

# **Rochester Police Department's Efforts to Strengthen Community Relations**

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Police and law enforcement officials must rely on the community for support in crime prevention and reduction. This paper is a preliminary review of some past and current Rochester Police Department (RPD) efforts to strengthen community relations. It reviews five RPD programs and activities. In late 2015 to early 2016, information for this paper was drawn from the RPD and individual programs' websites as well as from news sources. Future work will report on updated RPD efforts as new initiatives, like the Mayor's 90 Days of Community Engagement, have started since this paper was written.

### **Police Explorer Program**

The Police Explorer Program was started by the Daniel Webster Council of the Boy Scouts of America. Anyone ages 14 to 21 who maintains a "C" average and is of "good character" can be a police explorer. A police explorer is interested in law enforcement and participates in various activities alongside an experienced police officer. The explorer can partake in meetings, ride-alongs, and training sessions. Positive features of this program are that it allows teenagers and young adults a place to channel and develop their interest in law enforcement. The Explorer Program provides mentorship by experienced officers and an opportunity to attain leadership skills.<sup>1</sup>

A critique of this program is the demographic that the program caters toward. Many troubled youth could benefit greatly from the police explorer experience. Yet, how many troubled youth in Rochester are maintaining "c-level" grades and have an interest in law enforcement? Expanding the program to actively seek out these youth could spark an undiscovered interest and turn around the path of a troubled young adult.

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<sup>1</sup> Information retrieved from police explorer main website [http://www.rochesterpd.org/rpd\\_027.htm](http://www.rochesterpd.org/rpd_027.htm)

### **Shop Talk**

Another activity performed by the Rochester Police Department (RPD) are the Barber Shop Talks. In 2013, former Chief Jim Sheppard launched "Shop Talk" as a way to connect with the Rochester community in a neutral place, specifically targeting the young black men of the community. The purpose of the talks is to discuss with community members the issues of concern, such as racial profiling.

The first shop talk occurred in the 19th Ward at Visions Barber Shop, a known gathering place for young black men. Jonah Bairley, a young man who attended, appreciated the efforts made by police to connect with the community. Bairley stated, "I just felt like they don't care, they just do their job and go home. As I saw today, they came and tried to like help the community...."

As seen from Bairley's positive comments, RPD taking the initiative to meet in an environment of comfort to the target demographic can break down preconceived ideas the community holds about the police. Shop Talks provide a good forum for the community to candidly discuss issues and bring up concerns to the police department. For residents to feel like they're being heard, RPD must also display that actions have been taken based on the concerns discussed. If Rochester citizens believe their words are not being taken seriously, then resident participation in such programs will drop. Further research should be conducted to determine if any actions have been taken by RPD as a result of the Shop Talks<sup>2</sup>.

### **Social Media**

One of the ways RPD tries to stay connected with Rochester citizens is through social media. In 2013, the Rochester Police Department was ranked 47th among the nation's top 100

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<sup>2</sup> Information retrieved from Local News story first reported in 2012:  
<http://www.rochesterfirst.com/news/news-headlines/chief-sheppard-uses-barber-shops-to-connect>

police departments by MPHProgramsList.com for their use of social media. To date, RPD's Facebook page tallies over 7,000 likes, and their Twitter page has over 5,000 followers. Former police Chief Jim Sheppard described RPD's social media use as "...a great opportunity to engage the community, solve crime, push information and hopefully we'll get better at it as we go along". RPD also joined YouTube in 2012 and has amassed close to 10,000 views.<sup>3</sup> In a society where social media has become a routine part of life, it is also a way to communicate with the youth of Rochester.

### **Youth-Police Dialogues**

Teen Empowerment's Youth-Police Dialogues were created in an effort to improve the often damaged youth-police relationships. The Center for Teen Empowerment (TE) was founded by Stanley Pollack in 1992. TE began by hiring 14 youth organizers whose mission was to find a solution to the growing problem of gang violence in Boston, MA. The youth received training and developed the idea to organize a series of meetings between youth, police, and adults of the community. The talks seemingly produced success and led to a Youth Peace Conference where five rival gangs created a peace treaty. The teen youth organizers became an important part of the Boston community, advocating for more teen employment and encouraging the Boston Police Department to stop negative profiling of youth and increase community policing policies.

