



# **A look at the surprising results from Alton's ground-breaking Community Policing study**

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**ALTON** - The results from a [community policing study](#) were shown at a [special meeting](#) of the Alton Community Relations Commission on Wednesday, March 15, 2017, at the Scott Bibb Center, located at 1004 E. Fifth St., and some of the answers from both the police department and community are surprising.

Former St. Louis Police Chief and current University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL) instructor, Daniel Isom, reviewed the results with consultant Steve Finkelstein of Experience on Demand in front of an audience of approximately 50 people. The presentation included a Power Point display of the results of the study as well as an establishment of future goals with a time frame on when they will be achieved. Members of the public were invited to ask questions or give comments for as long as five minutes following the presentation.

Isom said Alton was the first community with which he has worked allowing him full access to both the police department and the community. He said the study was first initiated when he had lunch with Alton City Attorney Megan Williams and Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons in Ferguson.

"This was a perfect fit for what I was wanting to do," Isom said at the presentation. "Both the police department and the community have made this an incredible experience. In my 30-plus years of experience, it is rare for a community to take up such a project without a crisis, and Alton is not going through a crisis."

Phase one of the study involved an internal survey of the police department, which Isom described as "an organization, just like any other." All employees of the Alton Police Department were invited to take the survey in Nov. 2016, and 55 of the 80 employees did so - which results in 69 percent of the force participating.

"We're happy when we get over 50 percent," Finkelstein said. "These results were incredible."

The surveys included 23 areas in which employees of the Alton Police Department were told to give a rating between one and five based on their confidence in the area, with one being "very low," and five being "excellent."

These are what the Alton Police Department's internal survey results showed as the department's most confident areas:

1. We make the tough decisions - 3.21
2. We operate with personal ethics and integrity. - 3.03
3. We have a strong track record of achieving results. - 3.00
4. Level of Commitment - 2.80

## 5. Level of Accountability - 2.37

These are what the Alton Police Department's Internal survey results showed as the department's least confident areas:

1. Level of Trust - 1.86
2. We have a high degree of trust in our leadership team. - 1.91
3. We have a culture of open, candid communication. - 1.94
4. We act as ONE team. We put the team before individual agendas. - 1.97
5. Level of Open Communication - 1.97

Overall, the Alton Police Department's internal survey rated itself at 2.30, or just above low.

Besides the survey, Isom and Finkelstein conducted on-duty ride-alongs with officers and researched nearly 20,000 911 calls coming into the department over a nine month period to "provide additional insights." Using those insights with the survey results, the following issues were identified:

- Staffing needs
- Inadequate budget
- Ineffective communication
- Department morale
- Training needs
- Equipment needs
- Recruiting process
- Building community relationships
- Trust

A focus group was conducted in Jan. 2017 to further analyze the survey results. Approximately 20 members of the Alton Police Department were on the focus group to identify further goals for the department to reach. The major areas of focus identified were:

- Communication/Internal Morale
- Accountability/Job Descriptions
- Performance Evaluation
- Talent Management

Isom and Finkelstein said the training and equipment needs for police officers has begun its process of being remedied. They said officers told them they would like more time for both training and community relationship building. A police officer knocking on

someone's door was compared to a teacher from someone's child's school calling just to build a relationship and discuss good progress of a student.

A survey of the community was also conducted in Dec. 2016. As many as 1,264 different people participated in it, from a variety of diverse backgrounds, neighborhoods and occupations. Finkelstein said the answers were divided into groups of over the age of 21 and under the age of 21, and said the results were very similar.

Community members were invited to complete two parts of a survey, with the first being a list of major issues in the community with a summary of how well they are under control. Survey takers were asked to rate issues on a scale from one to four, with one being "inadequate" and four being "very adequate."

