

The problem facing the Indian River County Sheriffs Office was two fold;(1) How to overcome the historic animosity and indifference towards law enforcement, and (2), How to move from a reactive approach in law enforcement to a proactive problem solving approach.

The increasing crime and disorder in a community approximately two (2) square miles with a population just under 10,000. A large segment of this community are seasonal workers whose sole or primary income is from the citrus industry. Most of the citrus industry closes in May or June each year and reopens in the fall, depending on the crop and the weather conditions. This add to the already high unemployment rate the county. Due to the unemployment rate and the seasonal work there has been a steady increase in crime and disorder in this small community called Gifford.

The Gifford community encompasses a relatively small geographic area within Indian River County and accounted for the highest number of calls for service in the county. This coupled with the fact that it is considered an economically poor community caused an increase in the historic animosity and indifference towards law enforcement.

In January 1993, the ideas and concerns of the citizens, community leaders, churches and Sheriffs Office personnel led to the creation of a Community Oriented Police Enforcement (C.O.P.E.) unit. The unit comprised of one sergeant - Leroy Smith - and two deputies - Mark Buffington and Donald Hart - and became operational in April 1993. These three deputies would be assigned to work full time in the Gifford community to address the increasing crime and disorder.

Since the inception of community policing, members of the C.O.P.E. unit have overseen a process that has brought together citizens, businesses, organizations, members of the Sheriffs office, and other county departments on a host of issues and problems that involve cooperation, compromise and action.

Through this process a substation, space for which was donated by the school board, was established in the Gifford community which allows greater access to the Sheriffs office. Neighborhood residents walk in to the substation to report crimes, file complaints, or simply to discuss day to day business. Deputies assigned to C.O.P.E. also utilize mountain bicycles for increased approachability by citizens. Each member of the C.O.P.E. unit works very closely with the community to further the philosophy of community - oriented policing and problem solving.

One of the best examples to show that C.O.P.E is working occurred on Tuesday, December 12, 1994. On that date Indian River County Sheriff Gary Wheeler appeared before the Indian River County Commission to request matching funds for the COPS AHEAD grant. Mr. Victor Hart, the local president of the NAACP, was permitted to speak before the County Commission on behalf of the Sheriffs office community policing efforts. At the beginning of his presentation he presented the County Commission with approximately 500 letters in support of the C.O.P.E. program and as a direct result of his comments the County Commission voted unanimously in favor for providing the matching funds. Through the COPS AHEAD grant the Indian River County Sheriffs Office has been able to expand the C.O.P.E. unit from three officers to six and increase the number of sub stations from one to three, thus spreading the community policing philosophy to other parts of the county.

The manner in which we, the Sheriffs office, were able to get this support was through a variety of ways. One of the first steps taken was through the taking of surveys through out the Gifford community. These surveys ask questions ranging from their fear of crime to their perception of the Sheriffs office. Through these surveys we were able to identify a variety of problems and solutions.

In addition to the surveys we attended a variety of meetings. At these meetings we made presentations about the Indian River County Sheriffs Office and about Community - Policing, and/or we acted as the host for these meetings. Some of examples are:

—Gifford community meetings

This meeting is held every month and is open to the public. At this meeting the public expresses their concerns and offers solutions

to resolve their concerns.

—Wabasso community meetings

This is also held once a month like the meetings in Gifford.

These meetings were started at the request of the citizens in Wabasso.

—Numerous church groups

—Our Fathers Table Soup Kitchen

—Save our children foundation

—Association for retarded citizens

—Indian River County Board of County Commissioners

—Project success

—Indian River County Housing Authority

—Various recreation groups

—C.O.P.E. community arbitration

This is done to help stop neighborhood disputes from escalating.

—Indian River County Sheriffs Office Citizens Police Academy

Also we have worked with and continue to work with a variety of agencies within the County. These agencies range from federal to local. From Law enforcement to social services. During the first eighteen months of the C.OP.E. units existence we worked with twenty-two (22) different agencies to facilitate the community's needs.

One of the ways in which we brought the community and the Sheriffs office closer together was through a variety of events. Through these events the citizens of the community could meet deputies in a different setting then they were used to. Some of these events were;

—Family Fun Day

This event is held yearly. There is free food and games in a carnival like atmosphere. In addition, any agency or organization that is impacted by or impacts the community set up information booths to show the community what resources are available to them.

—Gifford clean up days

—Basketball tournaments

These tournaments are held with teams representing area ministers, Indian River County Sheriffs Office, Florida Highway

Patrol, and area teachers.

—Charity basketball tournaments

These tournaments are open to the public and are held to call attention to local charities and to help raise money for them.

—Comm-unity Day

This is held to bring the community together and show community pride.

In a twelve month time period the community identified Thirty-four (34) abandoned homes that were being used for a variety of criminal activities. In a joint effort between the community, the Sheriffs office and the Building department. (Thirty (30) of these homes were in the Gifford community and four (4) were in the Wabasso community), twenty-eight homes were removed in Gifford and two (2) were remodeled. All four (4) in Wabasso were removed.

