

Alton Community Relations Commission to reveal results of ground-breaking police study

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Former St. Louis Police Chief Daniel Isom said he has never had both a community and police department work together to form a comprehensive community policing platform - [until he attempted to do it in Alton](#).

Through the University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL) and consultant Steve Finkelstein, Isom has worked with several entities within Alton, including the entire Alton Police Department as well as civic and community leaders to create a comprehensive community policing platform, which is set to be revealed tonight, March 15, 2017, at 5:30 p.m. at the Scott Bibb Center, located at 1004 E. Fifth St., during the March meeting of the Alton Community Relations Commission (CRC), who assisted with the study.

According to a release from Alton CRC Executive Director, Peter Hough, the purpose of the study was to "improve the quality of life of citizens and to provide a safer, more vibrant and peaceful environment." It credited Hough's desire as well as the desire of Alton City Attorney Megan Williams and Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons for Alton to maintain and improve the community policing policies of Alton.

Alton Mayor Brant Walker said community policing was "one of the foundations of his election campaign" in 2012-2013, and vowed to continue with its progress if elected to a second term in the April 4, 2017, election. His support for the initiative was echoed by rival candidate Scott Dixon in several panels and debates taking place through this election cycle.

This process initiated by Isom, Finkelstein, Hough, Williams and Simmons had three phases. In phase one, the Alton Police Department did an internal assessment. Officers as well as jail staff and even maintenance employees contributed to the surveys conducted from Oct.-Nov. 2016. As many as 55 of out of 80 employees, or 69 percent of employees, completed the survey, according to the release.

"I think the biggest thing I learned is there really is a desire and a readiness to understand and be understood on both sides," Hough said Tuesday. "With the officers, it is great self-reflective work. You have a police department that is very engaged and wants to understand and improve its end of the relationship."

Along with the surveys, several ride-alongs were conducted and an analysis of the 911 call reports was conducted by Isom's team.

Major issues identified by the survey, according to the release, included: staffing needs, inadequate budget, ineffective communication, department morale, training needs, equipment needs, recruiting process, building community relationships and trust.



A focus group made of representatives from the police department was conducted in Jan. 2017 with the purpose of reviewing the major areas of focus as decided by that survey, including: communication/internal morale, accountability/job descriptions, performance evaluation and target marketing.

[In phase two, the entire community was invited to take part in the survey](#), which was administered in Dec. 2016 to "key stakeholders of Alton to include residents, businesses, employees, government, students and churches. As many as 1,264 surveys were completed - a number with which Hough is extremely pleased.

"Almost 1,300 people filled out the surveys," he said. "I feel like that was a large enough sampling. we were able to look at respondents by neighborhoods as well. I think we were able to get a good spread of responses through our surveys."

A community focus group was conducted simultaneously with the police department's focus group in Jan. 2017. The "four key areas identified" by the community-wide survey, according to the release, were racial diversity in the police department, youth activities, drugs and alcohol and police/community relationships and policies /procedures.

That focus group consisted of community leaders who, according to Hough and Williams, had significant reach in the community.

"Our goal and the guidelines given to us by Chief Isom was to get people from different areas of the community," Williams said. "We wanted individuals who had reach to come meet, and get involved in a deeper level with the process."

Neither Williams or Simmons were directly involved with the focus groups, as Isom believed the city should be supportive of the process, but not directly involved, so people felt more encouraged to share concerns freely.

Attendees of the focus group, according to an email from Williams, included: Bishop Samuel White, Andy Hightower, Ed Gray, Brenda Walker-McCain, John Simmons, Greg Denton, Tony Booker, Rev. Gregory Harrison, Darrin Williams, Mark Cappel, Sara McGibany, Virginia Woulfe-Beile, Dale Chapman, Monica Bristow, Brett Stawar, Michael Slaughter, Michael Bellm, Chris Sutton, Dale Blachford, Steve Thompson, Al Womack Jr., Peter Hough, Judge Ellar Duff, Marquato Rattler, Cindy Lolley and Michael Varner.

After both the community and police department focus groups met to discuss their main focus points, they congealed together for a "police and community workshop" during phase three of the process. This joint workshop was conducted in Feb. 2017, and consisted of representatives from both the community and police department. Major areas of focus in that workshop were from each of the prior focus group workshops, including: education/awareness, police department diversity and positive interactions between the police and community.

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"I think what you'll find is - what the focus groups decided on were three priorities with different objectives in each of the priorities," Williams said. "I'm very hopeful with the work between the community and police department continuing, we'll be able to achieve these goals. It will take time and involvement between both the community and the police department. I'm very hopeful the community and the individuals in the department will step up and achieve these goals. The only way we will see significant change is if individuals start working with each other."

Those goals, as determined by both community leaders and the Alton Police Department, will be revealed by Isom and Finkelstein tonight at the meeting. Hough believed it was important for an impartial and indifferent third party to present the results, goals and plan to the community, so neither side would be neglected nor considered biased.

"I think people should come to the meeting, because it will give them access to Isom and Steve , who led us through this process," Hough said. "He has a great deal of experience in this, and has concrete and tangible goals. I think people will be best-served through hearing about it from Chief Isom and Steve ."

