

ABSTRACT

From mid-1997 onwards, Levin township was plagued with a swarm of teenage parties, the aftermath of which left a community bitter, suspicious and cynical towards its youth and their capacity to dignify themselves

The problem facing the community centred on a persistent pattern of social behaviour by young men and women. They would organise teenage social functions in diametric opposition to what the community at large saw as a basic standard of behaviour and accountability. Inevitably as this pattern began to become predictable parties descended into chaos.

Police naturally identified a problem based upon their attendance at ever increasing scenes of disorder. Local school officials reported their concerns based upon first hand knowledge of the 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. Even the local media whose bread and butter is sensationalism, had a feeding frenzy resulting in poor press for a town which by and large was realising its potential.

An analysis was done which took account more of opinion, perception and community spirit than statistical empiricism and it was clear that School Principals, Police, local politicians, parents, hall committees and the like were all speaking the same language.

On a regular basis for at least six months, Levin's milieu was a cauldron of action and re-action with the Police and local community at the sharp end of the stick.

Weekends were approached by all with trepidation as history seemed to be dictating that anarchy would again raise its ugly head at some yet unseen teenage get-together.

The Police response was simple. Community problem equals community solution. To be successful all involved had to be consulted and a partnership of trust and respect built up where information sharing could flow.

A formal structure was placed on the process in the form of a Community Partnership Agreement plan.

Police identified key resources in the community and began to utilise them within their field of expertise. Media representatives channelled invitations to the consultative table by publishing articles. Venue booking offices reported first to Police before confirming hall bookings. School officials briefed their 'underground' and advised Police of details of known up-coming socials.

All stakeholders willingly co-operated and committed to a personally signed action plan which resulted from lengthy consultation.

The results were breath taking. No party subject to the Community Partnership Agreement since November 1997 when this process reached its zenith has featured in anything but good press; no call-outs, no arrests and no problems.

Through community oriented policing, with continued positive media coverage, delegation and ownership of the problem, Levin will maintain its dignity and resume the mantle of a safe and supportive environment for all its citizens.

PROBLEM ORIENTATED POLICING

INTRODUCTION

As we describe ourselves changing from a force to a service, community policing increasingly holds an exciting challenge of realising the full potential of community support and partnership with the Police.

There are a number of definitions of a community, however for the purpose of this problem a community is defined as a group of people who are linked by some common interest or who share some common territory.

In this case the community of interest the Police became involved with was a number of community groups whose common focus was the youth of a small rural town in New Zealand.

Levin Police recognised that their resources were limited and their ability to deal with any problems had to be effected within current budgets and constraints.

It was recognised from any early stage that the most efficient and effective method of tackling a problem was to prevent the problem.

Police efforts should be directed towards prevention as opposed to a re-active philosophy based on a fire brigade approach to policing.

The approach taken by Police in this problem solving model was guided and is consistent with the principles of the New Zealand Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989.

These principles must be taken into account when exercising any power under the Act. It is not suggested that Police were gaining statutory authority for their actions during this problem orientated policing, we were simply adhering to the principles and spirit as sign-posts to guide our actions.

"Families should participate in decisions effecting children and young persons"

"Where possible the relationship between a child or young person and his or her family should be maintained and strengthened"

"Consideration must always be given to how a decision will effect the welfare of a child or young person and also to how it will effect the stability of the family"

"Consideration should be given to the wishes of the child or young person"

"The support of the parents, guardians, or care-givers and of the child or young person should be obtained where possible"

"The child or young person's sense of time should be a factor in making and the implementation of decisions wherever practicable"

(The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989, Section 5 (a) - (f), pg.16
-17)

The problem Levin Police faced was out of control teenage parties with little consultation and assistance from Police, parents, or the community in general.

Aggravating features included clear breaches of the Sale of Liquor Act, in that alcohol was readily available to under-age drinkers and party goers with the inevitable result being public disorder and an escalation in anti-social behaviour.

In a rural town of no more than twenty thousand people and a Police population during the night shift period of a Sergeant and three Constables, near riot situations stretched Police resources beyond normal capabilities. Had this been an isolated incident Police may not have embarked on a problem solving approach focussing on long-term resolution.

The tragedy was that this was not an isolated incident and had the hallmarks of becoming a common occurrence in a small community. The situation could be likened to a festering boil, which was lanced with regular monotony however continued to hinder its host.

SCANNING

During 1997, teenage parties that had been described in the media as riots had occurred in Levin. On at least one occasion drunken youths littered the streets, along with the bottles and missiles that had been thrown at Police who were trying to restore law and order within the neighbourhood.