In 2003, Teen Empowerment expanded from Boston to Rochester, NY. TE identified the necessity for an improved relationship between youth and police in Rochester as well. In 2004, TE youth organizers began holding dialogues with officers from the Rochester Police Department.

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<sup>3</sup> Social media numbers updated as of 8/25/2015. All other information retrieved from: <http://www.rochesterfirst.com/news/news-headlines/rpd-recognized-for-social-media-use>

In 2013, TE received funding from the Fetzer Institute to continue the youth-police dialogues. The overall goal is to improve relations between the youth and police, while both groups have separate goals and outcomes they want from these dialogues. The police want to explain their job to the youth and receive more cooperation from them. The youth want to change the mindset of the police to ensure positive future interactions and make sure that both sides are responsible for their actions. To evaluate the effectiveness of the talks, TE staff met with researchers, all participants completed feedback surveys, and focus groups were held with participants after the group dialogues. Center for Public Safety Initiative (CPSI) evaluators found that youth and police generally held more positive attitudes towards one another after the dialogues, and both groups identified ways to change their behavior to interact better on the streets. TE continues to conduct a series of youth-police dialogues each year in Rochester and also conducts a one-day dialogue and training session at the Rochester Police Academy, starting with the 2015 police academy (Dougherty, 2013).

### **Police-Citizen Teams**

The Rochester Police Department also has several programs which try to get citizens in direct contact with officers on the job. Programs such as the Police and Citizens Together Against Crime (PAC-TAC) and Clergy on Patrol put citizens and officers directly in the community working together. PAC -TAC is a foot patrol program involving the use of civilian-police teams. The program was piloted in 1974 and funded by a grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. The goal of the program is to have a visible presence in the community as well as to improve police and community relations. Similarly, the Clergy on Patrol program has a member of the RPD walking the neighborhood with a local clergy member to help build relationships with the community (Anon, 1974).

Another program which puts police and the community together is the Family Conflict Intervention Team (FACIT). In 1974, the City of Rochester received funding from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration to implement the FACIT project. FACIT is a team of an officer and counseling specialists with specific training and resources to handle conflict situations appropriately. Through the training, the officer will establish various connections with local agencies and referral resources in the community. Since the pilot program in 1974, FACIT has now become specialized in crisis prevention and intervention. The FACIT team now includes counselors and volunteers who specialize in cases involving domestic disputes, juvenile delinquency, and other similar concerns. Such programs as FACIT, PAC-TAC, and clergy on patrol build a community partnership with the police that allows trust between the two parties to form. These programs can help change the way residents view local law enforcement.

### **Trust, Information, Programs, and Services (TIPS)**

TIPS is a one-day community event held four times a year in four different communities around Rochester. It brings representatives from many law enforcement agencies to the area to meet residents, and there are activities for children, service providers giving information, and barbecue food served. TIPS also involves a neighborhood survey to gather an understanding of the community's attitude toward law enforcement. Surveys are conducted door to door by a team of volunteers accompanied by a law enforcement officer (Burnett, 2015). To view all of the TIPS reports visit the CPSI website.

### **Discussion**

RPD is making strides to strengthen their relationship with the community. These initiatives include efforts to interact with community members one-on-one as well as in groups. The RPD has identified specific groups to focus on, including youth and communities that

interact with the police at higher rates than other communities. One way to gauge this relationship, is to survey the Rochester community on their relationship with RPD. The Community Views of Criminal Justice project records different community groups' perceptions of relations with policing and the justice system. The goal of the project is to create actionable recommendations that the RPD may consider in future strategies, programs, and policies to help strengthen their relationship with the community. Community Views of Criminal Justice project reports are shared with law enforcement and justice system personnel as well as with the Rochester Community.

## References

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