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The cops and the kids: Can community outreach transform policing?



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Charleston police officer Frankye Johnson works with her lunch buddy, Quantazia Johnson, on a Earth Day crossword puzzle during lunch Wednesday at Mitchell Elementary School. Officer Johnson likes working with the children and hopes she is able to instill values and let students know she is there to support them. PAUL ZOELLER/STAFF



About a month after he first arrived in Charleston, Police Chief Greg Mullen went for a walk, in uniform, through the East Side. He was joined by Deputy Chief Jerome Taylor, also in uniform. When they encountered children in the predominantly low-income, black East Side neighborhood, Mullen was distressed at their reaction to the two cops.

“Kids would run away when they saw us,” Mullen said. “For me, that’s not acceptable, that’s not going to work.”



He noticed something else during those early days on the job in 2006: At homicide scenes, young children often would gather at the perimeter, gawking, and it was clear they had disdain for the police.

“We need to do

Enlarge Charleston police officer Peter Farrell talks with Danearis Washington during lunch on Wednesday at Mitchell Elementary School. Farrell has been involved with Camp Hope for 10 years and says it allows him to build a close relationship with people in the community in an informal manner. Paul Zoeller/Staff

something to change the perception and mindset of children in that community,” he thought to himself.

It wasn’t long before he hit upon an idea: Camp Hope. The project was the first of what would be a string of initiatives, large and small, meant to encourage engagement between the police and area residents.

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It signaled Mullen's agenda of soft reform within the department and a determination to become more attuned to the needs of a community struggling with poverty, unemployment, crime, health issues and more, Mullen said.

In the wake of the Walter Scott shooting in North Charleston, which has fueled a national conversation about police behavior, abuse of power and a deeply rooted distrust of authority among many blacks, outreach efforts by police departments can provide a mechanism for improving attitudes and interactions, Mullen and other law enforcement experts said.

Residents get a chance to meet police officers and better understand how local law enforcement works, and police potentially benefit by becoming more sensitive to the challenges faced by members of the community. The concept sounds good, but to what extent is it being implemented? And is it working?

'Keep them safe'

The Camp Hope project took shape thanks to Mullen's participation in the Riley Institute's Diversity Leadership Initiative in 2007. He was on a team that included Paul Stoney of the Cannon Street Y; Tim Scott, then on Charleston County Council; Elise Davis-McFarland, vice president at Trident Technical College; Jeanette Florence of First Citizen's Bank; Tasha Gandy of Spoleto Festival USA; and Bill Settlemeyer, president and CEO of Setcom Media.

Mullen pitched the idea to his teammates: Some kids on the East Side attended summer day camps, but none had anything to do in the evening except linger on street corners. They were victims of poverty, boredom and, sometimes, more sinister forces, Mullen said.

"I felt that some of them were hopeless," he said. They received no supervision, no encouragement. Opportunity was sorely lacking. Mullen wanted to start an evening summer camp that would provide younger children with a safe refuge from the streets, extracurricular activities and, crucially, interaction with police in a nonthreatening environment.

By June that year, the program was up and running, mostly relying on in-kind donations. Eight years later, it's expanded to four schools, includes both elementary and middle school students, operates two of its camps during the day and provides hot meals, field trips in a donated van, recreational activities and educational programs.

"One of the things we wanted to do with this is show these kids many things they probably haven't seen before," Mullen said.

Based at Sanders-Clyde Elementary, Haut Gap Middle, West Ashley Middle and the Charleston

Charter School for Math and Science, the four Camp Hopes now serve about 120 kids each summer. About 20 police officers are involved, many of whom serve in the public schools, along with volunteer parents and counselors and numerous strategic partners, Mullen said. The curriculum is based on personal and social responsibility, and each week of the program features a different value: respect, attitude, teamwork and so on.



Enlarge Protesters with Black Lives Matters surround a car as they block traffic on Remount Road at Shelton Street on Monday afternoon.
Brad Nettles/staff

It's about developing personal relationships, Mullen said.

"These kids have a better understanding of what the police do — and who they are," he said. "It's not just a uniform they see. The flip side is, those officers get to know those kids and what they go through."

What they go through often is terrible: exposure to violence that can desensitize young people, whole days without food, except for what they get at Camp Hope, learning struggles and more.

"Violence becomes normal," Mullen said. "The way to break that is to have someone they trust intervene. I hate to think we're going to keep seeing this cycle of hate and violence."

Seeking justice

Over the years, the North Charleston Police Department, too, has organized or participated in outreach initiatives in an effort to gain the trust of the Hispanic and black communities. Grass-roots groups also have been formed, such as the Citizens Patrol Against Drugs (CPAD) in the Liberty Hill neighborhood, which helped deter drug transactions with support provided by North Charleston police.

