

Alton participating in ground-breaking community police study, requires public to help

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Alton is in the first stages of what could be a ground-breaking community police study - assuming the community participates.

Former **St. Louis Police Chief Daniel Isom** currently holds a professorship of police and community relations at the **University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL)**. He is embarking on an extensive study of the **Alton Police Department** and its relationship with the community with the assistance of **Steve Finkelstein** of the consulting firm **Experience on Demand**. The study will consist of three phases and will include an unprecedented examination of the Alton Police Department as well as a thorough public survey and community examination. The goal of this study is to hold the police department and community accountable for their relationship.

This study is coming to Alton thanks in part to the efforts of Riverbend **Ministerial Alliance Director and Alton Human Rights Commission President Peter Hough**. Hough met Isom at a diversity conference called **Listen, Talk, Learn**. Hough and Isom discussed such a study in Alton, but it would not work without the cooperation of the city, the police department and the community.

Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons has since given Isom and Finkelstein complete access to the Alton Police Department. Crime data and statistics dating to 2006 have been released to the team and the entire staff of the police department - including officers, jailers, custodians and desk workers - have also been given surveys to complete regarding their thoughts on the current state of community policing. Simmons said 56 of 86 employees of the Alton Police Department have completed this survey, which is the goal of phase one of the study.

"Officers are open to the program and are responding," Simmons said. "We solve more crime if the community is helping us. Some are reluctant due to the current climate of perceived distrust. We want to improve that. The majority of our people are open to this."

Trust was an issue raised by members of the community at a forum discussion earlier this month. Simmons was not in attendance at the forum, nor were any other city officials. Hough and Isom were both at the forum, with Hough acting as its facilitator. He said city officials were asked not to come, so people could feel open to discuss things candidly. Some took this gesture as the city not being active in the study, however, Hough said. **Alton City Attorney Megan Williams** said the **City of Alton** was extremely committed to the study, and city officials did not attend so a safe space could be provided to the citizens who had concerns.

"One thing that came up was from **Al Womack**," Hough said. "He felt we needed to get the message right and get our purpose and objective. Our purpose and objective is to have a safer and more peaceful city for both the police department and the community. That really is the whole point."

Finkelstein expounded Hough's message and said the purpose was also to "support strong community values, and continuous improvement with the support of building on success."

"This department is not in major trouble, so we're building on continuous success," he said.

Simmons agreed the department is not in major trouble, but added there are always issues and always way to improve upon a situation, even if it is not in a glaringly terrible position.

"My officers feel very safe in Alton," Simmons said. "It's unique in the fact police officers have given back."

Initiatives such as "**Shop with a Cop**," "**Coffee with a Cop**" and the Christmas season "**Summons of Joy**" program, which has officers giving citizens gift cards instead of tickets when pulled over, were named by Simmons as ways his department has already attempted to build relationships with the community.

Hough said the responsibility of trust and building relationships is not the sole burden of the police department. He said the community has a stake in the situation as well.

"Trust needs to be rebuilt in both directions," he said. "The burden is not just on the police. We need community leaders to listen and approve to put together a plan to take responsibility together. We will make it safer together as well."

Another issue raised by members of the community regarding the study is the cost. Each phase of the study will take \$2,200 for Finkelstein's consulting. Finkelstein said the rate is as much as seven times lower than his usual consulting costs. He has consulted for several non-profits such as the **Ferguson and Florrisant School Districts** as well as for-profit companies such as the **St. Louis Federal Reserve** and **Monsanto**.

"I really appreciate my relationship with UMSL," Finkelstein said. "We give a lot back, and do a lot with vets and first responders. We have a big heart for what's going on here, and would do it totally free, but just a little bit of something shows commitment to the organization."

That price will not be covered by the City of Alton. Isom said he requested the city not pay for it. The city not funding the study will ensure no bias is perceived due to who is footing the bill. Phase one will be paid by the professorship of Isom. An additional

\$2,400 has been pledged to the Alton Ministerial Alliance to cover phase two of the project. Hough is asking for stakeholders in the community to cover the cost of the third phase.