The following are issues from the survey rated highly by the community:

1. Traffic and Parking - 2.64
2. Animal Control - 2.59
3. Unreasonable Noise - 2.46
4. Graffiti - 2.46
5. Overall Safe Neighborhoods - 2.43

The following are issues from the survey rated low by the community:

1. Drug Issues - 1.89
2. Littering - 1.91
3. Homeless Issues - 2.10
4. Theft - 2.10
5. Burglary - 2.16

Overall, the community gave the Alton Police Department a rating of 2.25 when dealing with these issues, which is just above "somewhat adequate."

Survey takers were also asked to rate the Alton Police Department based on levels of relationship and trust. Those results were the most positive in the entire surveying process with a rating of 2.67 on a one to four scale, which is more than halfway to "good," upwards from "poor." Survey takers were asked to rate five different categories from one to four, with one being "very poor," and four being "very good."

The following is how these issues were rated by the community.

1. Level of Relationship - 2.69
2. Level of Trust - 2.62

3. Level of Communication - 2.58
4. Level of Responsiveness - 2.80
5. Level of Problem Solving - 2.68

A community focus group made of 20-30 community leaders from diverse backgrounds was then conducted in Jan. 2017 to identify major areas of focus. Those areas of focus were identified as the following:

- Youth Activities
- Drugs and Alcohol
- Police/Community Relationships
- Policies/Procedures

Finkelstein broke the survey results into two categories: "Hopes and Dreams" and "Fears and Concerns."

Under Hopes and Dreams, he said people were most concerned about safety (family, police, crimes), economic concerns (small businesses, housing/property, poverty and unemployment) and a stronger and more unified community (relationships, race /diversity, cleanliness and police relationships).

Under Fears and Concerns, he said people were most concerned about crime and safety (drugs, violence and crimes), economy (business, housing), racism and police (relationships, trust and respect).

Both the focus groups derived from the Alton Police Department and community leadership met together for a joint workshop in phase three of the plan. During that workshop, the police department and those leaders met together to create three main areas of focus

Those areas of the focus are the following:

- Communication/Positive Interactions Between the Community and Police
- Education and Awareness
- Police Department Diversity

Different members of both the Alton Police Department and the community are assigned to each of those goals to ensure progress is made. That progress will be overseen by the Alton Community Relations Commission, who will hold the project leaders accountable for their progress. The commission has therefore set 30, 60 and 90 day goals for itself.

Within 30 days, the commission will do the following:

- Identify Teams
- Schedule Meetings
- Define Objectives
- Gather Statistics

Within 60 days, the commission will do the following:

- Develop a written plan
- Develop an evaluative strategy

Within 90 days, the commission will do the following:

- Present Plan
- Approve Plan
- Begin the implementation and evaluation process

Methods to track progress will include another large annual survey as well as possible pulse surveys, which were suggested by Finkelstein at the presentation.

"Instead of a large survey, every 30 days or so, you can track progress by sending out a pulse survey," he said. "We could even ask just one question. We could ask, 'how are we doing on this?' or 'have you seen any results with that?'."

## **Community Questions/Comments**

Pastor Bill Pyatt of United Methodist Church in Bethalto asked Isom, Finkelstein and the Alton Community Relations Commission, which is headed by Peter Hough, if the study will affect other areas of the Riverbend, such as Bethalto, East Alton, Godfrey, Wood River and Roxana. He commented "Bethalto doesn't identify with Alton, but it seems every time Alton sneezes, Bethalto catches a cold."

Williams said she hoped it would set a positive example for other communities in the Riverbend, but quickly added the process's only concern was Alton. She said she hoped the positive changes would "trickle out from Alton to other places."

Virginia Woulfe-Beile of the Piasa Palisades group of the Sierra Club, who herself was on the community focus group, asked the commission if money from the city's budget has been set aside to deal with some of the issues revealed from the study.

Williams said the city has just begun to start the process of creating the budget for the 2017-2018 fiscal year. She said the budget hearings are open to the public, adding the public was welcome to give its input as well.

Woulfe-Beile retorted by saying the city has to "put its money where its mouth is," adding she is aware the city's budget is tight, especially with concerns to the current financial woes of the State of Illinois.