On one occasion eleven people, including eight youths, were reported in the media as having been arrested and taken into custody.

Police recognised an issue was on the horizon for this near riot had occurred in the middle of winter and the teenage parties that are characteristic of the summer periods were only round the corner.

The community was at its wits end. One resident was reported as saying, "How long is it going to take before people say enough is enough?".

Other reports included descriptions of an explosive and dangerous situation with Police showing amazing restraint.

It appeared to Police and community members that without positive and long-term intervention escalation in disorder and unwarranted violence may rapidly become the weekend norm.

The symptom was a public display of violence and disorder. It had been identified by Police, by the media, and by the community. Decisive action was called for and someone had to take responsibility.

The issues became apparent when front-line Police were confronted with rampaging teenagers on the streets of Levin. Minimum staff and maximum disorder were a recipe for disaster and affirmative and positive problem solving was required.

Reports from the front-line filtered through to management and a strategic approach to the problem was investigated.

It became apparent that the number of youths and other people being arrested and taken into custody as a result of out of control riotous parties was on the rise. This had the potential to lead to the eventual increase in court appearances, convictions and the stigma which results from being dealt with by the Police

ANALYSIS

Schools and Police were both concerned about the escalation in violence, disorder, and alcohol related incidents occurring within the community as a result of the out of control teenage parties.

Police were called several times to one function during October 1997. On the second visit they removed an air rifle from a thirteen-year-old youth who had allegedly pointed it at another.

Descriptions of an uncontrollable 'riot' appeared in the media. Neighbours, Police, and school officials were becoming increasingly concerned.

A Horowhenua College. Principal was reported in the media as saying, "A number of young people believe that to have a good time they needed to be drunk.". This was indicative of the problem facing Police.

To help address the problem a community committee had been formed comprising of community groups, schools, and Police. The Levin Police were in discussion with local media as well as informal and formal discussions between staff. There was no doubt a problem existed within the community. Somebody had to take control and the Police assumed the mantle of responsibility.

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August, September and October 1997 were months where accurate and adverse media coverage continued on the front page of the Levin Chronicle, describing teenage drunks, riotous parties and a problem out of control.

It was disturbing for the community to learn that a firearm had been in the possession of a thirteen-year-old youth at one particular incident.

Police felt that there were a number of ways in which the issues could be addressed but a pro-active and preventative philosophy was going to yield the richest reward. To that end a strategic approach to policing the problem was initiated.

We learnt from and considered the philosophy of broken windows. "Broken windows are a metaphor for the deterioration of neighbourhoods. A broken window that goes unrepaired is a statement that no one cares enough about the quality of life in the neighbourhood to bother fixing the little things that are wrong." (Walker, S. Broken Windows and Fractured History, pg.382)

Police took their responsibilities seriously and decided that Levin was not going to be a community of 'broken windows'. Teenagers are the future of the community and a minority of that future was in decay.

There were a number of harms that Police identified during the analysis phase of their approach. Troubled and drunken youths, littering and loitering the streets of Levin, was a recipe for disaster. They were on a slide to nowhere with a court appearance and conviction if not a probability, almost a certainty.

The mayhem that ensued included the potential for assaults, drunken driving, disorderly behaviour, and intentional damage. However these pale in comparison to the tarnished reputation that the Levin community was suffering as a result of adverse media coverage.

The reality was that a minority within the community was causing a great deal of strife, anguish and adverse publicity within a community of caring and responsible people.

The Police have a responsibility to maintain law and order and an innovative approach was required to curb this tide of violence and disorder and to regain control of a minority of youth and the streets of the town.

Prior to adopting the problem solving approach, Police were in re-active mode. '111' was the call and the Police response was all available staff on duty to take action.

This could not continue weekend after weekend. Locally Police resources were unable to cope and reinforcements were called in from out of town.

The problem of teenage parties caused grief for the front-line staff and grief for management. Police resources were limited and other Police functions and services had to be delivered throughout the community on a twenty-four hour basis. We simply could not go on with our fire brigade re-active approach to a problem and a community that demanded a long-term solution.

Police management soon realised that time spent policing riotous teenagers would impact upon our service delivery within the community.

The policing service is a valuable asset to any community and when that service is diverted into areas which have the potential to be managed more effectively and efficiently, one has no option but to search for innovative alternatives.

Things came to a head late in October 1997 when a reporter from the local newspaper, Mr Peter Franklin, contacted the Inspector in charge of the Levin Police. Following discussions between the two it became apparent that positive action was required in order to turn the tide toward a more responsible and consultative approach to the problem of teenage parties in the town.