The Rev. Jeremy Rutledge, who co-chairs with the Rev. Nelson Rivers the juvenile justice committee of the Charleston Area Justice Ministry, said his group has been actively engaged with North Charleston police for two years, seeking ways to reduce incarceration rates of young nonviolent offenders.

Other North Charleston police initiatives include several started under former Police Chief Jon Zumalt, such as Cool To Be In School, which provides students with school supplies; Community Roll Call, a series of barbecues and raffles; Kids and Cops, annual Christmas shopping excursions; and Operation Safe Summer, which assigns school resource officers to

city-sponsored summer camps that offer law enforcement classes and mentoring.

Since Eddie Driggers became chief, the department has instituted the Cops Athletic Program, which started last year with basketball and girls powder-puff football. Police officers serve as coaches. "They get to know these kids and play with them on sports they like," Driggers said.

He secured a pink police cruiser, named Hope, to show solidarity with both the powder-puff team and breast cancer patients. And he started the PAY Program (Police and Youth), which trains officers to mentor kids and work toward lowering high school dropout rates.

"It's paid mighty dividends," Driggers said. "Young people see us as integral. They get to know who we are."

Driggers also is encouraging residents to schedule "porch visits" with police officers, opportunities to talk informally and develop relationships. Soon, he said, the police department will organize spelling bees.

These low-cost efforts rely on partnerships with other city offices and community organizations, Driggers said. There is no significant funding allocated to them.

"When you start an initiative on a zero budget, you're really asking police officers to do their jobs during the day and volunteer at night," he said. "And every one of them has stepped up."

Rep. David Mack, whose constituents mostly reside in North Charleston, said he was involved with the Rev. Augustus Robinson and Zumalt in community relations meetings, which "worked well." Now Mack intends to promote more civic engagement between police and residents, he said.

To change the culture and address the blue code of silence, "we have to put everything on the table," he said. "It's not only procedure but behavior. That's the tough part."

No secrets

Robert Stewart (), a consultant and former State Law Enforcement Division chief who retired in 2007 after 33 years, said community outreach is essential but hardly enough to reform police and change public attitudes. What's needed, he said, is a comprehensive approach.

"Looking at it holistically, one thing is community relations. ... Once you get past competent people professionally trained who can do their job, then the rest of it is relationships," Stewart said. "If you wait until something happens to build a relationship, it's too late. Things are always going to happen." "Police departments therefore must reach out to all segments of the

always going to happen. Police departments therefore must reach out to all segments of the population: neighborhood associations, minority groups, the religious community and others, including the media.

“How you deal with the media is a critical thing,” he said. “You’ve got to have credibility, and integrity. “Everything has to be built around that. ... When things go bad, relationships are either going to get you through it or not get you through it.”

But police forces also must assess the way they recruit, hire and train officers, the salaries they pay, the psychological monitoring and therapy they provide and the technology they put to use, Stewart said.

“You’ve got to have transparency. There are no secrets,” Stewart said. In the case of a police shooting, the results of the investigation will be made public sooner or later. “Anyone can see what the quality of the investigation into a police shooting is once it’s concluded.”

Two-way street

Paul Stoney, director of the Cannon Street Y and Mullen’s active Camp Hope partner, said the Charleston police chief is very involved in the project, often showing up to meet young participants.

“As a result of this, we have seen the relationship between the police department and the community grow,” Stoney said. “But programs like Camp Hope, in my opinion, are only the tip of the iceberg as it relates to police department and community development. We are in desperate need of programs ... that sensitize police about the community, because it’s a two-way street.”

Stoney, who grew up in New York City, said he remembers how a police officer often would pat kids on the head and ask how they were doing. Cops and kids knew one another, he said. In contrast, he recently was pulled over at 2 a.m. by two white North Charleston police officers who used the excuse that his fraternity license plate frame partly obscured the phrase “State of South Carolina” on the plate.

He and his wife were dressed in formal attire, returning home in their red corvette from a dinner party. They had exited Interstate 26 onto Highway 78 and signaled to turn into a Wendy’s lot when the blue lights flashed. The first thing the male officer asked was, “Is this your car?”

“That hurt my feelings,” Stoney said. And it angered him, for the question implied that maybe this car didn’t belong to him or, worse, that it *shouldn’t* belong to him. It was disrespectful,

hostile and racist, Stoney said. He received no ticket and no warning. So why pull him over? It got him thinking about the excuses police use to stop drivers and how common it is to threaten and warn rather than inform and serve.

“Something needs to be done in order to create a system where people’s lives matter, and African-American males, especially, are not profiled,” he said. “The stakes are high in law enforcement, so should be accountability.”

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