



Officer Natalie Pehote works with one of the civilian interpreters on a case.

Clearwater's Operation Apoyo Hispano

BY JIM WEISS AND MICKEY DAVIS

The relationship between the Clearwater, FL, Police and Clearwater's Hispanic community has improved dramatically due to an innovative program developed through the joint efforts of several state and federal agencies and community-based organizations. Departments can duplicate this program across the United States.

About four years ago, the city of Clearwater experienced a dramatic increase in its non-English speaking Hispanic community, which had grown from a small number to 15% of the city's population of about 100,000. With only five

bilingual officers on its 250-officer police force, there was not always someone available who could communicate with the Hispanic residents.

The department also discovered that the young— mostly Mexican males who worked in construction or at hotels on the beach— seemed to have an inherent fear of the police. Often they would not cooperate with investigations, even if the victim was someone they knew. Other culturally based, dark sides to the crime problem were crimes not being reported, domestic violence, males seeking out prostitutes, and child neglect

In 1995 and 1996, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) asked the Clearwater Police to assist them in making sweeps of businesses that hired large numbers of illegally immigrated Hispanics. In the spirit of helping another law enforcement agency, the police department agreed. This turned out to be a mistake.

INS didn't deport these people, so they were left in the

Joining
Hands



Officer William Farias is explaining the command bus to two Tampa YWCA employees.

community without jobs. Even today there is bitterness within Clearwater's Hispanic community.

The Clearwater Police at first didn't understand why they received no help when investigating a crime, nor could they provide necessary police services to a segment of the population with whom they couldn't communicate. They knew something had to be done to create an understanding on both sides.

In researching the problem, they found out what a number of uniformed patrol officers had been telling the police leadership for years: the number of Hispanics was rapidly increasing. About 10 years ago, new residents began coming from Hidalgo, a state north of Mexico City. Families and friends came by word of mouth, hearing that there was plenty of work in Clearwater and not much INS pressure. They bused from Hidalgo to the border and paid a people smuggler \$2,000 per person to get them across the border. They then worked their way across the United States to Clearwater.

Outreach

In 1999 the city of Clearwater created the Hispanic Task Force, made up of representatives from city departments that have a lot of public contact. The police department, under the direction of Chief Sid Klein, played a major role. Clearwater had already been designated a federal Weed and Seed site. Coincidentally, Hispanics heavily populated many of the Weed and Seed areas.

In 2000 Officer William Farias of the Clearwater Police Department was appointed to the new position of Hispanic Outreach Officer, in which he acted as liaison between the police department and the community, as well as with the city government. Deputy Chief Dewey Williams, along with members of the Hispanic Task Force and several others, traveled to Hidalgo, Mexico, to study the cultural differences between the two countries.

But it was only after five other groups—the YWCA of Tampa Bay, the U.S. Attorney's Office, the Regional Community Policing

Institute, the Mexican Government and the local community— began to work with the task force that the many pieces of the puzzle came together and a program was developed that is a model for law enforcement agencies nationwide.

Program Composition

The police and city officials held a public forum and asked Hispanic community leaders to tell them how the police could improve their service and communicate with the Hispanic community. They came out of the meeting with a list of 21 items.

Since few other Florida police departments had such a program, the Clearwater Police Department had to be creative. The new program developed was called Joining Hands: Operation Apoyo Hispano. It was made up of ten parts, each integral to the success of the program.

Communicators

The Clearwater Police Department requested and received permission from the U.S. Department of Justice to use funds from the Weed and Seed



Sergeant Joe Young works with a young boy on his golf swing.

program to create a pool of 15 bilingual interpreters (funding will continue for this through a \$65,000 grant from the Edward Byrne Memorial Grant Program). The police department and the YWCA trained them in police procedure, teaching them to translate verbatim. They also taught them to notify the officers if anything was said that would put those officers at risk, and to take notes in case a case goes to court.

These individuals wear special vests designating them as interpreters in English and Spanish. They live within 20 minutes of the center of Clearwater and are available on call to assist police officers at the scene. Between February and November 2001, they were called out 70 times—everyone involved was impressed with the quality of their translations and how they handled the situations.

Victim Advocacy

The YWCA program has two full-time, bilingual victim advocates to help victims of crime by explaining the criminal justice system and even accompanying the crime victim to court.

Mobile Outreach Program

It was necessary to overcome the resident's fear of American police reinforced by Mexican news media coverage of U.S./Mexican border problems, and to overcome their distrust of those in uniform in general. Because the community wouldn't come to the police, the police decided to go to the community.

The program was named Project Next Step, referring to the next step in community policing. Using a mobile command post vehicle that was developed for hurricane disasters and sat unused most of the year, the police department goes where the Hispanic community gathers: at the soccer fields and the church.

