

Suwanee, Georgia Police Department Community Policing: It's a Philosophy, Not a Single Program

Suwanee, Georgia was among the fastest-growing cities in the country throughout the 1990s. The City's population, based on Census data, mushroomed from 2,412 in 1990 to 8,725 in 2000, a growth rate of 262 percent. As the number of citizens grew, so did the ranks of those charged with serving and protecting them: the number of sworn officers in the department grew from 7 in 1990 to 30 today.

In the face of such extraordinary growth, how could the Suwanee Police Department uphold a high quality of service, meeting the City's goal to "exceed expectations," and help maintain, and even enhance, the "hometown" feel that was so important to the community? The key, City officials determined, was to create a well-trained, community-minded police force, one that distinguished itself and the City through its effectiveness and its ability to build relationships with constituents. In order to do that, Suwanee officers would have to interact with citizens, schoolchildren, business owners, and visitors regularly and during times other than when responding to a crisis or writing tickets.

Thus, the City adopted in 1999 a community policing philosophy, and today residents and the City are enjoying significant benefits as a result. While "community policing" has certainly become a buzzword among law enforcement agencies across the country, Suwanee Police Chief Mike Jones is adamant that community policing is much more than a single, quick-fix program. He insists that, incorporated properly, community policing is a philosophy, a way of thinking, and that programs adopted are but tools in the community policing toolbox.

"Community policing opens the door for citizens to come to us if they have problems," says Det. Shane Edmisten. "When I was growing up, when you saw a patrol car in the neighborhood, something was wrong. When most citizens see us in their neighborhoods today, they come up and say, 'Hi.' We don't want people to think 'Uh oh, here comes a police officer; I've done something wrong.'"

Live...work...play...serve & protect

The Suwanee Police Department has an array of tools/programs in its community policing toolbox. One of the most effective and serviceable tools supporting Suwanee's community policing

philosophy is our **PACT** program. PACT, or Police and Citizens Together, now in its second year, affords officers an opportunity to **build relationships** with neighborhood residents. Through PACT, residents have access to a specific officer with whom they can address quality-of-life issues, often resolving problems before they become criminal issues or injuries are incurred. Such issues might include speeding through the neighborhood, theft prevention, teenage drivers, or vandalism.

Suwanee officers are assigned a neighborhood to which they are the PACT liaison. They hold three meetings each year with community members and are available via phone/voice mail and e-mail to neighborhood residents. In a few subdivisions, PACT officers participate in the neighborhood electronic message boards. Also, in addition to their assigned patrol areas, officers always are responsible for their PACT neighborhood.

“When our officers see and interact with residents in a neighborhood on a regular basis, it becomes kind of personal for them as far as looking out for the residents,” says Sgt. Elias Casanas. “They’re not just an address on a mailbox.”

To date, 16 of Suwanee’s 22 neighborhoods (representing 73 percent) are PACT-certified, meaning that they have held the required three meetings with their liaison and are actively communicating with their “personal” police officer. Since beginning in 2002, nearly 100 PACT meetings have been held in neighborhoods throughout Suwanee, with approximately 1,500 residents in attendance.

If neighborhood residents have their own “personal police officer” through Suwanee’s PACT program, then elementary schoolchildren are provided their personal officer through the **COPS (Caring Officers Providing Support)** program. This unique program was begun by a Suwanee patrol officer and elementary school counselor in 2002. Through the program, officers are matched one-to-one with elementary schoolchildren who need a little extra attention for a variety of reasons. The officers meet with their student once a week at the school to talk about homework, family, personal responsibility, and other life topics. This program is voluntary; officers are not paid for their time at the school. To date, 55 officers (some have participated multiple times) and 75 students have taken part in this special program.

Teachers of students in the COPS program have reported improved class participation and better attitudes. "I don't know what...that officer's doing," says one, "but that child is changed."

Another important program in Suwanee's toolbox is its **Citizens Police Academy**. This popular seven-week program offers participants tailored police training and a peek into the world of the Suwanee Police Department. Activities include building searches, use of radar guns, and traffic stops. The academy serves to inform citizens about police practices and makes them aware of situations police officers encounter regularly; it serves as another means to build relationships and understanding with community members. Over the past three years, it also has built an "alumni" group of graduates that are supportive of the police and interested in assisting the City. More than 100 residents and people who work in Suwanee have participated in the program.

Other programs that support Suwanee's community policing philosophy include:

- multiple park patrol/bike officer positions
- Georgia Teens Ride with PRIDE, a program for teenagers and their parents that addresses driving attitudes and teenage behaviors in order to help reduce the number of automobile accidents, injuries, and deaths
- car seat safety inspections (conducted free of charge at City Hall)
- ADVANCE, a program designed to help fifth-graders deal with pressures related to drug and tobacco use, violence, and interaction with peers
- Explorers, a group for youth who are interested in a law enforcement career and in providing service to the community.

Last year, the Suwanee Police Department served approximately 3,500 individuals through more than a dozen community-building programs. An unanticipated bonus of Suwanee's community policing programs has been a slight **decrease in calls for service**. Although traffic accidents, traffic citations, and alarm calls all were up in 2004, in some cases significantly so, the number of calls for service handled by the department were down by nearly 200 (a little less than 1 percent). Suwanee's police chief attributes

this decline to his officers' ability to build relationships and communication lines and to proactively resolve problems in the field.

Lessons learned

For the most part, the things that the City of Suwanee has garnered through implementing its community policing philosophy have been reinforced lessons rather than revelations. The notable exception being that there can be unexpected benefits (e.g., a decline in calls for service) to adopting such programming. Here are other points of which the City has been reminded:

- Community policing requires time to be fully implemented and embraced. It is *not* a quick fix. Suwanee began adopting a community policing philosophy nearly six years ago.
- Community policing requires professional and financial commitment. In order for officers to have time to do more than react to calls for service—to interact with citizens, obtain feedback, and problem-solve in the field—appropriate staffing levels are required. In addition, Suwanee officers are allowed the flexibility to work additional hours if needed to manage community concerns.
- Community policing requires an investment in training. In 2003, Suwanee officers racked up 6,671 training hours (an average of about 222 hours per officer) in areas that included firearm safety, child care seat installation, bicycle patrol, and driver training.
- Community policing is *not* soft on crime. The Suwanee Police Department may have a soft spot for community-building, but it's proud to be tough on crime. Suwanee believes that through community policing more crimes are solved and an untold number prevented.

Through its community-policing programs, the Suwanee Police Department has generated goodwill and loyalty among citizens, many of whom act as “booster club” members for the City and possess a true understanding of the added value of a professionally managed, community-focused police department.