"The city was asked not to pay for it," Williams said. "They thought it was important for the city not to pay for it, so the community owns it, and it's not paid for by the city. It doesn't mean the city is not committed, but it's a community plan."

Phase two of the study will test the community's ownership of it. During phase two, stakeholders in the study are asked to fill out surveys of their own about the police department. Those surveys will be hosted online on the city's website, with links to it from other sites, including **Riverbender.com**. Paper surveys will be available at the **Alton City Hall** as well, Williams said.

"The second phase will be about exploring and meeting the community," Isom said. "We will be developing a survey about police and community relations."

Following the survey collection and analysis by Isom and Finkelstein, a community focus group will be selected by the study's stakeholders. Hough and Isom agreed the focus group would be very diverse and Williams said it will include community leaders who represent large groups of Alton's diverse population.

"We will build a smaller focus group of Alton constituents, a very diverse group," Isom said. "We will get more dedicated about community expectations and desires to make it stronger and safer. We will do the same with the Alton Police Department and we will bring police and the community together to really think about what this vision may look like."

Hough said ensuring the community receives these surveys and the knowledge of the study is essential to making Alton a better and safer place.

"We're going to do our best to get community leaders and stakeholders to get word out to the community," he said.

After a focus group sourced from the community is able to meet and discuss their concerns with the state of community policing in Alton, Isom and Finkelstein will create a list of priorities and concerns. Another such list will be made from officers of the Alton Police Department. In the final phase of the study, each group will meet, discuss the lists and propose solutions. Finkelstein said those solutions will also feature people from the community and police department who are going to take accountability for the issues raised.

"Instead of starting the session with charts, we'll start by saying what the survey says," Finkelstein said. "We will talk about top issues and get directions and items for focus, as well as things to change. It's going to be a pretty long list of things."

The dynamic of the two groups will not be adversarial. Each stakeholder currently invested in the study assured the dynamic will be one of partnership and cooperation. The end goal of phase three, Isom said, is creating accountability.

"Another issue was accountability," Isom said. "How do we evaluate what proposals will be done? We talked about the fact it's a community and Alton Police Department plan, and within the plan, there should be discourse about accountability and availability. We will make people accountable in the plan, everyone will have a role in that accountability. It will not be a plan demanding the Alton Police Department should do this or that. The community of Alton will have a shared responsibility to keep it safe."

Finkelstein said the plan will give the community and police department a "road map," and not just a list. He said after the study and plan are finished, he and Isom would check on the progress of the end decisions and see how they are being utilized in the community and police department.

Until the end of phase one, the study only requires the community to contribute to its cost. Hough and the Riverbend **Ministerial Alliance** are going to collect the remaining money required to fund the study (\$2,000, if all \$2,400 in current pledges are collected). He encourages people to donate to the study so they feel as if they are investing into the future of their community.

"We're asking for people to make an investment in that process to give us that road map," Hough said. "We have experienced and disinterested parties to help devise that road map, and we're asking the community for their investments of presence, interest and money to complete it."

Checks for the study can be sent to the Riverbend Ministerial Alliance, located at 504 E. 12th St. in Alton. Donors are asked to write "police study" in the memo line of the checks.

Isom said this study is the first of its kind in the region. He said other communities offered partial access to their community and police departments, but Alton is the first to give unlimited access to the entire police department and community, in order to better community policing, safety and relations.

"A part of my role at UMSL is teaching and giving back to the community," he said. "In Alton, it's all about relationships. Out of the meetings I had with Megan , Chief Simmons and Peter , we decided to collaboratively take on this project. My role at UMSL is teaching police and community relations. This is exactly what UMSL hired me to do. I am excited to see see such forward-thinking and progressive aspects in other plans."

Anyone who would like to contribute to the study, ask questions or voice concerns is ask to contact Hough via email at Peter.Andrew.Hough@gmail.com.