville Police Department was awarded a federal grant to study racial disparity in arrests; Tobias said young black men make up 23 percent of the city's population but were being arrested at a much higher rate.

"It's brought our arrest rates to a much more proportional level," Tobias said. "It's not really a community policing strategy so to speak, but it's being willing to talk about the hard stuff, and being willing to bring the public in and say, 'OK, there's a big elephant in the room, let's talk about it. Let's figure out how to make it better.'"

As in Lincoln, Gainesville police are assigned to a specific geographic area. Officers are assigned to one of 20 zones, which are based on population density.

Because of the unpredictable nature of the work, officers aren't required to spend a specific number of hours in the community. But they are encouraged to be out in it as much as possible, Tobias said.

An officer's community engagement work is a large part of the promotion process, he said. Chief Tony Jones and Major Terry Pierce, community policing proponents, are in the process of creating a community service award to recognize officers who are innovatively engaged with the community.

That work translates into crime prevention. The command staff for each sector meets for a weekly "tactical briefing" in which they discuss problems and how to solve them. They look at crime trends and data to develop solutions that supervisors implement in their teams.

The department has enough people to put in the time that community policing requires. It was down 30 to 40 officers just two years ago, but it hasn't had Columbia's chronic understaffing problem.

"I would think trying to implement community policing in a department that's understaffed is going to be very, very difficult because these officers are going to be running from dispatch call to dispatch call," Tobias said.

Community policing might not always be easy, Tobias said, especially when first making the transition to it full force, but it's a worthwhile investment.

"Sir Robert Peel, who was one of the founders of police in general, had a very famous quote that says 'The police are the public, and the public are the police,' and that still rings true today because we have to be embedded in our community," Tobias said. "At the end of the day, when your community has full trust in your police department, it's going to be worth everything that's happened."

MATT RYERSON/Lincoln Journal Star

Officer Luke Bonkiewicz of the Lincoln Police Department holds Catina Back, 2, after giving her a police badge sticker during the Pop with a Cop event June 2016, at Trago Park in Lincoln, Nebraska. The event gave children and adults the opportunity to interact with officers in a friendly setting and ask questions.

WHAT EXACTLY IS COMMUNITY POLICING?

The definition of community policing changes depending on where it exists and the priorities of a particular community. But broadly, it is a strategy aimed at both reducing the crime rate and building relationships and trust with the community. This is done through police focusing on the underlying causes for crime and being proactive rather than reactive. The strategy also places a greater emphasis on community members being involved in the decision-making process, which in turn holds police to a greater level of accountability. The community and police are seen as a partnership that work together to make the city or town a better place.

Kansas City, Missouri: Creating partnerships

In 2013, when Kansas City Police adopted a focused deterrence effort — the Kansas City No Violence Alliance — its main goal was to reduce violent crime.

It worked. Violent crime went down, and homicides dropped by 19 percent in 2014, the lowest rate in more than four decades, according to the Kansas City Star. But homicides spiked again in 2015 and 2016. All told, there were 100 homicides in 2013, 82 in 2014, 111 in 2015 and 128 in 2016.

Kansas City Police Chief Darryl Forte said in 2016 that he thought the homicide rate would be higher if KC NoVA did not exist.

KC NoVA is a collaboration between law enforcement agencies and local community organizations that implements focused deterrence. Some of the entities included in the partnership are the Kansas City Police, the City of Kansas City, FBI, ATF and probation and parole offices. Social workers are also part of the organization, as well as local community partners, such as churches and businesses.

At a job fair in Kansas City on March 20, Jason Cooley walked around talking to the participants and employers; he laughed with some, seemed to be engaged in solemn conversation with others and happily accepted hugs from many of the people he spoke with.

For Cooley, that's part of his job as a community interaction officer, which entails figuring out what the community needs while building relationships. It means taking phone calls from Kansas City residents who need help or have questions.

Cooley has worked for more than a year with the KC NoVA program after working for six years as a community interaction officer for the police department. He said KC NoVA's purpose is to get everyone on the same page about problems in the community.

"It helps identify individuals doing the worst of the worst," Cooley said.

The governing board comprises top brass from the various law enforcement agencies and meets each month. Cooley said having leadership in the room is effective in solving some of the city's crime.

KC NoVA isn't a community policing program, but Cooley said components of it involve community policing, such as getting out in the community to meet neighborhood residents and being available to help.

Cooley said that last fall, the police department worked with the Royals to purchase 100,000 baseball cards to hand out to kids.

"And that was 100,000 positive connections we made," Cooley said.

KC NoVA hosts events throughout the year along with its community partners, ranging from spring flings at schools to the job fair that's open to convicted felons. The day before the March job fair, KC NoVA brought in resources to aid the prospective employees. Organizations provided free business clothes, free haircuts and resume assistance.

