



## Community Policing Strategic Plan

<http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/community-policing-strategic-plan/?ref=6375dcba35e24952aa272ea53a397612>

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Recent decades have seen a steady evolution in the expectations of and demands on police officers. Highly publicized use-of-force incidents and officer-involved shootings have exacerbated a mistrust of police and highlighted the widening gap felt between officers and the communities they serve. While law enforcement has historically been focused on pursuing criminal offenders, communities are increasingly demanding a new approach to policing. Rather than a model of a department separate from the community, acting as a peacekeeping force, communities expect community-oriented policing that emphasizes collaborative relationships between officers and community members to solve local problems.

It was in this context that the San Francisco Police Department (SFPD) requested assistance from the Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) to address significant community concerns about the status of policing in San Francisco. In 2016, the COPS Office issued a report outlining 94 findings and 272 associated recommendations for the SFPD across five categories: use of force,

bias, community policing, accountability, recruitment and hiring, and personnel practices.<sup>1</sup>

The COPS Office definition of 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.*<sup>2</sup>

This approach to law enforcement involves the whole community by giving some responsibility for creating positive outcomes to the community members. Many law enforcement agencies have had community policing programs for years, but today's environment requires that community policing evolve beyond a single program or stand-alone policy into a foundational principle for any agency's operation.

Developing partnerships with San Francisco communities, a key tenet of community policing, has long been a stated goal of the SFPD, and the department has a history of implementing innovative, albeit stand-alone, programs to meet it.<sup>3</sup> These programs include partnerships with city agencies—such as the Departments of Homelessness and Supportive Housing and Public Works, to address systemic homelessness through a unified command center—and activities focused on building relationships with specific communities. Two of the more successful outreach programs are Chinatown Night Out, which focuses on connecting to San Francisco's community of monolingual residents who are often reluctant to interact with law enforcement, and the Police Activities League, which allows youth and officers a space to spend time together in an informal setting. To build even deeper relationships with a small group of youth, the department holds an annual trip to Ghana. Operation Genesis, as it is known, is an opportunity for high school students from low-income neighborhoods to experience a culture far removed from San Francisco. Along with three SFPD officers, the ten chosen students spend several weeks studying Ghana and raising money for the nine-day trip.

However, the COPS Office's assessment notes that these community policing activities lacked a unifying strategy and identified the need for a "comprehensive, strategic community policing plan" that would align community policing policies and procedures across the department.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Recommendation 40.1 dictates that "the SFPD should develop a strategic community policing plan that identifies goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes for all units."<sup>5</sup> Such a guiding document can enable the department to ensure that work across the organization supports the philosophy of community policing, as it continues to evolve to meet today's law enforcement needs.

Community policing is more than any one program or partnership. It is a philosophy that emphasizes a guardian mind-set wherein officers see themselves as part of the community they serve, working side-by-side with community members to create a safe, livable, and vibrant community. It asserts that a major goal of any law enforcement agency should not only be to bring offenders to justice, but to actively improve the lives

of everyone that lives, works, or visits in the community. True to the spirit of community policing, the SFPD formed a working group to lead the strategic planning process and fulfill Recommendation 40.1. The group consisted of individuals representing nonprofits, community leaders and activists, sworn officers of all ranks, and civilian members of the department. The resulting plan, created by these diverse voices and experiences, will be used as a guide for SFPD's policing policies, practices, and values as they work alongside local communities to improve the city. Not only will this document guide the department for years to come, but the process of its creation represents the next stage of law enforcement's evolution, demonstrating how departments and community members can collaborate to solve important local challenges.

## **Strategic Plan Development**

Participation in the working group was open to any member of the public who wished to join. However, recommendations for specific community members to invite were solicited from district supervisors and captains of district stations. Over the course of 10 months from summer 2017 through spring 2018, the working group met 15 times to review research, analyze results, and aggregate input from a range of sources into a guiding document for the department. While nearly 100 people were invited to each meeting, there were generally 20–30 community members, organizational representatives, and SFPD members of all ranks in attendance.

Developing a vision of community policing in San Francisco began with an initial assessment of its current strengths, challenges, and values, conducted as a brainstorming session within the working group. This provided a common vision of what the resulting plan should achieve, needs it should address, and the group's priorities. The desire for increased trust and personal relationships between officers and community members was raised consistently, as were issues and challenges that are particularly relevant to San Francisco such as homelessness, cost of living, and changing demographics.