RESPONSE

Police management considered a number of alternatives. We could increase our staff and police the venues using a firm and positive hand, arresting those who commit offences, closing down the parties, and putting the perpetrators before the court.

We recognised that these interim actions would only deal with the incident. A solution was required to deal with the problems.

An immediate or interim response to the incident was not a solution. What we were looking for was a long-term solution to resolve the problem and not simply place a band-aid on a symptom.

It was recognised that in order to address the problem everyone involved had to be motivated towards a solution. Ownership and responsibility were key factors in ensuring not only the successful identification of the problem, but implementing an effective response.

Once again Police turned to The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989 and its objectives as set out in Section 4 of the Act.

The legislation's aim is to promote the well-being of children, young persons and their families in family groups by ensuring that where children or young persons commit offences "they are held accountable and are encouraged to accept responsibility for their behaviour" and "they are dealt with in a way that acknowledges their needs and that will give them the opportunity to develop in responsible, beneficial and socially acceptable ways. The challenge was to incorporate these objectives into a workable solution!

A re-active approach with the Team Policing Unit involving dogs and Constables in riot gear was not consistent with the principles or the objectives of a revolutionary piece of legislation whose spirit compelled us to approach this problem in a effective and efficient manner, focusing on a strategic resolution.

It was recognised that this was not easy road to follow. Rostering Police to deal with an incident and having the courts make decisions for us in these circumstances was seen as an abdication of our responsibilities to the community and to the principles and objectives of the Act.

This was an opportunity for Police to be innovative, to think laterally and to design a programme that would attack a problem at its root cause.

The key to our solution was its simplicity. The effectiveness of the programme is based on principles of equity, fairness, responsibility, accountability, co-operation, and consultation.

Police recognised that in order to address this problem we could not do it in isolation. A working and meaningful partnership had to be forged with those stakeholders who were prepared and committed to a resolution.

We identified the stakeholders as the teenagers who engage in such parties, their parents, the media, the business community, the residents of Levin, and the local Police. Leadership was required and this was a responsibility taken by the Police.

It was important to identify our target audiences and to that end the assistance of local media was enlisted. A media representative was consulted and as a result the local newspaper was enlisted as a vehicle to get the message across.

The key to the problem solving initiative was a community partnership agreement with all participants. This was a written document formulated by Police in consultation with teenagers, their parents and other interested parties.

The plan focussed upon the problem at issue, and the major goals which all interested parties had a vested interest in managing.

Open dialogue highlighted the appropriate response strategies to problems. Goals were documented thus providing a clear focus which sign-posted further discussion and ultimately agreement in relation to response strategies.

Each member of the consultative committee agreed to committing themselves to their own personal action plan, which when inter-woven with other members' commitments set up an effective strike force which would ameliorate any problems that the social function presented.

What was appealing about the document and the subsequent agreement was its simplicity and ease of approach, which lent itself to being understood by all who read it.

All members of the consultative committee signed the document in good faith and although the community partnership agreement workbook was not seen as a legally binding imperative, the goodwill of those in attendance on every occasion ensured that commitments agreed to were indeed carried out successfully.

Once family and young people understood the concerns Police had in respect of out of control teenage parties, then they were far more willing to compromise their position for the greater good both of themselves, their families, and their community.

In nearly every instance that an agreement was reached, the response, particularly from the youth involved, was both positive and supportive, in large part due to the fact that their wishes and needs had been consulted with.

Police communicated with their public through the medium of the local newspaper, and faxed messages some local schools. The booking offices of the halls that were to host the parties were also consulted by Police. The Police request was simply any teenage parties should be referred to our Youth Aid Section for consultation and input.

This networking throughout the community resulted in a number of approaches to the Police Youth Aid Section for advice and assistance in respect of a teenage party.

A strength of the approach was that those running the party became motivated towards its success. This was a common goal held by all parties and this common goal provided an anchor and firm foundation from which to launch a successful agreement, thereby enhancing the outcome.

The New Zealand Police Community Partnership Agreement (document) identifies the project facilitators, the participants, and then contains a section based on the problem solving model. Areas are set aside for scanning, analysis, response, and assessment whereby the problem or issue is identified, those involved are identified, the issues are fleshed out, and appropriate goals and strategies are agreed to under the response section.

A community partnership written agreement was completed as part of the package, whereby the problem, goals, responses, and responsibilities are formally documented. A starting date, completion date, and assessment date are contained within the document and all parties agree that in order to work towards the common goal a series of actions and initiatives will take place.

Actions that were agreed to include limitations on the number of people who will be invited to the function, the hours of operation, no door sales, no alcohol, no weapons or drugs, a minimum number of supervising adults to be present at all times, door security arrangements, and that the Police be afforded unlimited access to the event.