Resources KC NoVA provides include job training, education, mental health assistance and homeless assistance.

"It's about seeing a need, meeting a need, identifying leadership within home associations, schools, churches that can help," Cooley said.

The organization also hosts a quarterly meeting between people on probation and parole and the leadership of KC NoVA. At the meeting, the organization's leadership talks about available resources and tries to inspire participants to stay on the straight and narrow by talking about success stories. The attendees then have dinner together. Cooley said about 30 people on probation or parole typically attend.

Not everyone is open to reforming their ways, Cooley said. If the individual continues to commit crimes and is not willing to utilize resources offered, KC NoVA will quickly crackdown on the offenders.

"But if you're truly going to make a concerted effort to change, then all day long, we'll work with you," he said.

Columbia: Looking forward

Every time Columbia discusses the possibility of implementing a full community-oriented policing program, hesitation about community policing comes up: Not enough officers and not enough funding to hire more officers. But the conversations will happen anyway.

The City Council resolution passed in February, drafted by Councilman Thomas, states that the community engagement process will develop recommendations for City Council on whether the city should adopt a community policing process and how to implement it. The deadline for the process is Feb. 28, 2018. Parts of the resolution were similar to recommendations made by the former 2014 Mayor's Task Force on Community Violence, one of which proposed implementing a community policing program.

Thomas said he became interested in community policing after visiting the Gainesville and Nashville police departments and seeing the impact of community policing on residents. Officers seemed genuinely excited about it, he said.

"We were aware that we still have a serious staffing shortage as well as a morale problem, and as well as a lot of tensions among communities of color — concerns about racial profiling, whether certain groups were being targeted and so on," Thomas said.

The understaffing has been linked to an increase in response times, increased overtime and lower officer morale.

MATT STAMEY/Gainesville Sun

Harlem Globetrotter Bucket Blakes takes a shot over Gainesville Officer Bobby White while playing a pickup game on Jan. 23, 2016, in Gainesville, Florida. White is an officer in Gainesville's community policing program.

MATT RYERSON/Lincoln Journal Star

Aliyah Vlach, 10, enjoys two free sodas while chatting with Capt. Jason Stille of the Lincoln Police Department during the Pop with a Cop event June 7 at Trago Park in Lincoln, Nebraska.

NEXT STEPS FOR THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Following City Council's approval of the community engagement process resolution, council members Ian Thomas, Laura Nauser and Michael Trapp and City Manager Mike Matthes distributed a survey to 26 stakeholder groups. The survey asked questions about what the groups would like to see throughout the engagement process.

All voiced support for the community engagement process resolution and provided suggestions such as what other stakeholders should be contacted and proposed goals for the process.

Proposed goals include discussing community policing, improving police staffing levels and morale and reducing the crime rate.

Thomas said he, Nauser, Trapp and Matthes are in the process of working with Heart of Missouri United Way and New Chapter Coaching to host a symposium in the fall.

The following organizations, boards, commissions and groups responded to the survey and are the stakeholders committed to having conversations about the future of community policing — the Columbia Missourian is one of them:

- Columbia Police Department
- Community Outreach Unit
- Columbia Police Officers' Association
- Social Equity Outreach Team
- Citizens Police Review Board
- Commission on Human Rights
- Members of (now disbanded) Mayor's Task Force on Community Violence
- Columbia NAACP
- Minority Men's Network
- Youth Empowerment Zone
- Race Matters, Friends
- Empower Missouri
- Columbia Faith Voices
- Diversity Awareness Partnership
- Association of Black Graduate and Professional Students
- Centro Latino
- Refugee and Immigration Services
- Columbia Neighborhood Watch
- Crimestoppers
- Columbia Chamber of Commerce
- Columbia Public Schools
- Heart of Missouri United Way
- Central Missouri Community Action
- Columbia Housing Authority
- Boone County Commission
- Columbia Missourian

"It occurred to me that the process we would need to go through to adopt a community-oriented policing philosophy and program would address all of those things, if we did it right," Thomas said.

So Thomas took steps that culminated in the resolution. He wrote a position paper about community policing and spoke with his fellow City Council members, the police department, the Columbia Police Officers Association, activist groups and other stakeholders, including Race Matters, Friends.

Traci Wilson-Kleekamp, president of Race Matters, Friends, said she hopes the police department works to have genuine, meaningful conversations about "community controlled policing."

"It would be nice if the police department would not be on the defensive about this and see it as an opportunity to self-reflect as an organization," she said. "It's an opportunity for our community to reflect as a city about the disparities that we have and be real about what those challenges are and to meaningfully address them."

