CNA Spotlight

Engaging the Community as Partners in Public Safety
The Albany, New York Police Department's Neighborhood Engagement Unit

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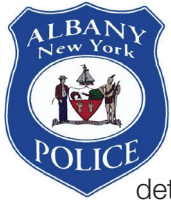
This report is part of a series highlighting innovative programs that have been implemented in some of the most progressive police agencies across the country. These reports will highlight some of the nation's most innovative best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterence; approaches to gun violence; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime. Each of these reports provides a background on the program, details important components of the program and the agency's approach, highlights the successes the agency has experienced as a result, and identifies ways other agencies can employ similar programs.

This report highlights the Albany (New York) Police Department's Neighborhood Engagement Unit. CNA worked closely with the Albany Police Department to develop this publication over the course of two years and spoke with numerous department personnel about the initiative.

Albany, New York Police Department

Chartered in 1686, the City of Albany—New York's capital—is one of the oldest municipalities in the United States.[1] Albany was home to 98,617 residents In 2016 and continues to grow.[2] Despite being the hub for a number of Fortune 500 companies, Albany falls below the state's and the nation's median household income levels and exceeds the nation's median poverty levels.[3] Yet Albany's economy—much of which is dependent on state government and health care services—is beginning to see a resurgence.

The Albany Police Department (APD) has approximately 530 employees, both sworn and nonsworn. The APD's ratio of sworn officers to city residents is 3.4 per thousand, greater than the national average of 2.4.[4] The APD's robust staffing enables it to go beyond answering calls for service to developing problem-solving techniques that address and protect Albany citizens' quality of life.

The department is organized into two primary divisions: Investigations and Patrol. The Investigations Division contains a number of specialized units, such as Community Response, Children and Family Services (Juvenile and

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1. City of Albany, "City History," The Official Site of the City of Albany, NY, accessed August 10, 2016, http://www.albanyny.org/Government/CityHistory.aspx.

2. FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the United States 2016," Table 26, accessed August 6, 2018, https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/tables/table-26/table-26-state-cuts/table-26-new-york.xls.

3. U.S. Census Bureau, "Quick Facts: Albany, New York," accessed August 10, 2016, http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/3601000,36001.

4. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Crime in the United States 2016," [see note 2].

Domestic Violence), Criminal Investigations, and Forensic Investigations, while the Patrol Division includes the Special Operations, Center Station, South Station, and Neighborhood Engagement units.

The evolution of the Albany Police Department

In fall 2009, the APD's leadership team—through input from the community and city government—recognized the need for a change in its approach to fulfilling its mission and serving the people of Albany. Rates of nearly all Part I crimes had decreased over the previous five-year period, yet the community perception was that crime was rampant and that the streets of Albany were unsafe; the community also expressed a general feeling of distrust of the APD. To address the community perceptions of safety and to build trust with the community, the APD embraced a community policing philosophy.

To help enact this philosophy, the APD created the department's first strategic plan in 2012. It called for streamlining existing programs and creating new ones to effectively address crime, fear of crime, and quality-of-life issues, while enhancing community involvement and trust through collaboration, partnerships, and transparency. The strategic plan laid out four goals: Taking Back our Streets, Growing our Family, Healing Wounded Communities, and Winning over a Generation. Each new and existing plan, project, and policy within the department would now address one or more of the strategic goals: for example, while the Neighborhood Engagement Unit (NEU) predated the creation of the strategic plan, it now provides more targeted programs to address the goals of Taking Back Our Streets, Healing Wounded Communities, and Winning Over a Generation.

