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Police as Contributors to Healthy Communities: Aiken, South Carolina

SYNOPSIS

In Aiken, South Carolina, community policing has led to numerous innovative programs that have contributed to a healthy community. The MOMS and COPS (Managing Our Maternity System with Community Oriented Policing System) program has played a significant part in the county's 50% decrease in infant mortality since 1989 and contributed to Aiken's designation as an All-America City in 1997. Other programs include a mentoring program for at-risk teen girls; instant crime reporting with donated cellular phones; seminars for seniors to alert them to scams and common crimes; demolition of unsafe homes; free installation of smoke detectors; a child ID program; and parental education on child brain development.

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At the time this article was written, Ms.

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“Dedicated to the Community” is the slogan voted upon by the Aiken, South Carolina, Department of Public Safety (ADPS) to express its commitment to community policing in a city where the Healthy Communities movement has been active for a decade. The two movements, one originating from the city's need to reduce neighborhood crime, and the other from a grassroots effort to reduce infant mortality, work together to extend the abilities and resources of both groups.

Community policing in Aiken began in the fall of 1993 with two teams of two-man bike patrols in at-risk neighborhoods in this city of 25,000. The team of officers in the Smith-Hazel section of town, an area beset with drug crimes and assaults, began riding their bikes through the streets, meeting the neighbors, setting up a small office in the city recreation center, and rapidly drawing a Pied Piper-like following of neighborhood kids on their bikes. The officers surprised residents by playing basketball with the teens, helping resolve landlord disputes, and replacing

light bulbs and carrying groceries for elderly people. Within months, the officers were accepted as part of the community.

At the same time, they began effecting drug arrests by gliding up on their bicycles on unsuspecting dealers hawking their wares on street corners. That technique, combined with undercover video surveillance from cars by other officers, soon had an impact on the street traffic in drugs. The final blow to the local dealers was the involvement of the children, who eagerly called out directions and descriptions to their new heroes, the pursuing bike officers. Within a year, drug crimes in the area dropped by 70%.

THE BIRTH OF AIKEN'S "MOMS AND COPS" PROGRAM

One of the community policing officers, Sgt. Karl Odenthal, faced with a troubling case of a runaway teen with a sick infant, sought the advice of City Councilwoman Karen Papouchado, who was also director of Growing into Life, Aiken's Healthy Communities collaborative. Out of that contact, MOMS and COPS was born. Under MOMS and COPS, officers are trained in the basics of prenatal care by nurses from the Health Department. The two-hour training covers everything from the number of recommended prenatal care visits to signs of preterm labor and fetal movement monitoring. Then police officers introduce themselves to pregnant women they encounter in their neighborhoods and ask them about their prenatal care. When the officers find cases where that care is insufficient, they alert their Health Department nurse contact and provide the pregnant woman with a list of doctors and even help with arranging transportation and child care.

Says David "Chico" Nieves, one of Aiken's first community policing specialists: "A lot of times these are young women who are afraid and don't know what to do, so we show them some concern, and we show them we are trying to help, and we let them know there is somebody who cares. They might be afraid of us at first, but if we stay with them and get to be their friends, we can turn things around."

Aiken County's infant mortality rate has dropped by more than 50% since 1989, and the City Council acknowledges that the MOMS and COPS initiative is responsible for a significant part of that decrease. Women in the community-policing areas are also seeking more information about pregnancy issues.

As the officers' new role became more comfortable to them (early in the program, one officer said that he'd "rather work a homicide than try to get another pregnant teenager into prenatal care") and familiar to the community, other avenues of improving health appeared. When Aiken County Coroner Sue Townsend sounded a warning that the high number of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) deaths was, in fact, masking a problem of improper sleeping environments leading to unnecessary infant deaths, MOMS and COPS began distributing sleeping wedges to new mothers in their neighborhoods