The upcoming April 4, 2017, election will also be a large part of that budget's final items. Several alderman positions are being contested as is the office of the mayor.

Greg Gelzinnis of the Alton Salvation Army Corps and the recently-created [Youth Engagement Program](#) asked if youth were properly represented in the survey results, saying he believed as many as 700 of the surveys were completed by people under the age of 21. He asked if youth were excluded from the community focus groups "by design," and if there would be a place for youth in the future of the plan.

Finkelstein told Gelzinnis about the survey results being separated by age. He said youth were excluded from the focus group by design, but added several people who work with the concerns of the youth, including Alton Superintendent Mark Cappel and Marquette Catholic High School Principal Mike Slaughter were on the community focus panel. Finkelstein said it would be up to the community if youth will have more participation in the future.

Another citizen asked if there was a deadline for becoming a part of one of the groups working to remedy an issue or attain a goal. Hough said there was absolutely no deadline, adding the commission would love to see as many people as humanly possible be a part of the process and initiative.

She also asked how the program could be monitored for its effectiveness. Finkelstein said the commission is working on both qualitative and quantitative metrics for each issue. He said each part has different definitions of what success may look like.

She then asked if each group would be held accountable for their part, and if they could be dismissed if they were not doing the work or their work was not successful. Finkelstein said people's names were going to be attached to each of the goals and projects from both the police department and the community at large.

Isom added the police can track their progress by "calling out." He used the example of officers visiting schools more often. Officers can call out and say they are going to the school.



Hough said the Community Relations Commission would work to hold people accountable. He said the commission meets on the first Wednesday of every month at 5:30 p.m. at the Scott Bibb Center, adding they would listen to public comments regarding the study, and if no work was being done, he would ensure the commission took action to remedy it.

Greg Norris, who runs a program called Aces for Youth, took the podium and used his five minutes to talk about various "quasi-military" groups similar to the ROTC and Boy Scouts of America, which are helping African-American children get training and discipline. He said such a program could be utilized to help the Alton Police Department recruit more minority officers.

Norris complimented Chief Simmons for his assistance with the program, saying his kids could not believe Simmons was a police officer - especially not a chief - because he assisted them in everyday clothes and worked alongside of them.

Simmons said he has "broken bread with Norris" and has met with him on several occasions, but said the hiring process is done by the Civil Service Department, and not the Alton Police Department itself, so he had no control over the hiring process. He said he did support Norris's efforts, however.

Gail Donnelly Bader asked the commission which of the mayoral candidates supported the process, adding she was worried all the work would "go down the drain," if a candidate was elected who opposed it. Hough responded by telling her he was not sure about the stances of the candidates, telling her to read [the Riverbender.com article from the Community Awareness Panel's candidate forum](#), during which that question was asked. (Both Alton Mayor Brant Walker and Scott Dixon support the measure, Joshua Young spoke against it and Dan Rauschkolb was skeptical of its effectiveness. However at the Youth Engagement Program's forum, all four candidates commended the program, with both Young and Rauschkolb pointing out other issues, which needed attention as well).

Chief Simmons told Bader the current administration under Walker was extremely supportive of community policing, adding Walker has worked with him to implement several measures to better community policing, some of which were taken from St. Louis County following the Ferguson riots. He shared Bader's fear the entire program could be "thrown out" if the wrong candidate was elected.

Alton Main Street Board President Sasha Bassett asked why diversity in the department was not one of the main concerns of the department itself. Simmons said it was, adding it was "fourth or fifth" on the list. Both Simmons and Isom agreed police departments across the country were struggling to hire enough African-American candidates.

Bassett also asked if the way the police present themselves and criminalizing addiction were topics of concern. She said police aesthetics and weapon usage should have been topics of discussion.

Simmons said "legalization of marijuana did not come up" during the survey. He said the topic of education was added so people could better understand issues such as: why they are being stopped by police, why the police have the equipment they do and why they may use a Taser in some situations. He said he wanted to work toward making his department work better with the community and said the process will encourage officers to hold themselves as such.