Figure 1. **The four goals laid out in the Albany Police Department's Strategic Plan**

| Taking back our streets | Growing our family | Healing wounded communities | Winning over a generation |

Source: CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2019. *Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative: Albany Police Department* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2019).
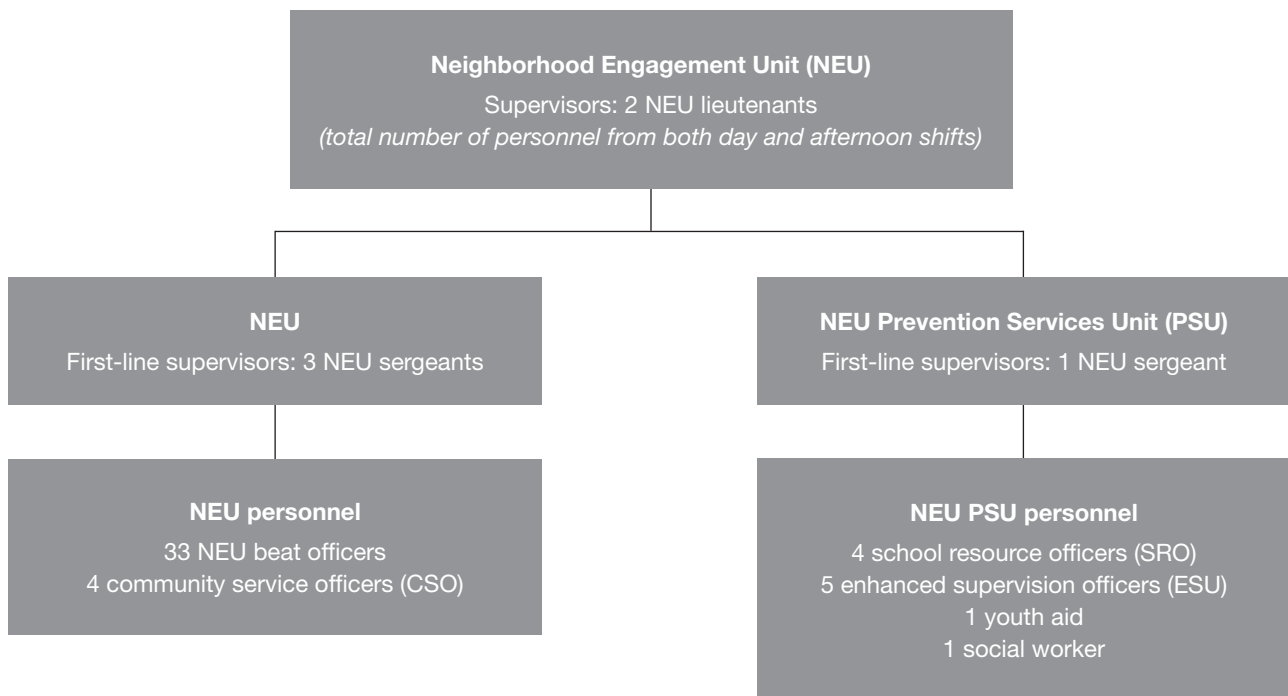
Neighborhood Engagement Unit

One of the APD's first steps under the community policing philosophy was to develop the Neighborhood Engagement Unit (NEU) in 2010. Recognizing the need to connect with city residents in a more meaningful way, the APD created the unit to reach at-risk populations within the city and to revolutionize the traditional beat. The NEU's mission is to promote a "problem-solving partnership with the community to best enhance the quality of life while reducing social harms and the fear of crimes within the city's neighborhoods."[5] To do this, the NEU collaborates with community residents to identify problems in the community and to develop solutions. NEU officers and personnel build and maintain problem-solving partnerships with the community, engage with community members and organizations, organize community and law enforcement events, and address neighborhood-level issues.

NEU officers do not have traditional patrol responsibilities; rather, they proactively identify problems in neighborhoods that affect the well-being and safety of residents and work with the community to identify andimplement solutions.

