

Keys to the City

Problem Solving in the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department

JUNE, 1993

VOLUME 2, No.4

Key Gasoline Drive-offs

Police Officer Gary Phelps of the **First District** was becoming frustrated by the volume of reports he was taking for the theft of gasoline from area services stations. To support his theory, Gary obtained print-outs from the **Computer Center** on gas drive-offs reported in the district. The greater number of these reports were filed by the Vickers and Clark stations. As you may have guessed, the policy of these stations did not require the customer to pay before pumping the gasoline.

Gary felt that a quick and simple solution to the problem was to initiate a pay first policy. When he approached **Mr. Lou Herla, Operational Manager for Vickers Oil Company**, and **Mr. Pat Hyder, Corporate Lawyer for the Clark Oil Company**, with this idea, he learned of their objections.

See Gas drive-offs p.3

Key Shootings

Knowing that guns are used to commit homicides in St. Louis more frequently than the national average, **Chief of Police Clarence Harmon** asked **Professor Scott Decker of the University of Missouri St. Louis** to help him better

understand the availability of guns in St. Louis. Professor Decker submitted a report to Chief Harmon in March of this year, reporting the results of a survey of over 1,300 prisoners arrested in St. Louis over a nine month period. (The survey was completed as part of the Drug Use Forecasting interview.)

Professor Decker drew the following conclusions, some of which should come as no surprise to St. Louis police officers. Arrestees claim guns are easy to get in the city and that they are cheap. The most preferred gun, the .38 caliber revolver, can be purchased for under \$100. Half of the arrestees said they could buy their guns legally and that they didn't have to go out of their neighborhoods to get them.

Over half of the arrestees said that they themselves had been shot at and almost a quarter of them had been wounded by a gun. These figures also significantly exceed the national average.

Guns seem to be equally available to citizens of all age groups and from all of the city's police districts. Arrestees from the **Fifth District**, however, claimed that they could easily get every type of gun asked about (.25, .32, .38, and .357 caliber; 9 millimeter; automatic weapons; and long guns). Younger arrestees (under age 19) claimed to have greater access to the full

range of guns, and they tend to be the ones most likely to be shot, wounded, and killed by guns. Because persons who are threatened with a gun or shot often seek similar revenge, Professor Decker advised Chief Harmon that special emphasis should be given to keeping guns away from younger criminals.

Prompted also by a rash of shootings one April night in the Fifth District, the Chief decided that he was personally going to open a COPS project to address this problem. On April 12th he met with some commanders from the Fifth District and agents from the **Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms**.

The ATF agents briefed the Chief on the high number of federally licensed gun dealers in St. Louis and particularly in the Fifth District. There are over a hundred licensed firearms dealers in the City of St. Louis alone.

The Chiefs objective for this project is to reduce the level of gun violence in the Fifth District. He released the results of Professor Decker's report to the news media to call the public's attention to the problem and to build support for forthcoming response strategies.

Lieutenant Robert Haug, the Area II Station Executive Officer, was asked to assist the Chief develop and implement a response plan.

see Shootings, p.2

Shootings from p.1

Elements of the plan thus far are:

(a) identifying individuals with firearms licenses in the district, (b) publicizing and staffing ATF's gun hotline to identify additional dealers, (c) enforcing city zoning laws that prohibit sales of guns from private residences, and (b) conducting compliance checks with licensed dealers.

During the first week of May a compliance team consisting of **ATF Agents Lawson and Vorhes** and **Fifth District Officers David Wingbermuehle and Brian Strehl** visited licensed firearms dealers in the target area. Uncovering violations of the license conditions, twenty-nine licenses were surrendered to the officers.

One thousand gun hotline fliers were distributed throughout the neighborhood, and ATF agents answered the hotline. This tactic, however, failed to yield many calls.

Service of a search warrant and the seizure of other guns during the week by patrol officers and detectives supplemented the enforcement campaign.

