



Creating a sense of urgency: Organizers talk community policing at council meeting

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ALTON - Alton is behind on its original goals for its community policing program by as many as 90 days, but there are still many reasons for optimism, program organizers Steve Finkelstein and former St. Louis Police Chief Daniel Isom said.

The pair offered a presentation at last night's Alton City Council meeting regarding the initiative. Delays in the programs implementation were attributed to issues caused by the April 4, 2017, Alton mayoral election as well as the announcement of the resignation and subsequent termination of former Alton City Attorney Megan Williams, who was instrumental in the initiative coming to Alton originally.

Since the election and Williams's leaving, Alton Mayor Brant Walker met with Alton Community Relations Commission (CRC) President Peter Hough as well as CRC Board Member Judge Ellar Duff, Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons and Walker's Chief of Staff Kimberly Clark. Hough said that meeting helped solidify the future of how the program will be initiated.

To remind the city officials about the importance of such an initiative in the city, Isom and Finkelstein addressed the Alton City Council Wednesday, June 14, 2017, to show what the proper implementation of the plan should look like. Isom and Finkelstein, through the University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL), took surveys of the Alton Police Department as well as the community to identify problems and solutions for community and police relations.

"This is unusual," Isom said. "It's not every day a community lets itself open to strangers to evaluate the police department and the community itself."

Finkelstein agreed with Isom's sentiments and said the Alton Police Department's 69 percent participation in the internal survey was extremely hopeful. He added the 1,264 surveys completed from across the community were also inspiring to his optimism.

During their presentation to the Alton City Council, Finkelstein and Isom presented definitions of "community policing," with the focal words of each definition being: proactive, public safety and partnerships.

"Community policing is a policy that requires police to inherit a proactive approach to address public safety concerns... Community policing recognizes that police cannot solve every public safety problem alone, so interactive partnerships are created. The policing uses the public for developing problem-solving solutions."

The second definition goes as follows:

"Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder and fear of crime."

That second definition may not apply as much to Alton as the first. Isom described Alton as a "city not in crisis." Many cities use programs and platforms of community policing only as reactions to a crisis. In the case of Alton, there is no major crisis, so the city is volunteering itself proactively. Unfortunately, this lack of crisis may not give the program the urgency it deserves.

Ultimately, the goal of community policing is this: "Provide a safe, vibrant and peaceful environment." That goal can be reached by a multitude of sources, but Finkelstein and Isom delivered a "Police Success Model," detailing the many methods of reaching that goal. Those methods are as follows:

- Community engagement
- City support and police leadership support
- Right officers, right passion, experience and skills
- Right equipment, training, process and technology

The approach to reach those goals has been almost entirely completed. The project began with a survey and interviews conducted in September and October of 2016 in the Alton Police Department. As many as 55 of the 80 employees of the department (69 percent) willingly took part in surveys.

In October and November, consultants, including Finkelstein and Isom went on ride-alongs and analyzed 911 call reports over the course of nine months in 2016, which was a staggering total of 19,293 calls.

In February 2017, a police focus group of around 20 people was created to identify problems and possible solutions strictly within the department itself.

During phase two, an Alton community survey was taken. A "good cross-section of the community" was then mined to create a community focus group of as many as 25 people who looked through the results of the community survey, which had 1,264 responses.

Those two focus groups merged for phase three, which featured a joint focus group of community members and police officers. They created a list of issues to address during the plan's full implementation.

Areas of focus identified are as follows:

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

To reach those goals, the Alton CRC had 30-,60- and 90-day goals, which were originally set to begin following an Alton CRC special meeting to discuss the findings of the community policing study, which was held on March 15.

Chief Simmons described those time frames following the meeting as overly ambitious. He said, considering a very contentious mayoral election, and the following administrative shake-ups sure to follow, those goals were not realistic.

Within 30 days, the Alton CRC was tasked with the following:

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

Within 60 days, the Alton CRC was tasked with the following:

- Develop a written plan
- Develop an evaluative strategy

Within 90 days, the Alton CRC was tasked with the following:

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

Those goals have yet to be met. Hough said the CRC is lacking at the moment, because the loss of Williams on the board as well as several vacant seats. Currently, the Alton CRC is searching for three new board members. Members may apply through the city to sit on the board, and members are appointed by the mayor. The board is looking to have all 11 of its possible seats filled.

Finkelstein and Isom completed the presentation by illustrating to the city how progress can be marked regarding future implementations. Finkelstein also challenged the city to ask itself what the cost of implementing the plan is compared to the possible costs of not implementing it. He said the true answer "lays somewhere in the middle."