In addition the community called to our attention that there was a growing problem with the area landlords. The problem ranged from sub standard housing, absentee landlords, and not understanding the requirements for the landlords as established by state statue. Due to this problem we started a landlord association. Approximately 40 area

landlords or their property managers were contacted and asked to attend a meeting to form this association. At the initial meeting there were approximately twenty-five in attendance. The Sheriffs office put together a book explaining the state laws and held workshops with the landlords. In addition the landlords established their own organization and through a joint effort guest speakers were brought in to assist them. These speakers ranged from State Attorney's to bankers. In the eight months that this organization has been in place there has been a significant reduction in the calls to the Sheriffs office regarding landlord tenant disputes in the Gifford community and an improvement in substandard housing. A positive side effect of the organization has been the net work that was established between the landlords. This network allows them to communicate about problem tenants and drug dealers who have in the past been able to rent property for the purposes of dealing narcotics. Through this net work there has been a decrease in the number of rental properties used by the dealers.

Since the start of the C.O.P.E. unit we noticed that there was a number of repeat calls for service to the same addresses each month. Due to this we started a program in September 1994 we call Community Analysis. Each month we receive a report from our

Planning and research Division listing every call for service in the Gifford community. Those addresses listed three (3) or more times during the month were contacted. Upon making contact with the occupants we would offer them assistance in relieving the problem(s) that caused the need for the Sheriffs office to respond there three or more times that month. This service would include everything ranging from social services to traditional law enforcement. In January 1995 we noticed a significant decrease in the number of repeat calls for service. Due to this we changed our requirement from three calls per month to two calls per month. As of April 1995 we have again changed our requirement from two calls per month to two calls every two months. This program has not only met with great support from the community, it has also help ease the nonessential work load on the uniform operations division of the Sheriffs office.

CRIME RATE:

One of the gauges we use to show if community-policing is working is through tracked offenses. Tracked offenses are Homicide, Sexual Battery, Robbery, Residential burglary, Business burglary, Auto burglary, Grand theft and Stolen Vehicles. In the year 1993 there was a total of 387 tracked criminal offenses. In 1994 there were 293. This represents a 32 % decrease in activity.

Another way is through the calls for service. In 1993 there was a total of 10,367 calls for service in the Gifford community. In 1994 there was a total of 10,521 calls for service. This total shows an overall increase of approximately 1.5% in the calls for service. This can be attributed to the increased trust between the community and law enforcement. Calls that would normally go unreported were now being reported. In addition, if we break down the calls for service in the community by sector we see a reduction in the calls for service if the sector that includes the Sheriffs office administration building

and County jail was eliminated. This would show a reduction of a minimum of 1%. We can not get an accurate rate due to the large number of walk in complaints at the Administration building. Many of which have nothing to do with the Gifford community. For example in 1994 39% of the calls for service generated by the sector covering the Sheriffs administration building were generated from walk in complaints. Many of which had nothing to do with the Gifford community. In March and April 1995 that number increased to 67%.

One of the best gauges of success may be the intangibles. Some examples are:

In may 1993 the community expressed concerns about a violent gang calling themselves the 33rd Avenue Posse. This gang was being led by three juveniles between the ages of sixteen and seventeen. Based on information received from the community we joined forces with the State Attorney's Office. Due to this co-operative effort we not only recovered approximately \$ 20,000.00 in stolen property we also were able to charge the leaders as adults, thus getting them off the streets that much quicker. This co-operative effort caused the end of this gang.

In September 1993 the United States Marshall's Office was looking for a federal fugitive who was rumored to be hiding in the Gifford area. Through the trust that had been established between the Sheriffs office and the community the fugitive was located and apprehended without incident.

In November 1993 we received information that an individual wanted for twenty-one (21) counts of capital sexual battery was residing in the Gifford community. Through our contacts with the community we were able to locate the subject and apprehend him without incident.

In February 1994, the C.O.P.E. unit participated in operation S.O.A.P. (serious offender apprehension program). This involved representatives from state, federal and local law enforcement agencies. During this operation the whereabouts of numerous felons that were out of state was gathered from the community which led to their arrest.

In July 1994 the Vero Beach Police Department was investigating a homicide and a related shooting incident involving three suspects. Two of the suspects were chased by the Vero Beach Police Department into the Gifford community. We, the C.O.P.E. unit, made contact with the suspects families who then brought the suspects to

the Sheriffs office. The reason stated by the families for turning in the suspects was that they felt that they could trust the Sheriffs office.

In August 1994 after a police related shooting the community leaders joined forces with the C.O.P.E. unit in keeping the more volatile community members emotions in check. Once the Sheriff had held a community wide meeting to talk about the shooting there were none of the usual aftermaths associated with a police related shooting.

In 1995 there were six burglaries at a local school in the Gifford community. Based on information received from the community the suspect was apprehended and the property totaling approximately \$10,000.00 was recovered.

In May 1995 the Sheriffs office responded to a report of an armed robbery in which the suspect had shot at the elderly victim. While we, the Sheriffs office, was pursuing the suspect on foot numerous citizens, young and old alike, kept us informed as to the where about of the suspect until he was apprehended.

Since the start of the C.O.P.E. unit there have been numerous search warrants executed throughout the community based on information

given by the community. These warrants executed by the Narcotics unit and federal agencies led to the arrest of numerous drug dealers.

There are many more examples of community involvement that are too numerous to list. Probably the best example is the following;

When we first started the community -policing philosophy within the community we rarely saw anyone walking the streets except for the trouble makers, we rarely saw anyone sitting on their porches after dark as they did in the "good old days ", and we rarely saw the children playing in the streets. It was even rarer for the good citizens to stand up and point out the bad for fear of retaliation. Today we see the children playing. We see the good people walking the streets and sitting on their porches. Now we are getting more and more people to stand up and point out the trouble makers in the community.

This more than any numbers ever could shows that community -policing works.