The APD focused on three objectives when developing the NEU. First, it built NEU beat areas around preexisting neighborhood associations. This strategy allowed the NEU to more easily partner with existing organizations and groups. It also created an environment of co-ownership

Figure 2. Neighborhood Engagement Unit personnel

Neighborhood Engagement Unit (NEU)
Supervisors: 2 NEU lieutenants
(total number of personnel from both day and afternoon shifts)

NEU
First-line supervisors: 3 NEU sergeants

NEU Prevention Services Unit (PSU)
First-line supervisors: 1 NEU sergeant

NEU personnel
33 NEU beat officers
4 community service officers (CSO)

NEU PSU personnel
4 school resource officers (SRO)
5 enhanced supervision officers (ESU)
1 youth aid
1 social worker

5. Lt. Michael Tremblay, "Community Policing in Albany," talk presented to CNA, August 18, 2016.

among the community and police on quality-of-life issues and crime. Second, the APD ensured the beat areas were small enough to be effectively patrolled by officers on foot or bicycle. By creating smaller beats, officers could interact with community members on a daily basis. Third, the APD reviewed crime data, noting hot spots to ensure that high-crime areas were adequately covered by NEU personnel.

Partnerships

The NEU's unique multidisciplinary makeup allows innovative problem solving to thrive. The NEU creates and participates in diverse community programing and connects with communities on a variety of levels. On average, the NEU participates in more than 500 meetings and events annually in partnership with neighborhood groups and community partners. Two of the NEU's most successful police-driven events—public forums and bicycle "rodeos"—have become hallmarks of the program.

Through the department's partnership with the Albany Community Policing Advisory Committee (ACPAC), the NEU hosts four public forums a year in different neighborhoods throughout the city. In each public forum, community members interact with the patrol officers assigned to their beats or neighborhoods to express concerns, identify quality-of-life issues, strengthen partnerships, build trust, initiate problem solving, and receive information on APD programs and resources.

The NEU partners with the Police Athletic League, which is staffed by both law enforcement and community members, to host annual bicycle rodeos for children throughout the city. At each bicycle rodeo, NEU personnel engage with neighborhood children to provide bicycle safety tips and teach riding skills. In addition, the NEU gives bicycles and helmets (provided by department funds and donations) to low-income children. In 2017, more than 200 children participated in the APD's bicycle rodeos. During these events, NEU team members further the strategic goal of Taking Back Our Streets in two ways: by creating a positive environment for children and their families to interact with officers, and by teaching bicycle safety practices

Beyond police-driven initiatives, the NEU also participates in programs and events organized by the community. Because of its unique makeup, the NEU can reach a broad audience. For example, because there are four school resource officers (SRO) in the NEU, other members of the NEU have more access to school activities, and more ability to support after-school programs, tutoring programs, and summer league sporting events. This positive working relationship with the school district has also allowed the NEU to present educational safety sessions in multiple middle and high schools.

Since the NEU's inception, NEU personnel have been invited to numerous community-led meetings. Members of the NEU also attend regular neighborhood association and neighborhood watch meetings. The NEU also strives to create positive police-community interactions by participating in events such as community clean-ups and block parties. These types of events also allow community members to informally discuss quality-of-life issues and work with the police to solve problems.

Challenges

Although community and city leadership, including the mayor's office, consistently show their support for the NEU, the APD continues to work on overcoming three primary challenges. First, the APD has experienced significant turnover through promotions, transfers, retirements, injuries, and bids for different assignments throughout the implementation and maintenance of the NEU, which has affected programmatic consistency, despite, new officers

filling vacancies and embracing the NEU's mission. Second, in order to be sure that NEU officers were implementing the unit's mission consistently the APD has had to be mindful of the effectiveness of its NEU supervisors. Third, the APD struggled with inspiring officers and personnel to take ownership of the NEU program when it was initially implemented because officers were selected for assignment to the NEU based on seniority rather than aspiration to work closely with community members.

Successes

Since its inception, the NEU has built and maintained successful partnerships to address quality of life issues with businesses, community organizations, colleges and universities, and activists throughout Albany. For example, the NEU has developed productive partnerships with colleges and universities including the State University of New York (SUNY) at Albany, the College of St. Rose, Albany Medical College, Albany Law School, Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, and Sage College of Albany to enhance safety and security and improve quality of life for their students. During orientation sessions, the NEU delivers safety presentations to all incoming freshman at SUNY Albany and St. Rose. The presentations are followed by an open forum, which allows students and police officers to discuss concerns about police and student issues, as well as touch on general campus safety tips.