Isom will be presenting a Power Point regarding the goals and missions resulting from the study.

According to the release, the new Community Policing Plan will involve the following goals and missions:

Communication

- Increase communication between police and youth
- Increase and develop police social media
- Increase awareness and attendance of organizations through communication
- Law enforcement community Awareness

Education

- Police policy, procedures and work environment
- Use of force
- Department policing strategies
- Study community participation habits

Diversity

- Develop a cadet program
- Change city hiring process
- Increase scholarships for AA applicants
- Increase recruiting footprint

The Alton Police Department's plan will include the following goals and missions, according to the release.

Communication and Morale

- Develop a comprehensive internal communication strategy

Accountability and Performance

- Establish job descriptions
- Improve call for service coding for tracking and evaluation
- Performance evaluation of officers, supervisors and commander leadership
- Six month climate surveys to assess morale
- Annual citizen surveys to assess satisfaction

Talent Management

- Develop a recruiting plan and change hiring process
- Establish a retention strategy
- Engage and motivate officers
- Improve field training program
- Restructure allocation of personnel

The Alton CRC, headed by Hough, has also established 30, 60 and 90 day goals as a result from the comprehensive community policing process. Both the community and police department have chosen leaders to be accountable for each of those goals. During each month, according to the release, the CRC should track the progress of each goal and hold the responsible parties accountable.

During the first 30 days, the CRC will: identify the team, schedule meetings, define objectives and gather statistics.

During the first 60 days the CRC will develop both a written plan and an evaluation strategy.

During the first 90 days, the CRC will present and approve the plan and begin the implementation and evaluation process.

Following the presentation and meeting of the Alton CRC tonight at the Scott Bibb Center, Hough said people from the community would be given up to five minutes to share their thoughts, concerns, questions or even offerings of assistance with the CRC. Hough said he would be willing to hear from anyone who would like to share their concerns or offer their hands and minds to help implement the process. Due to the Illinois Open Meetings Act, to which the Alton CRC must adhere, Hough said people are limited to those five minutes.

How do the mayoral candidates feel about this initiative?



While Walker and Dixon emphatically support the community policing process, as they have said at the [Community Awareness Panel forum](#), candidates Joshua Young and Dan

Rauschkolb, who is a two decade veteran of the Alton Police Department himself, are more skeptical of what it promises.

During that forum, Young said he wanted to see more "local champions" working to improve their neighborhoods while asking for police assistance when needed. Young said he believes the community policing initiative being brought by Hough and Isom is another wing of the establishment working to preserve itself.

Young also advocated building a community center to give kids something to do after school. Among those local initiatives he supported was "[Fists Up, Guns Down](#)," a grassroots movement to settle disputes in the "Mexico" neighborhood of Alton with boxing and sportsmanship instead of guns. Young said he is still working towards supporting that movement, even after its founder, [Brian Newman](#), was arrested and charged with gun and drug-related crimes.

Chief Jake Simmons agreed the movement has potential, despite Newman's arrest, saying the Alton Police Department would supply helmets, gloves and mouth guards if insurance could be attained, a safe location could be found and it was being administered by properly-vetted professionals.

Young's concerns for neighborhood building and sportsmanship seem to go hand-in-hand with the community policing process's goals, however, especially in regards to youth engagement.

Rauschkolb said at the Community Awareness Panel he has seen several city administrations "try all sorts" of initiatives to better community policing. He said some worked and some did not. He agreed with Young that the biggest issues with community policing are Alton's neighborhoods. He said he would work to strengthen neighborhoods "overall." If elected Rauschkolb said he would encourage neighborhood watch initiatives with direct access to the police department, adding he would also champion a community center accessible by everyone -especially young people.

Walker said his administration has done several things to improve relations with the police departments, including reintroducing bicycle patrols, and doing initiatives such as "Shop with a Cop," "Coffee with a Cop" and "Ballin' with a Cop," During which members of the community, especially young people, were encouraged to communicate with police officers and meet them as people.

Diversity in the police department was another issue brought to the stage at the Community Awareness Panel. Walker said he is looking for ways to bring more minorities into the police force. Young said the only way to do so was to drop the educational requirements currently mandated to be an officer (Young was under the

false impression a bachelor's degree was absolutely required. If a bachelor's degree has not been earned by a potential officer, an associate's degree with some experience in the field is also acceptable, as Walker corrected him at the panel). Walker believed that level of education was not only sufficient, but should stay mandatory.

Dixon said he would base his police cadet model on one currently in use in St. Clair County. According to the New York Times, Belleville has 26 percent more white police officers than population, meaning it has yet to properly reflect the population's diversity, but it is among the best in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area, only being beaten by Florissant with 20 percent more white officers than population and St. Louis City, which has 21 percent.

The creation of an equality panel to oversee diversity in the city's workforce and more engagement with the youth of Alton were also measures championed by Dixon.

Hough said he hoped people would attend the Alton CRC community policing presentation and then subsequently attend another Alton mayoral forum being hosted by Alton Main Street at the Riverbender.com Community Center at 7 p.m. Wednesday evening, and bring some of their concerns and comments from the policing presentation to the candidates. Hough believed each should be asked about the specific goals set to be revealed and discussed by Isom and the community tonight.