

**HERMAN GOLDSTEIN  
EXCELLENCE IN  
PROBLEM-SOLVING  
AWARD SUBMISSION**

**"Abington Citizens' Police  
Academy"**

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## "Abington Citizens' Police Academy"

Abington Township, a first class township in Montgomery County Pennsylvania, is a diverse community serving as home to 56,000 residents living in an area of approximately 15 square miles. Abington is policed by a department comprised of 92 sworn officers and 20 full-time civilians.

The police department serving Abington has an open recruitment policy; officers have been hired from as far away as Washington, DC. Many of the police officers hired within the last 15 years are not, nor have they ever been, Abington residents.

The loss of the resident police officer yielded a loss of community history and a cultural difference.

### WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?

This cultural difference; both in perception and in reality separated the officers of the department from the citizens they served.

This cultural difference manifested itself in several ways. The most obvious manifestation - and the stereotypical difference - was the perception as held by the police officer that "they" the citizen, have no concept as to what "we" the police do.

## **FOR WHOM WAS THIS A PROBLEM?**

It was a problem for the police as the perceptions held by the police, of **the** community were often inaccurate and unnecessarily negative. The police officers regularly espoused a "we - they" mentality. In addition to this mind set, there also existed a feeling of isolation. Officers felt that the community under-appreciated, and lacked a sense of empathy for the police functions.

It was also a problem for the community as the perceptions held by the community, of the police department were parallel to those held by the officers. Citizens felt that their police department was estranged from the individual residents, and lacking a sense of responsiveness to the needs of those residents. Many citizens had never even seen an officer out of, and distanced from, a patrol vehicle.

Due in part to perceived and real issues the police department was not garnering the full support of the community, and the community was not availing itself of the full service of the police department.

## **HOW DID THE DEPARTMENT HANDLE THE PROBLEM IN THE PAST?**

The problem lay largely unaddressed for many years. Once the philosophy and practicality of community-oriented policing was made a major goal of the department, mechanisms such as "park and walks" and school reading programs were instituted to better acquaint the citizens with the officers. These programs were successful but limited.

## **WHAT INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED ABOUT THE PROBLEM?**

Once the community-oriented policing philosophy became a practical day-to-day function, problem-oriented policing in philosophy and practice followed. With this link of community- and problem-oriented policing came more contact, which generated questions about the functions of, and the services available through the police department. As these questions were asked in greater volume and to a greater depth, Abington Police determined that a formal system to educate our citizens would be both timely, and fitting.

## **WERE THERE ANY DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING THE INFORMATION?**

No. Information had been gathered from willing and articulate members of the community as conveyed to concerned, open-minded members of the police department.

## **WHAT WAS THE GOAL OF THE PROBLEM SOLVING EFFORT?**

The **goals** of the problem-solving effort were three-fold; all three, equal in importance.

First: It was important that police officers were provided the opportunity to become even more visible and more participative in the community. This visibility and participation was followed by empowered officers seizing the opportunity to educate the public about policing, its constraints, its activities, its variables and its functions.

Second: The Police Department wished to create an educational system, to be named the Citizens' Police Academy, which would become an interactive program designed to educate the public about it's police department policies, procedures, regulations, the criminal justice system and ways through which the citizens and police working together might help to reduce crime and improve the quality of life for all.

The program allows members of the police department and citizens of the community to meet and share ideas and information. It enables police and community members to interact in a very positive and pro-active setting.

The instruction provides an increased awareness of the police function, so as to dispel suspicions and misconceptions and to increase police/community rapport through this educative process.

Third: To identify the natural leaders in the community and develop them as partners and resources for future police and community projects such as block/neighborhood/town watch programs, volunteers for community events, and as advocates for the police department in the community.

#### WHAT STRATEGIES WERE DEVELOPED TO REACH THE GOAL?

- Garner commitment from command personnel of the police department.
- Gain support from line supervisors.
- Identify funding sources.

- Encourage participation on a department-wide level.
- Solicit support from community resources.
- Engender support from government leaders.
- Recruit members of the community willing to participate.
- Create an alumni association.

**WHAT AGENCIES HELPED THE POLICE DEPARTMENT IN ACHIEVING THAT GOAL?**

- Abington Township's Community Development group provided initial funding in support of this program through the Community Development Block Grant fund.
- The local District Justice participated as an instructor.
- Duncanville Police Department's existing Citizens' Police Academy program was used as a foundation for our program.
- Cooperation from adjacent police departments in sharing police equipment.

**WAS THE GOAL ACCOMPLISHED?**

Yes.

First: Twenty three (23) officers from all levels of the department selected their subject matter, prepared an outline/lesson plan, composed a biography; and took responsibility for presenting the material to the class; providing all necessary equipment and materials necessary for that class. Officers also solicited and acted upon feedback and critiques of their respective classes, then updating and amending their presentation as appropriate.

Second: After attending 30 intense classroom hours, our citizen police academy students left the academy with an in-depth knowledge of the resources, capabilities of and judiciary constraints on the police department. They also learned that police officers are people, too. Academy participation engendered a feeling of trust and a positive relationship both with the academy attendees and the participative officers. This trust and this relationship is spreading throughout our community through the words of the alumni.

Third: The alumni have enthusiastically supported police, on a positive level through their volunteer spirit in community activities such as block/neighborhood/town watch programs, and fund raising efforts for police/community programs in the township. More importantly, the alumni have Stepped forward with confidence to support "their police officers" on controversial issues.