The Police agree to assist in the organising of the party, ensure public safety, regular visitations, positive media coverage if the party is successful, and have the right, ability, and co-operation of the function officials to close the event down if it is deemed that disorder behaviour or public safety is likely.

The formal contract binds all parties towards a common goal, which in essence is to ensure that all participants act responsibly with public safety being paramount.

The Police, who are represented by Constable Allan Ward (Youth Aid Section), and the parents of the teenager principally responsible for the party, enter into this agreement. Also a participant in the agreement are the teenagers who have taken responsibility to organise and set up the function.

Police consult with the media, neighbours, and the business community if necessary.

At the time of writing Police are involved in facilitating and putting together a Community Partnership Agreement for exchange students from Europe who intend to hold a farewell party for four of their colleagues in Levin on 6 June 1998.

It is imperative that this party is professionally planned, managed, organised and operated within our community as we have international visitors who will be left with a lasting impression of the town if anything less than a success ensues.

An integral part of the Police planning is to ensure that front-line staff are well aware of the party, its conditions, and the persons who assumed responsibility for various actions.

Levin Police Intelligence Section is fully briefed in order that they are able to brief front-line staff on events that are occurring within their tour of duty.

Contingency planning is also in place in the unlikely event that reinforcements are required within the area. The appropriate staff in adjoining areas are provided with adequate information should their services be required.

This is a problem solving initiative which has been successful to date and has employed the services of a wide range of community members acting in the common good of their neighbourhood. This has involved the Police, the business community, the youth, and parents of a medium sized rural town.

ASSESSMENTS

The results following the implementation of this problem solving model have been nothing less than spectacular. The headlines in the local newspaper have changed from describing teenage parties as riots to describing them as trouble-free events. This is within the space of a few months.

Headlines have included praise for the teenagers for the manner in which they have conducted themselves during the parties.

Parents have taken the time to personally visit the Youth Aid Officer and extend their appreciation for the manner in which Police have assisted in the planning and operation of what was once known as riotous behaviour.

At least one parent has taken the time to write in to the Police Station expressing gratitude and thanks as a result of this problem solving initiative.

The teenagers of Levin have benefited as the bad name and black cloud, which started to appear on the horizon as a result of riotous parties, has been removed. No longer are the headlines negative in respect of the town's youth, but they are full of praise.

On one weekend in March alone there were two parties organised with an estimated two hundred and sixty youths attending. Neither party presented any problem to the Police whatsoever and those who attended were formally congratulated in the media.

Had the problem solving initiative not been initiated then two hundred and sixty youths in Levin, attending a party based on previous experience had the potential to be nothing short of a recipe for disorder.

By community co-operation and consultation, coupled with Police taking a responsible and accountable stance, coupled with mature consultation involving teenagers, the tide of violence and the potential for criminal activity has taken a dramatic turn.

This has been recognised by the media, the public, the parents, and the youth of the town who are to be congratulated on their support and commitment to the project.

Parents have visited the station following the parties and , displayed a response of pleasure and praise at how well the functions had gone and how their teenagers returned home in one piece.

Whilst it could never be claimed categorically that Police and the community in partnership have reduced the crime rate along with the potential for road carnage as a result of this initiative, the inference is certainly there. Clearly alcohol and drugs, weapons and disorder are no longer the ethos of the teenage parties that are held in Levin.

The key to this problem solving initiative is its simplicity, coupled with the principles of responsibility, accountability, consultation and ownership of a problem.

This is an example of people working together with a common goal for the good of the community.

Electronics coupled with space-age technology was not employed to solve this problem. Instead 'we' returned to a basic policing philosophy and old-fashioned principles.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

Minimal resources in both manpower and time necessitated a distilled approach which with minimum intervention would achieve maximum results.

Only one Police Constable with Youth Aid experience was offered ownership of the problem, which simplified greatly the administrative commitments such a problem solving model would take.

This individual acted as a focus for the consultative process and in each partnership agreement he would manage the problem solving initiative by employing a Partnership Agreement Workbook.

This template simplified and formalised issues to the point where commitment and expectation were clearly high-lighted.

Indeed no training was required for the Executor of the Community Partnership Agreement Workbook as its simplicity was self-evident; a simplicity which undoubtedly contributed to the problem solving initiative's success.

The Community Partnership Agreement Workbook was combined with an Officer whose resources were simply good time management, consultative prowess and a drive to succeed - not for himself but for his community.

The result was astoundingly successful and of no financial or personal cost to the Officer concerned or his Police Department.

No losers; only winners and all based on a simple plan easily applied to any problem solving requirements.

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