Impact of Community Policing Efforts

Objective

Have the Austin Police Department's community policing efforts since 2016 been effective?

Background

Community policing involves police departments building relationships with the community. These relationships can help police departments identify and solve public safety issues and make communities safer. The Austin Police Department (APD) currently defines community policing as "building positive relationships, one contact at a time, by being present, engaged, and visible in [the] community to address crime and improve the general well-being of residents and visitors."

The concept of community policing has existed in Austin for many years but in 2016 APD hired Matrix Consulting Group (Matrix) to assess its community policing efforts. As a result of this review, Matrix gave APD over 60 recommendations to improve community policing efforts. We reported on APD's status of implementing Matrix's recommendations in August 2019. At that time, we found APD had implemented 40 of 60 recommendations.

What We Found

APD has taken steps to improve its community policing efforts since 2016 and has seen some positive effects, but more time is needed to determine if APD's efforts have been effective.

APD made several changes in response to recommendations Matrix made in 2016. For example, APD developed a community policing policy and added community policing principles to its training programs. APD also started several new programs that align with community policing principles.

When we reviewed how APD's efforts have affected their relationship with the community though, we found mixed results. We noted some positive changes and some areas where APD continues to face challenges. For example:

- When comparing results of a 2016 APD employee survey to results of a survey we conducted in 2019, about 7% more respondents agreed APD does a good job planning services to the community, while nearly 11% fewer respondents agreed that APD has the support of the community; and,

- When comparing results of a 2016 Austin community survey to results of a survey we conducted in 2019, respondents in 2019 rated individual experiences with APD staff higher, but about 20% fewer respondents agreed that officers were professional in their contacts with them.

One possible reason why the results of APD's community policing efforts have been mixed is that community policing efforts address issues of culture, trust, and confidence both within APD and between APD and the public. Recent issues suggest there are deeply rooted challenges APD must face to create a department-wide culture that is fair, impartial, and procedurally just, which APD states it is aiming for in its community policing policy. While APD's community policing efforts since 2016 appear to have helped establish a foundation to support community policing goals, APD must address these issues and then continue to build on the foundation they have built to produce the change that they and the community want.

Community Policing

What We Found, Continued

APD's ability to improve community policing outcomes may be limited because of issues with the way it measures performance.

- APD collects data on several performance measures related to community policing but does not have an established process for using the data to understand and improve community policing efforts.

- APD does not have measures to assess the changes they made to support community policing. For example, APD made changes to how they recruit and train cadets but does not appear to have measures to determine if these changes have achieved desired results.

- APD needs a better process for documenting successful and unsuccessful community policing strategies. While successful strategies may be shared informally across the department, there did not appear to be a formal system to record this information. Such a system would help APD leaders prioritize impactful practices moving forward.

- APD could make its performance measurement process more open and transparent. It was unclear how much APD involved community stakeholders when it identified performance measures. Also, APD did not have a single place to view data on APD's community policing measures and efforts.

While APD has reported an increase in the amount of time officers have to engage with the community, it appears officers may not be able to use this time for community engagement activities.

Effective community policing requires law enforcement officers to proactively engage in community engagement activities, such as participating in community events, building relationships with local business owners, and increasing visibility in neighborhoods. In 2016, Matrix recommended APD increase the amount of time patrol officers have for community engagement to at least 35%.

APD determines the time available for community engagement by calculating uncommitted time. Uncommitted time is the time officers have available when they are not responding to calls. APD reported an increase in uncommitted time from 22% in 2016 to 27% in 2018. However, we found this measure does not accurately represent the time officers can spend on community engagement for two main reasons:

- Uncommitted time it is not generally available as a single block of time during an officer's shift. Instead, it is broken up into small blocks of time between calls. Since officers appear to be going from one call to another, the blocks of time between calls can be very short and not likely usable for community engagement activities.

- Officers have many responsibilities to complete during uncommitted time, including writing reports, reading policy updates, and checking email, so it is not likely that there is much time left for community engagement.

Because of these challenges, it is not clear if officers have more time available for community engagement in 2019 than they did in 2016. Many patrol officers who responded to our survey of APD employees indicated they do not have adequate time to engage with residents because of high call volume and issues with understaffing. APD managers said similar things during interviews.

What We Recommend

The Chief of Police should:

- establish and implement a process for measuring and reporting on the effectiveness of community policing efforts to continuously improve efforts, prioritize impactful practices, and guide next steps for community policing; and

- develop and implement a plan to ensure patrol officers have time to engage with the community in ways outside of responding to calls.