His project is ongoing and Chief Harmon is refining the indicators that will tell whether the project is actually reducing the level of gun violence in the district.

Noise (Trucks)

A citizen complained to her alderman about the noise from trucks driving illegally along Gustine Avenue between Gravois Avenue and Meramec

Street in the **Dutchtown and Tower Grove South** neighborhoods. The alderman told her that signs were posted along the street and there was little more that could be done if truck drivers chose to ignore them.

The woman turned to the **Traffic Safety Division** in the Police Department for help. **Police Officer Bob Hurster** agreed to look into the problem. The woman told Bob she was pleasantly surprised that the police would show this personal attention to her problem.

Bob began his analysis of the problem by surveying the area. He found that signs were in fact posted in the area, but significantly, they were posted only in the middle of this stretch of roadway and not near either of the intersections at Gravois or Meramec. Bob reasoned that it did little good to warn truckers to keep off a stretch of road they were already on.

To remedy this Bob called **Jim Suelmann**, the city's **Director of Streets**, and arranged to have the proper warning signs posted nearer the main intersections.

Using a tactic that had previously proven successful with a similar traffic problem on Goodfellow Boulevard between I-70 and West Florissant Avenue, Bob wrote an official letter addressed to the area's merchants. The letter reminded them of the law prohibiting commercial traffic on Gustine Avenue and asked them for their assistance. Specifically, he asked them to inform their own delivery drivers and the drivers of the companies with which they did business

about the law. He suggested they send specific delivery instructions to drivers telling them the legal and proper routes to take when making deliveries.

To monitor the impact of his work, Bob sat on this stretch of roadway for two continuous hours one morning, finding only one small truck violating the law. He also recontacted the woman who initiated the complaint and she told Bob that the situation has improved.

Child Fatalities

In 1991 the Missouri legislature passed House Bill 185 which created the **Child Fatality Review Project**. The legislation was prompted in part by a series of articles written by the **St. Louis Post-Dispatch** and by the longstanding concern of some physicians and criminal investigators about the failures of the system to properly recognize the true causes of many child deaths.

While this project has been publicized extensively in recent newspaper articles, it deserves special mention in this newsletter because it stands as a prime example of how a problem-oriented approach to public safety can be practiced at even the highest levels of government, and because St. Louis police officers have been in the forefront on the local **Child Fatality Review Panel (CFRP)**. **Detective Gary Guinn of the Child Abuse Section** is the chair of the panel in St. Louis.

In brief, the **CFRP** collects extensive, detailed data on the deaths of all children below the age of fifteen in the city. A

statewide panel analyzes the aggregate data from across the state. The local panel conducts a more thorough examination of those deaths meeting criteria suggesting that the initially determined cause of death might be incorrect. The panel analyzes trends and patterns of child deaths in order to improve the various agencies' abilities to both investigate child fatalities and adopt effective preventive strategies.

The state panel issued its first progress report in April and confirmed that more careful examination of child fatalities reveals that those caused by abuse and neglect may be as much as double the level previously suspected.

Because these deaths then become criminal matters, it is important to realize that the reported crime rate in this area will increase significantly, a positive indicator insofar as it helps reveal a hidden problem. According to **Dr. Coleen Kivlahan**, the state director of the **Department of Health**, "The first step toward prevention is understanding the problem."

Among the most significant findings reported in the state panel's first report are that child fatalities frequently occur when there is no adult supervision of the child and the children most likely to die from injuries, homicide, and sudden unexplained death are those living:

- with married parents
- with mothers having less than a high school education
- in environments marked by alcohol or drug use.

The most frequent cause of accidental deaths were automobile accidents, in which two-thirds of child victims were not in child safety seats or restrained by seat belts. (**Lieutenant Toni Filla** and the **Traffic Safety Division** have started a campaign to get more child safety seats properly installed. Many children are riding without any child safety seat, but even in those cars with these devices, an estimated 90% are improperly installed.)