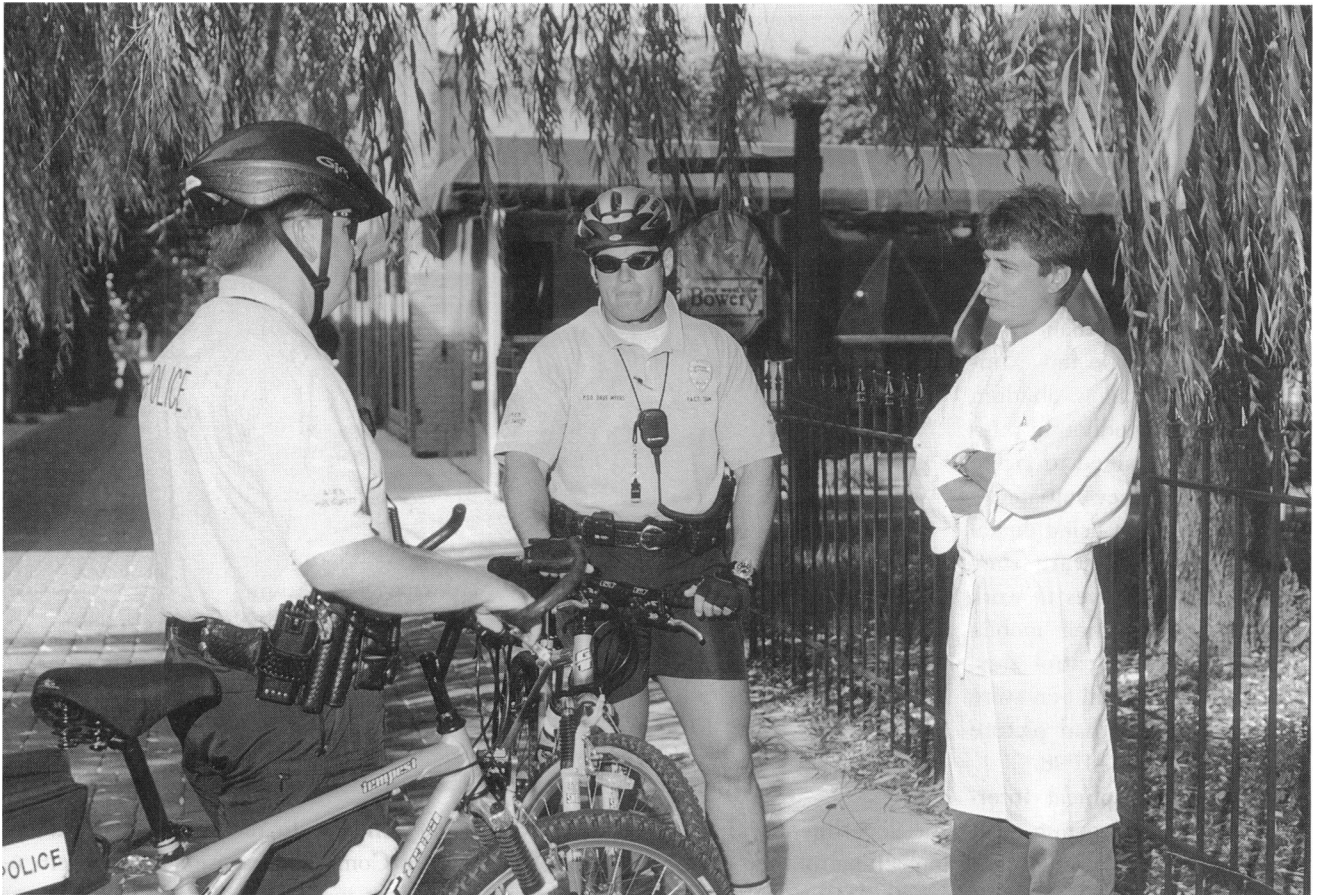
and obtained more training in the proper handling of newborns and infants. Reporting back that many grandmothers were advising that their grandbabies be put to sleep on their stomachs (a major cause of infant death), the local hospital, Aiken Regional Medical Centers, began grandparenting classes to teach the safer sleeping position while Growing into Life promoted the program, known as "Back to Sleep," throughout the community.

MOMS and COPS won the South Carolina Innovation in Government award in 1998, was a semi-finalist in the Innovations in American Government competition in 1996, was selected as an Exemplary National Program by the Commission on Accreditation

for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), and was one of the three programs that won the All-America City award for Aiken in 1997. The program operates at no cost to the city since it is an extension of its community service.

ADPS officers also serve as substitute teachers and as resource officers in the public schools. ADPS received a grant to start a mentoring program for at-risk teen girls. Seeing a need to protect children and adults in areas often closed to them by Department of Social Service (DSS) regulations, ADPS also obtained a grant for an officer to work at the local DSS site to assist families with active cases. This has allowed children removed from their homes to attend their usual school, has permitted

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Officers Kirk Owens (left) and Dave Myers pause to chat with local business owner Sam Erb.

greater cooperation in domestic assault situations (Aiken has an electronic warning system for victims of domestic violence), and has lowered the number of elder abuse cases.