The NEU has also partnered with local activists and businesses to address specific neighborhood quality of life issues. The Oak Street neighborhood is adjacent to APD headquarters and for years lacked a neighborhood park. Children who lived in the neighborhood would regularly travel to other parts of the city to play in parks, especially during the summer. This created a public safety issue, as children were crossing busy streets with minimal supervision. Officers in the NEU worked with neighborhood

residents to raise funds to transform an abandoned parking lot into a park. The park now serves as a home base for outreach programs for low-income children who reside in the Oak Street neighborhood.

Figure 3. Oak Street lot before construction.

Figure 4. Rendering of Oak Street park design

In the Lark Street neighborhood, the APD attributes decreased gang-related shootings to the good work of the NEU and the increased positive police presence in the neighborhood. The NEU regularly organizes pop-up events throughout the city in partnership with other APD departments, ACPAC, the Police Advisory Board, faith-based organizations, local business, and the mayor's office. These events are strategically held in neighborhoods with

high crime rates. In one such event, the NEU and partici-
pating partners held a barbeque in the heart of the high-
crime Lark Street neighborhood, which is known for its
gang activity. Community members, including children
and teens, joined officers in enjoying food, games, sports,
and an outdoor movie. The officers attending the barbeque
event that day recognized multiple known gang members
in attendance and initiated positive interactions with them.
There were no gang-involved shootings in the Lark Street
neighborhood in 2017; the APD believes that positive
police presence in the neighborhood—including the NEU-
driven pop-up events—has helped to drive crime down.

Moving forward

Recognizing the success of the NEU, the APD has built a
formative sustainability plan to solidify and continue its
growth. It has codified the unit within its standard operat-
ing procedures and incorporated it into the department's
overall function as a department and organizational chart.
In addition, the APD has developed training to emphasize
the NEU's core mission of the NEU. NEU members receive
40 hours of specialized training on problem-oriented
policing, community-oriented policing, cultural sensitiv-
ity and awareness, quality of life, and fear of crime at
the beginning of their assignments to the NEU; they
also receive a yearly eight-hour training to reinforce
these principles.

Understanding the need to adapt as the City of Albany
changes, the APD has developed goals for ensuring NEU's
continued success and growth:

1. Continue to use problem-oriented policing tactics and
   the Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment
   (SARA) model as the primary methodologies to
   address neighborhood issues.

2. Increase responsiveness to citywide quality-of-
   life issues.

3. Establish a community-oriented policing training
   protocol for all department personnel, to be deployed
   quarterly.

4. Measurably enhance relationships with the commu-
   nity to improve public perceptions of the APD and the
   quality of services delivered.

5. Enhance community group involvement in already-
   established programs and assist in developing new
   police-community programs.

6. Require NEU officers to respond to high-profile inci-
   dents in their assigned beat. For instance, if there is a
   shooting, stabbing, or other major incident, NEU offi-
   cers should make every effort to make contact with the
   community and victims during their next shift.

7. Require NEU officers to participate in the Capital Dis-
   trict Transportation Authority (CDTA) and the APD's
   Cop Ride Program—an initiative aimed at increasing
   police visibility and awareness on public transporta-
   tion. The APD strives for a significant presence on the
   public bus systems and seeks to further develop its
   relationship with the CDTA.

8. Increase public awareness of individual beat officers.
   While beat officers are visible, many residents and
   organizations still don't know their officers by name.