Armed with this knowledge about the patterns of child fatalities, Detective Guinn is now looking for ways to improve the ability of even the initial investigators, often district police officers, to recognize suspicious deaths. He is exploring use of the new **CAD** Flagging system to alert officers who respond to child deaths if previous child fatalities have been reported in the same household.

More information on this groundbreaking project is available through Detective Guinn.

Gas drive-offs from p.1

The oil companies have long realized that a certain percentage of the population will not patronize a "pay first" establishment as long as they have a choice. Pump and pay establishments also enjoy an increase in profits, generated from the sale of confections inside the station. The increase in profits are usually enough to offset the loss of gasoline from drive offs.

Mr. Heria and Mr. Hyder also informed Gary that the

company policy on matters involving minor thefts was *not* to prosecute. The additional cost of prosecution, i.e. employee salaries for court appearance, additional staffing at the station etc., increased the opportunity cost to the station. Gary also learned that the preparation of a police report was not a company policy. The decision to call the police rested solely with the clerk on duty at the time of the incident and in most cases was used to document any shortages to their manager.

Next, Gary met with **Mike Scott**, the **COPS Coordinator** and obtained information on how other jurisdictions around the nation handle gas drive-offs. The **Savanna Georgia Police Department** is currently using a simplified report, which is completed by the businesses whenever a theft occurs then mailed to the police department. This system allows information to be gathered, and at the same time frees officers from responding to this type of call.

After re-designing the form Gary re-contacted Mr. Heria and Mr. Hyder with the idea. Both gentlemen endorsed the process and agreed to work with our department.

Mr. Frank Dorh, from **Planing & Development**, and Gary are now working to implement this procedure into department policy. If successful, this process could be expanded to include any minor theft from a business.

In all, this concept has the potential for eliminating thousands of calls every year.



DOWN THE ROAD

Are there materials available to explain the COPS concept to the public? An eleven minute videotape is available to all officers through each district or this office that helps explain the concept in the words of police officers and citizens.

What's happening with the policy review? The Policy Review Team mentioned in the March issue has been forwarding written recommendations to the Chief of Police. The group first made some administrative recommendations, namely to combine all the policies, rules, and regulations into one document and then to put the document on the HSL computer system. This would eliminate the enormous volume of binders and paper and assure that everyone has an up-to-date, complete set of guidelines at all times.

The Review Team then focused on the current Police Manual, recommending a lot of changes to eliminate unnecessary, duplicate, and conflicting rules; establish guidelines on important subjects such as police officer arrest discretion and off-duty enforcement activity; and delegate decision-making authority closer to the line personnel. The group has proposed a new mission statement and a new oath of office for the department; completed recommendations on Rules 1, 2, and 9; is nearing completion of Rule 3; and beginning work on Rule 10. Rules 8 and 11 are being left to the Board Secretary's Human Resources Panel.

Are other big city police departments going through as much change as we are? Those that are serious about improving policing are. A top commander in the New York City Police Department informed us recently that they are beginning a thorough review of their policies and procedures for consistency with the community problem solving philosophy and involving rank and file personnel because of what they heard we are doing in St. Louis. This is a first for New York as well, and with 30,000 police officers in the department, it will be a big job. But, they too realize how important it is to involve line personnel in these issues.

The Boston Police Department brought **Officer Bob Heimberger** to their department this month to teach problem solving to their officers. (How's that for a secondary job?) And a recent article in the Washington Post reported that, while hundreds of cities are involved in a brand of community policing limited to improving public relations, St. Louis is one of a handful of cities seriously incorporating problem solving to more effectively address serious crime, nuisances, accidents, and disorder. The initially skeptical Post reporter actually flew to St. Louis and rode with Sixth District Officer Steve Lewis to find out that this is not merely a public relations gimmick.

Keys to the City is a regular publication of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department designed to share examples of good police-community problem solving in the City of St. Louis. Project descriptions should be sent to the COPS Coordinator's Office in Room 607 of Headquarters by departmental or electronic mail. Inquiries can also be directed to 444-5681.

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