

The Providence Police Department— Family Services of Rhode Island Partnership

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IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, A FAMILY SERVICE OF RHODE ISLAND (FSRI) liaison worker is on a nightly ride-along, responding with police officers to a domestic violence call. While the police question the mother, the Family Service Worker spends time with three young girls found huddled together in a bedroom; one has just thrown up. The FSRI liaison worker calls the clinician on call to respond to the scene to provide crisis intervention, education, and support to the family.

Because the FSRI police liaison worker is a native Spanish-speaking person, the Spanish-speaking mother is more willing to give information to the police than she has been in the past. The girls reveal that there is a loaded gun in the bedroom, and the police seize it. The perpetrator is arrested.

Follow-up by the liaison worker and a police officer helps the family get enrolled in a social service program that will provide home-based services and will help the girls cope with the arrest of their father.

Three years ago, the Providence Police Department, with the support of Mayor David Cicilline, began a partnership with FSRI and other city agencies to enhance the Police Department's community-oriented policing program. The goal of this partnership was to replicate the Child Development/Community Policing (CDCP) model—a program developed in the early 1990s by Dr. Steven Marans of the Yale Child Study Center with help from Dean Esserman, then assistant chief of police in New Haven and now chief of police in Providence. The CDCP was based on research that demonstrated that children exposed to violence or abuse are 59 percent more likely to be arrested as juveniles and 30 percent more likely to be arrested for committing a violent crime in adulthood than their peers.¹

Over the past three years, the Providence partnership has given help to hundreds of children and families involved in homicides, sexual assaults, stabbings, shootings, drownings, and other traumas.

WHY IS THIS PARTNERSHIP SO IMPORTANT?

In a city with a growing immigrant population, families often struggle with problems relating to employment, housing, education, and medical issues, and they often are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of crime. Many immigrants have brought with them histories of trauma and horrendous stories from their homelands, sometimes even at the hands of their local "police." Not only do many of them have difficulty communicating with our police; they fear and lack trust in our laws.

The Providence Police Department—Family Services collaboration enables both agencies to reach people earlier, to access people who otherwise might be unreachable by traditional social service agencies, to prevent escalation of violence, to divert people into the mental health system, and to educate victims and help them participate in the criminal justice system.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE PARTNERSHIP

Recently, in his comprehensive evaluation of Chicago's community-policing initiative, Wesley Skogan concluded that the challenge for the future is to find ways of responding to the problems facing cities' newest immigrants.² To meet this challenge, the Providence collaboration focuses on districts with a high proportion of Spanish-speaking



Monthly Case Consultation meeting at Family Service of Rhode Island

residents. Police and family care workers have visited schools, attended community meetings, and established relationships with community leaders and neighborhood organizations in these districts.

Bilingual Police FSRI Liaison Worker

In addition to deploying on-call clinicians to critical incidents, the program employs a bilingual police liaison worker who rides with officers on weekday nights, focusing on the most crime-ridden districts. Because of her consistent presence, police have come to trust her as "one of their own." Further, many immigrant families feel more comfortable speaking their native language with her and often are more willing to give information to the police through her.

The police liaison also spends one day a week in the downtown Providence police substation at the Kennedy Plaza bus station, where hundreds of teenagers, homeless persons, and others congregate. Working closely with that district's police sergeant, the liaison has provided many adolescents with assistance, from help with pregnancy tests and negotiating with a parent to replacing a stolen backpack or facilitating a youth's return to school. Many of these juveniles have been victims of neglect and abuse and are often just a step away from crime themselves.

Family and Culturally-Relevant Intervention

Implicit in a family response is the recognition of cultural and language issues that can impede or improve police-community relations. To meet this need, the Providence Police Department actively recruits minorities and women into the force. In addition, the native Spanish-speaking FSRI police liaison and FSRI workers who support her represent Providence's culturally diverse community (which includes Southeast Asians and African Americans).

Some of the city's foreign-born residents are undocumented and try to avoid any contact with the police. Even those with legal status do not always understand U.S. laws or legal processes. Many parents are themselves victims of abuse, have experienced trauma, and need education and support to help their children. Many family members have told police that the program's language support and cultural sensitivity are critical to its success. And the police, in turn, have found increased cooperation with their investigations through this partnership.

Proactive Planning for Drug Raids and Other Law Enforcement Activity

When the police identify a house used for drug trafficking, they often notice that there are children living in the home. Once they establish enough evidence to plan a raid, police notify the liaison worker. Following the arrests of adults in the home, the liaison worker provides food and other types of support to the children and explains the situation until relatives or Child Protective Service workers arrive. Similarly, police notify the liaison worker prior to early morning sweeps on outstanding warrants, especially those for domestic violence, to enable the on-call clinicians to respond to families and children.