The working group next spent several weeks researching community policing best practices from departments around the United States, as well as from agencies in several other countries. Working group members developed a list of jurisdictions of interest and researched how those law enforcement agencies have incorporated community policing philosophies into their work. Synthesizing the findings from nearly 40 sources revealed trends ranging from common guiding values to specific strategies that have shown promising results. One significant finding was that although there is widespread agreement that current policing metrics are inadequate to measure community policing's impact, developing effective alternatives is very difficult.

It was critical to incorporate feedback from the San Francisco and SFPD communities beyond the working group. A qualitative survey regarding attitudes about and visions for community policing was sent to over 500 representatives of local nonprofits, neighborhood groups, and business associations across the city, chosen by the working group members. Also included in the survey recipients were members of all Community

Police Advisory Boards (CPABs) and Chief's Advisory Forums. These groups comprise community members that advise department leadership about district station and department-wide policies and work with officers to solve local issues. Recipients responded on behalf of their organization and the populations each serves, answering questions about what community policing should achieve, what works, what does not work, and expected outcomes of effective community policing. A corresponding survey was sent to more than 100 members of the SFPD, 7 from each of 10 district stations, as well as each bureau's captain.

Responses were received from nearly 200 individuals representing 140 different organizations, every Community Police Advisory Board (CPAB), and 50 self-identified neighborhoods. In addition, 66 responses were received from the SFPD member survey. Every response was manually reviewed and coded to enable analysis of significant themes and recommendations. While the survey was not designed as a scientific review of city-wide opinion, it revealed invaluable feedback from organizations across the city about how law enforcement can adapt to work more closely with local communities.

The working group took the findings from these three sources: initial assessment, best practices, and the community and SFPD surveys, and synthesized them into a vision and values statement, five goals, and 21 objectives to guide the department's community policing activities moving forward. The goals and objectives are designed to be specific and measurable, so that the department and community can both gauge whether they are met.

As mentioned, the best practices research effort found little public information about how to effectively measure community policing outcomes, beyond costly and time-intensive surveys. Therefore, developing a list of specific metrics that track success was a crucial output of this process. The working group first developed a list of metrics and data sources already in use that align with at least one of the new objectives. Only 29 were found, and even those span only 15 of the 21 objectives. To supplement those, they created a list of 133 possible metrics, which SFPD departments can refer to as a resource as they develop their own and measure how well their specific duties support the new goals and objectives.

The extensive research and brainstorming of the group also resulted in a database of specific community policing strategies that came to light throughout the process. These ideas, along with important considerations for their implementation, were included with the Strategic Plan to give the department and district stations a starting point when developing their community engagement plans. For community members unable to participate in the working group but interested in understanding the plan's development, meeting notes, research documents, and other process elements were made available both throughout the year and after the plan was completed.

The plan's development process was guided by the community policing values it aims to promote. Not only collaboration, trust, and problem-solving, but a commitment to

transparency. Open meetings and consistent communication defined this process and modeled the type of partnership that the department's work will embody moving forward.

## **Stakeholder Engagement**

The Strategic Plan was developed through a close partnership between police officers and community members. However, as with any department policy, it requires investment from leadership to succeed. Captains and command staff were given an opportunity to provide input on the vision, goals, and objectives during their development and therefore felt ownership in the resulting document. Other senior leadership, including the police chief, were presented with an opportunity to provide feedback before the plan was finalized as well. During the approval process, the chief, command staff, police commission, and other department senior management could see their input reflected in the document and understand the process that led to this plan.

The Strategic Plan's development process was designed to reflect a central tenet of community policing: building trusting relationships to foster collaboration between the community and the department and address difficult systemic challenges. Bridging the gap between community members and officers requires direct interpersonal interactions and a concerted effort to understand each other. The individuals involved in the working group reported that having a space to meet and listen to each other created deeper respect and trust.

Community buy-in is necessary for any strategic plan to succeed, and the department is working to build support from the community beyond those individuals who participated in the planning process. Working group members have proposed a neighborhood-centric marketing campaign, which includes presentations and discussion sessions in which the same people who developed the plan can talk with community members about the process, why and how decisions were made, and how they think it will improve the lives of all San Franciscans.