After the resolution was approved, Thomas met with fellow council members Michael Trapp and Laura Nauser, the two co-chairs of the community violence task force, and City Manager Mike Matthes to plan the next steps. A 12-question survey about community policing and what people wanted from a community engagement process was sent to stakeholders or people who expressed an interest — 26 groups in total. All 26 groups said they supported the resolution.

Some of the recommendations from the Task Force on Community Violence will be implemented through the engagement process, Thomas said, because one of the task force's recommendations was to hold an annual forum on crime, policing and social need, which is "very much the same thing" that he envisioned.

The department's community outreach unit is a smaller version of a full-force community policing program. The outreach unit began following the success of the Douglass Park officers James Meyer and Jamie Dowler. Six officers and one supervisor comprise the unit. Columbia Police Public Information Office Bryana Larimer said the department wants to expand community policing efforts, but it hasn't been feasible because of understaffing by as many as 50 officers. Hiring that many officers isn't in the budget.

Wilson-Kleekamp takes issue with that notion. She said changing the department's mindset to a guardian mentality, which is essential in having a good relationship with the community, won't cost money.

"I've been talking to a retired black police chief in Las Vegas and he's implemented community policing in two departments in Michigan, and he said it's not about the numbers of cops," Wilson-Kleekamp said. "It's about the mindset. It's about the philosophy. And that seems to be the hardest part to get across because, quite frankly, politicians are used to doing things the way they've always done it."

In changing the department's mindset, she said it's important for all officers to look at history and learn about people's lived experiences. She said the department also needs to be genuine when addressing problems and honest about its shortcomings.

In a response to the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing in 2015, the department said it had policies in line with a guardian mindset. But the report questioned whether that mindset had actually been put into practice.

"There appears to still be some evidence of low morale in the first line employees and supervisors," the report read. "This will undermine the efforts for internal procedural justice practices. There appears to still be a lack of trust, communication, and department unity."

Wilson-Kleekamp cites this as evidence that the department knows it has problems.

"What they said is that they're ahead of the game on everything, but the document doesn't say they're ahead of the game," Wilson-Kleekamp said. "Their document is absolutely critical of what they do."

City Council approved a $500,000 federal grant in January to hire four more officers who will expand the community outreach unit. A Columbia police focused deterrence program based on KC NoVA and the High Point, North Carolina Police Department's unit, is almost ready for roll-out. A partnership of local and regional law enforcement agencies, such as the Columbia Police Department, Boone County Sheriff's Department, Boone County Prosecutor's office and FBI, will focus on getting people off the streets and into a stable life, Larimer said.

"These agencies will come together and say, 'Look, we want to work together to get these career criminals off of the streets and into jobs and into having an income, being able to get their housing, helping them be productive assets in the community rather than turning back to their criminal ways," Larimer said.

Deputy Chief Jill Schlude said the department is finalizing the program with its partners and determining the criteria for inclusion in the program.

"Once that has been completed, we will have more details about how the program will work, the intended outcomes and the overall scope," Schlude wrote in an email. "Our program will not be a carbon copy of the others we have seen. It will be tailored to our community needs and priorities."

Beyond this, the department has no immediate plans to hire more officers to implement a full community-oriented policing approach. Larimer said an ideal program would allow officers to split their shifts into thirds: one-third responding to calls, another third doing administrative tasks like writing reports, and another third engaging in the community.

"We would like to have staffing consistently at a level that allows us to integrate structured community policing activities into the regular expectations of beat officer," Schlude wrote. Those would be activities such as attending school and community meetings, patrolling on foot and solving problems proactively, she said.

It's unclear what sort of funding would allow for new officers to be hired. When the community engagement process resolution was approved at the February City Council meeting, City Manager Mike Matthes offered up one solution: using council reserves, which is an annual fund for unanticipated issues not worked into the city budget.

Another option could be a property tax, which would fund the hiring of more officers. It was on the ballot in 2014 and defeated. But a recently released 2016 City of Columbia Citizen Survey of 960 Columbia residents showed that 62.3 percent of respondents said they'd be "likely" or "very likely" to support a property tax increase for the purpose of hiring more officers, and 59.1 percent said yes in support of a quarter-cent sales tax.

In the meantime, the engagement process will move forward with tough conversations about how community policing might work to bridge gaps between the police and community. Thomas said he hopes as many people as possible will get involved in the conversation.

Community policing's sole focus isn't just to lower crime rates, all the departments say. It's designed to instill a sense of trust between community and police and collaborate to improve the city.

Wilson-Kleekamp said she encourages people to have empathy for "shoes you don't walk in."

"I think that the kind of impact they would have as an institution would be much greater if it was embraced as an institutional philosophy," Wilson-Kleekamp said. "I think all the work that police do is valuable, but I think it's much more valuable when it's leveraged in collaboration with the community and the community drives it."

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