City-Wide Networking

In Providence, police districts are decentralized, and officers know their neighborhoods, community leaders, and local groups. Representatives from FSRI, local schools, street gang workers, probation and parole officials, the state attorney general's office, the U.S. Attorney's office, faith-based organizations, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) workers, Weed and Seed leaders, and other community groups regularly attend weekly command staff meetings, where they collaborate with the police to plan responses to upcoming neighborhood events. All attendees have the opportunity to engage in an open, constructive dialogue about crime prevention, family and community safety, and improving the overall quality of life for residents.

FUNDING DEVELOPMENTS

Initially, this partnership was funded by the RI Foundation and Victims of Crime Act funds. As it expanded, funding was also provided by the City of Providence through Community Development Block Grant money. The United Way has supported counseling services for follow-up care to victims. This work has paved the way for financial support from the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, through a "Safe Start: Promising Approaches" grant. Some of this grant money can be used for law enforcement training, particularly in the area of working with elders who are victims of crime.

RESULTS

Each year the Providence police-family services partnership serves about 300 victims of crime and 200 other residents, of whom 55 percent are children (19 and younger). The partnership handles many types of calls, including child abuse, sexual abuse, DUI/DWI, domestic violence, sexual assault, incest, homicide, elder abuse, abduction, carjacking, robbery, hostage situation, arson, drive-by shooting, and larceny. The ethnic breakdown of those served by the program in 2006 was 22 percent white, 15 percent black/African American, 50 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 13 percent other.


(Those figures are based on demographic information obtained by the liaison at the scene and analyzed by the Research and Evaluation Department at FSRI.)

A survey of police found that they overwhelmingly endorse the partnership. In fact, 97 percent of the police surveyed reported that this partnership has had a positive impact on the community. (The survey was conducted at the Annual Police Retreat at the Rhode Island Foundation in 2006.) And crime statistics in Providence continue to go down: Violent crime is down 14.5 percent in 2006, and overall serious crime is down 12 percent.³

In addition to providing acute response to crime scenes, the police-family service collaboration has developed related initiatives that have benefited the community beyond initial expectations, including:

- Regular availability of culturally-responsive staffers,
- Nightly availability of a bilingual police liaison worker (who often is able to intervene before a critical incident occurs),
- Regular attendance at community meetings,
- Language support at the police station and in the community,
- Proactive planning to assist children after drug raids and other law enforcement activity,
- Liaison with Child Protective Services,
- A more vigorous response to the homeless and the elderly,
- Obtaining shelter for victims and families.

The relationship between the partners continues to grow. Police and Family Service workers call on each other for assistance, informally and formally; this overlap of services is an important hidden outcome of the program. As a result of the program, shelters have been made more easily available to victims; Child Protective Services has been able to improve its handling of abusive, neglectful families; there is more frequent follow-through on restraining/no-contact orders by victims; victims are cooperating more; and residents express greater respect for the police.

Underlying this program's success is the daily support provided by the Command Staff and officers, by Mayor David Cicilline, and by Margaret Holland McDuff, CEO of Family Service of Rhode Island. When officers and social workers know that their work is valued by city leaders, the often extraordinary efforts required in this challenging field are even more rewarding. 


1. Avendano, M., Gewirtz, A. & Harris, D. (2006). "Improving Access to Care for Traumatized Children: Law Enforcement-Mental Health Collaborations for Child Witnesses to Violence." *CURA Reporter* (Summer), 28-29.

2. *Police and Community in Chicago*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

3. Smith, Gregory. *Providence Police Take a Bite Out of Violent Crime*. Providence Journal, 2 Sept. 2006, p. A3.

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as to the crucial planning and research topics, issues and concerns they would like to see addressed at this venue.

If you would like to attend or want to request further information on the upcoming Planning & Research Directors' Forum, please feel free to contact Dr. Bruce Taylor or Doug Abrahamson. 

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1. Including "return on investment," "downsizing," "restructuring," "quality management programs," and "operations management (quantitative) techniques."

2. Policy and practice decisions are made using the highest levels of "evidence" available, which then are used to support the adoption of program ideas/concepts or the cancellation of existing programs.

3. RBM is about defining the anticipated results of a project or a program, measuring the progress towards achieving those results, and reporting on results finally achieved.