9. Require all NEU members to distribute a minimum of
   10 business cards per week to community members.

10. Develop additional quarterly training to enhance con-
    sistency, accountability, and reliability.

Lessons for Other Agencies

The APD has learned many lessons while developing and implementing the NEU that are helpful for other agencies implementing similar models. The department's key lessons include the following:

- **Engage the community in informal settings.** Community events, such as block parties, provide opportunities for informal communication between community members and police officers. These conversations are often catalysts for positive changes in attitudes and expectations, and provide the foundation for partnerships and innovative problem solving. The goal of community engagement should be for police to become part of the community they are policing.

- **Supervision is the key.** Supervisors should ensure all officers are actively engaging with the community and should encourage officers to initiate informal engagement.

- **Use an interview process to ensure ownership when selecting officers for the unit, and do away with seniority-based positions.** Implementing an interview process, a step usually restricted to review boards, is a more effective selection method.

- **Create flexible hours.** Officers' hours should be flexible so that their shifts can be adjusted to meet the needs of the neighborhood. This will allow officers to attend after-school activities or early-morning community meetings that may occur outside their usual shift hours.

- **Develop frequent training to reinforce principles and practices.** Instituting training beyond one eight-hour block annually will foster continuity among new officers and consistency in reinforcing principles.

- **Strive to establish trust and confidence.** of the police in the communities who have been most distrustful, through non-enforcement activities.

- **Include fair, inclusive, and transparent policies, practices, and procedures in Strategic Plan.** Successful crime-reduction strategies require a roadmap for future policing initiatives to insure sustainability and transform culture over time.

- **Embrace community policing as a philosophy and joint problem solving as a way of doing business.** Rather than seeing crime as the impetus for implementing police strategies and tactics, view the reduction of violent crime, disorder, and fear as a continuous collaborative responsibility, one calling for transparency and authenticity.

- **Openly discuss and embrace a community policing philosophy and guardian mentality in everyday police activities.** To be effective, this message needs to be consistently delivered and reinforced. The culture of policing is defined by the leadership and their commitment to practices that guide individual officers.

- **Provide officers with the tools to engage the community.** Due to fears, misconceptions, or reservations, starting a conversation can be difficult for both officers and community members. Providing officers with the tools to prompt engagement helps officers interact with the community in a friendly, informal manner that builds relationships and reduces fears. The items, such as basketballs, footballs, kick balls, Frisbees, jump ropes, or sidewalk chalk, should contain the agency's logo and be left with the community member. To keep this practice in effect, these engagement items should be both handed out at events and kept in police cars and resupplied on a regular basis.

- **Involve department personnel and community members in the development and implementation of innovative strategies.** Community members may suggest many helpful activities that could be implemented almost immediately and at little to no cost. Equally important, by employing a receptive and inclusive process, the agency instantly achieves buy-in to projects and informal champions who will advocate for them.

- **Partner with government and private agencies, such as parks and recreation departments, to target crime prevention programs in high crime areas.** These partnerships can lead to improving parks or streets, revitalizing dilapidated houses, and building new homeless shelters. Projects like these can give people in the community somewhere safe to come and build relationships with the beat officer or patrol officers who work the area.

- **Lastly, do not assume that you know what the community thinks about the police or what changes they may want to see.** Instead, implement a formal mechanism for gauging community perceptions, satisfaction, and ideas on a regular basis and then make appropriate changes based on these findings. If you do not measure something, then you cannot effectively change it.

About CNA

CNA is a not-for-profit organization based in Arlington, Virginia. The organization pioneered the field of operations research and analysis 75 years ago and, today, applies its efforts to a broad range of national security, defense, and public interest issues, including education, homeland security, public health, and criminal justice. CNA applies a multidisciplinary, field-based approach to helping decision-makers develop sound policies, make better-informed decisions, and lead more effectively.

The Albany (New York) Police Department's Neighborhood Engagement Unit (NEU) was created in 2010 to collaborate with residents and existing neighborhood organizations to address problems in the community. This Spotlight report describes the program's background and implementation and gives advice for other agencies considering similar programs.

This series of Spotlights highlights innovative programs implemented in progressive police agencies across the country. These reports showcase best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; approaches to gun violence; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime.

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