They present cultural programs as well as information about government services, including video presentations outdoors on a plasma screen. In the past year they have also conducted summer camps in conjunction with teachers from Mexico who told children about Mexican heritage, had Officer Friendly visit the elementary schools to discuss safety, held a Public Safety Expo in the community and given out free bicycle helmets obtained through a grant. The outreach bus is also used as a mobile TV station and police substation in neighborhoods that need extra policing.

Officer Recruitment

The department is looking at long-term goals by trying to recruit bilingual officers. This is a problem, though, because the applicant pool is small and the demand for bilingual officers has skyrocketed. The department will offer bilingual incentive pay for new officers modeled after a program in Texas, but first they must pass a proficiency test. In the test an officer must translate a tape from Spanish as well as respond to a scenario in which a woman is frantic and the recruit must respond to her satisfactorily in Spanish.

Television and Radio

The program uses Spanish language

radio stations as well as live television to reach the community. Blueline CPD is a local, live interactive television show in which Clearwater officers answer questions called in by the viewers.

Community Education and Crime Prevention

The Clearwater Police Department and the YWCA conduct programs in both English and Spanish. Topics include immigration, landlord/tenant issues, employment, child abuse, domestic violence, education, etc. These informative sessions are free and some are offered totally in Spanish.

English for Speakers of Other Languages

These classes will be conducted in the new Latin Outreach Center to help residents become familiar with English and better able to connect with the society around them, and, in the long run, make them more employable and eligible for higher paying jobs. GED instruction and job training will also be offered.

Basic Spanish for Officers

Clearwater officers and police employees are taught basic Spanish by the Pinellas County Schools so they will not have to rely entirely on the YWCA interpreters. The 10 session series instructs classes of 20–25 people at a time. About 65 officers expressed an interest in learning Spanish even before the classes were offered. Other employees will be taught as well.

Currently there are no bilingual employees in the 911 Communications Center, so the Center uses an AT&T "Language Line." This connects the employee with a bilingual person who then translates via a three-way call. Not only is this expensive, but precious time is lost in an emergency.

Training

Job skills training will be offered at the police facility.

Partnership with Regional Community Policing Institute

This partnership has resulted in the production of a video and printed material to assist other law enforcement agencies dealing with similar issues. The video may be obtained from RCPI by calling Susan

Majko at (727) 341-4581 or contacting her at majkos@spjc.edu.

Clearwater Latin Outreach Center

In order to bring Hispanic residents of the city in contact with city services, a new 6,000 square foot Latin Outreach Center, Centro de Apoyo Latino, will be opened near the Clearwater Police Department. This building will house many services to be operated by the YWCA, including a bilingual child care center for Hispanic residents as well as city employees, office space for the Clearwater Police Hispanic Outreach Officer, victim advocacy and interpreter programs for the police and other city departments, classrooms for language instruction, meeting room space, office space for a representative of the Mexican Consulate who will have information on visas, passports, immigration and trade, office space for a representative of the Government of Hidalgo (the state in Mexico that is the home to most of Clearwater's Hispanic community), and space for health and nutrition instruction by the Pinellas County Health Department.

Funding

Programs such as this one in Clearwater would not be possible without the partnership and funding of several agencies.

The city of Clearwater was able to obtain a 6,000 square foot former day care center to use as the Latin Outreach Center in downtown Clearwater. They were also able to match the \$50,000 in funds from the YWCA of Tampa Bay for renovations of the building.

The YWCA of Tampa Bay is an autonomous women's movement providing leadership for social change. The organization wanted to expand its Hispanic outreach, and obtained a \$165,000 grant from the Allegany Franciscan Foundation to renovate the former childcare center.

Once renovated, they will lease the building from Clearwater for a dollar a year in exchange for managing the programs at the facility. They will also provide the two paid bilingual victim advocates who will be located at the site. In addition, they financed

the interpreter program after the Weed and Seed funds ran out and will sponsor teen and intergenerational programs.

Donna Bucella of the U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Florida, feels that all over the country, law enforcement must reach out to the communities they serve. This office funds the Weed and Seed programs throughout the United States. They feel that this leads to safer neighborhoods, and that it is better if the first contact immigrants have with the local government is through outreach programs and explanations of the services they have available to them.

The Florida Regional Community Policing Institute (FRCPI) serves all of the communities in Florida. It is one of 28 in the country and receives funding from the Department of Justice to develop innovative policing throughout Florida. It is interested in developing programs that can be replicated in other communities around the country, and funded a video about Clearwater's program.

Advice

When asked what advice he could give to other areas facing similar communication and cultural problems with members of their policing community, Williams of the Clearwater Police advised to make an impact, have an audience, and if the audience won't come, go to them. Listen to rank and file officers. They are out there every day and know the problems they are facing. They will be the first to recognize that there are language barriers or a change in population.

Don't wait for a crisis to act. Build a relationship with the community ahead of time. Establish contacts with its leaders—they can help solve problems before they get out of hand. Clearwater's Hispanic community is still relatively new, and has not yet experienced organized crime or gangs. The police department is working to be ahead of this and not just react to a crisis as it happens.

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