## **Looking to the Future**

This process began with an effort to understand the department's current efforts related to community policing and identify areas for growth and how the organization can evolve to meet the community's needs. It also acknowledges that important work is already underway in San Francisco, including crisis intervention team trainings being rolled out to every SFPD member, and a minimum set of 14 community policing activities every district station must perform annually. With the new Strategic Plan, the department can expand these programs and develop new ones to fill any gaps. For example, the model of block-by-block beat assignments implemented by one district station, which received positive feedback from residents and merchants, can be adopted by other captains and spread across the city.

Today's world of ever-advancing technology and instant communication presents a novel environment for police departments. Standing apart from residents as outside observers and peacekeepers is not sufficient to create safe, healthy communities. Community members want to know their officers and have their officers know them. There is an explicit desire from the community that departments be accountable to, transparent with, and invested in the community. In doing so, the department earns the community's trust. The resulting relationships are invaluable when responding to calls for service and performing other law enforcement work.

Building community policing philosophies into every aspect of a department is no small task. It requires time, collaboration, active listening, and open-mindedness. Imbuing not only the policy, but also the behaviors of individual officers, with the spirit of community policing requires a change in how officers and departments see their role in society. While officers used to be viewed as warriors, today's world demands guardians.

Community policing also emphasizes problem-solving, specifically partnering with community members and organizations to both identify and develop solutions to local issues. The Strategic Plan was designed to give bureaus and district stations guidelines to direct their work, while retaining enough flexibility to focus on issues that are particularly relevant to their neighborhoods. This allows community members to take an active role in building a vibrant community that they feel ownership in. As the department moves forward into a new era of policing, this plan will shape how policy is made, officers are trained, and SFPD members interact with their communities.

## **Important Lessons**

Just as modern policing requires law enforcement agencies to work closely with their communities, agencies must learn from each other as they strive for continuous improvement. Several important lessons emerged from this process that may be useful to those exploring how to build a community policing plan:

- Development of the plan must be a true partnership. Community policing necessitates that the community itself have a voice and so should officers of all ranks. Soliciting ideas from these groups separately will not yield the same results, and meetings in which one group or the other does not participate will be unproductive.
- Beginning the process by outlining desired outcomes from community policing will serve as a guide for the work. It is very difficult to define a process if the end goal is not articulated. For example, the metrics developed by the working group focus on the changes they would like to see, rather than specific actions they would like the SFPD to take. "Percentage of community members who feel heard"; "Percentage change in number of use of force incidents, by race/ethnicity"; and "Number of officers who say they have personal relationships with community members" are just a few of the 133 possible metrics they brainstormed.

- Diverse viewpoints (by demographics, geography, politics, background, opinion of the police, and more) are critical for creating a plan that can be accepted as legitimate by the community.
- Transparency and an open, accessible process are just as important as the resulting plan in earning the community's trust; the act alone of creating a community policing plan is not enough. The community members involved in creating the plan should provide input about how to make the process as inviting and available as possible.

The SFPD used many community policing strategic plans as models in creating its own and is interested in sharing details of the process; lessons learned; and the final goals, objectives, metrics, and strategies with other departments that seek to progress with their own plans. Those interested in exploring any part of the process or using the outcomes to inform their own community policing work should reach out to the SFPD Community Engagement Division at [sfpdcommunityrelations@sfgov.org](mailto:sfpdcommunityrelations@sfgov.org).

**William “Bill” Scott** was appointed as the chief of police of the San Francisco Police Department in January 2017 after serving 27 years in the Los Angeles Police Department. While at the LAPD, he rose through the ranks to become deputy chief of LAPD’s South Bureau.

Commander **David Lazar** has been a member of the San Francisco Police Department for more than 26 years. He has served in various capacities in the Patrol, Investigations, Special Operations, and Administration Bureaus. Commander Lazar served as a captain for 9 years and is currently the commander of the newly formed Community Engagement Division.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Collaborative Reform Initiative, *An Assessment of the San Francisco Police Department* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2016), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, *Community Policing Defined* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2014), 1.

<sup>3</sup> San Francisco Police Department, *Community Policing and Problem Solving*, 2007, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Collaborative Reform Initiative, *An Assessment of the San Francisco Police Department*, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Collaborative Reform Initiative, *An Assessment of the San Francisco Police Department*, 105.