ADPS also began the Seniors and Law Enforcement Together (SALT) program, in which seniors are trained to assist officers as school crossing guards, mentors, and ticketers of those who violate handicapped parking laws. The SALT volunteers also participate in the cell phone alert system ADPS began to allow instant crime reporting by citizens armed with donated cellular phones.

AIKEN'S POLICE JOIN THE HEALTHY COMMUNITIES MOVEMENT

Once officers had the "vision" of the Healthy Communities concept, they began expanding their scope of work. When they saw the need for general health care in at-risk neighborhoods, they offered a small office for Health Department nurses to use. This interested the Aiken Housing Authority director, who then contracted with the

Weston Rural Health Clinic to open a full clinic in a three-bedroom public housing unit. This began running at full capacity within months of opening.

Healthy families need good housing, and Aiken's officers saw too many substandard units and vacant properties in their patrol zones. They worked with City Council and staff to streamline enforcement codes and to allow city crews to demolish buildings for a minimal fee that encouraged absentee owners to agree to the process. During 1998–1999, the city inspected 130 dwellings for code violations and demolished nine unsafe homes. The officers also worked on 244 unsightly lots, enlisting the aid of neighborhood residents for highly publicized community clean-up days.

ADPS officers are trained as first responders, and they now carry defibrillators to assist with heart attack victims on the scene. They used the devices 12 times in 1998 and were credited with directly saving two heart attack victims.

As the officers see issues that have an impact on community health, they partner with organizations or develop model programs to address the needs. They have installed

Police Lieutenant Carl Odenthal (left) and Officer Kirk Owens speak with a young boy at a public swimming pool.

5,000 smoke detectors at no cost to the citizens, and they have taught more than 1,000 citizens how to use fire extinguishers. They allow children to name the bloodhound puppies who are trained to locate lost kids, and they initiated a child ID program using digital cameras and software they developed themselves to work in concert with their mobile data terminals in patrol cars. More than 300 children were fingerprinted and had picture IDs made in 1997–1998.

Their Geographical Information Systems program allows the department and the public to see what crimes occur in each patrol zone each month. Based in part on this information, 12 new Neighborhood Crime Watches were begun. A website (www.aiken.net/public_safety/index.htm) provides a wide array of information and interactive services. The website was selected as an Exemplary National Program by CALEA in 1998.

The newest programs include WET (Water Education Team), developed to educate children and parents about water safety, and Senior Seminars, which alert older citizens to scams and common crimes and provide health protection tips. Vials for Life, a program in which residents place their prescription medicines in special vials in the refrigerator for easy identification in case of emergency, was begun by an officer who saw this as a health need, especially for the elderly. One officer, stationed in a public housing neighborhood, brought his church into the project with Operation Explosion, a half-day extravaganza of music, activities, and entertainment for children. The group brings into the neighborhood a truck that contains stage sets, toys, and a troupe of church members who interact with the local children and parents. Aiken's horse patrol is on hand to talk about animal treatment, and area agencies provide information on local services. This event takes place each month in several neighborhoods.



ADPS officers continue to redefine their duties in terms of the Healthy Communities vision. The aforementioned programs do not include the Little League teams they coach, the charities they support, the neighborhood meetings they attend, the off-duty supervision they provide at local cinemas and events, or the teddy bears they keep in their trunks for young victims of trauma.

ADPS officers' newest program, Thrive by Three, will allow them to educate parents on the need for proper brain development in children ages birth to 4 years. Officers will buy appropriate books and developmental toys through a grant from Stone Soup, a coalition of neighborhood groups, and will distribute them at monthly meetings where child development experts will also be available to measure developmental advances of the participating children.

There seems to be no end to the creative approaches community-policing officers can design to improve the living conditions and health of the residents of Aiken. One key to their success is the freedom they are given by the administration to do what they think is needed in their patrol zones. A second key is the culture of acceptance that is reinforced by diversity training and weekly education sessions that cover every aspect of community life. The third key is the support of the citizens, who know that they are an integral part of the team that creates a healthy community. ■