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Community-Oriented Investigation at the North Miami Beach Police Department

By David Singh

One can't help but like Ron Friedman and his dedication to helping others. He said he can't remember a time when he didn't have a strong sense of right and wrong. That's why he didn't flinch when he was approached by drug smugglers while working in an airport in the 1970s. The smugglers wanted to stow their drugs in the gasoline barrels he used to refuel airplanes. Friedman turned them in and worked with the police to bring them to justice. It was then that he realized he wanted to join the police force, eventually becoming a homicide detective in the North Miami Beach Police Department (NMBPD). Because homicide investigations are among the most sensitive and important functions of a police department, the best detectives are assigned to the homicide squad. Friedman was a good detective. He liked the thrill of catching a lucky break on a case, he liked being an elite among the elites, and,



Commander Friedman and Detective Schuster review notes in a police investigation.

most of all, he liked catching bad guys and helping to put them away.

In 1994, something happened in NMBPD that changed the way the entire department would conduct

police work. Police Chief William Berger and his staff were designing an innovative approach to investigations. As described in a proposal to seed these changes, "the present-day job description for a detective will be replaced by a new role—the Major Crime Problem-Solving Specialist." Friedman and his colleagues had little idea about the changes in store. Over the next few years, the detective functions of NMBPD would be transformed. At first, Friedman struggled with his new role, but later he became one of the department's strongest problem-solving advocates.

The changes that took place in NMBPD in the mid-1990s marked the emergence of a new form of policing for the 21st century. This is the story of that emergence, the conditions that led to its arrival in North Miami Beach, and its evolution over the next several years.

Community Policing Hits North Miami Beach

In 1994, problem solving was not a new concept to NMBPD. As early as 1987, Chief Berger had sent officers to Flint, Michigan, to visit the Flint Police Department (FPD). At the time, FPD was home to one of the nation's first explicitly designed community-oriented policing programs. There, NMBPD officers learned about the value of decentralized community-oriented policing methods that emphasized neighborhood-based assignments, use of proactive crime prevention strategies, and development of problem-solving skills. Not long after, NMBPD created its first community-oriented policing unit, designed around the classic tenets of community policing.

The Hallowed Detective?

"All was not well," said NMBPD Deputy Chief Linda Loizzo. "The addition of a community-oriented policing unit to our force was a step in the right direction, but the chief, I, and others in the department recognized a problem in our detective squad. We had a unit of prima donnas."

Friedman, now a commander in charge of the investigations unit, admitted, "We were like the country



Deputy Chief Loizzo and Chief Berger are the architects of North Miami Beach's community-oriented policing initiative.

club unit, segregated from the rest of the department. We didn't really interact with one another and rarely interacted with other units. We were truly an island unto ourselves."

However, haughty attitudes in the investigations unit were not the crux of the problem. Poor intradepartmental communication and a case-by-case approach to crime made it hard to do good detective work. Friedman acknowledged that these factors made his work frustrating, because detectives almost always had to rely on getting a lucky break to solve a case. Strategically analyzing crime trends, seeking the community's help to solve cases, and sharing information within and among

departments were all foreign concepts at the time.

"We had to do something different," said Loizzo. "Internally, we were driven by the need for change in our investigations unit. Externally, we were driven by increases in crime."

Working with the chief and other senior officers, Loizzo helped devise a plan that would shift investigation work from a reactive to a proactive model. With the aid of new technologies, new skills, and new organizational structures, the old-school detective was to be replaced by a new-generation problem solver. To seed its transformation efforts, NMBPD received a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance.

This series is dedicated to the exploration of vital issues in criminal justice program development and management. Case studies highlight the work of progressive, innovative people and programs in state and local criminal justice systems. Although a case study may include a detailed description of the operational aspects of a program, it is not a scientific program evaluation. Rather, it is a document designed to explore the interaction of factors such as collaboration, politics, resources, culture, and others that play a part in successful public management.

Community Investigating

The development of a community-oriented investigations unit did not occur overnight. An integrated approach to investigation required the involvement of all units within NMBPD. Accordingly, the department set out to implement an approach that would modify the policies and practices of the investigations unit and the department at large.

Task Forces

To begin, a new investigative structure was designed that centered around the development of integrated major crime problem-solving task forces. Six task forces were established: auto crimes (e.g., theft, burglary, and carjacking), gang and juvenile crimes, domestic and family violence, robbery, vice, and economic crimes. Detectives assumed new roles as task force coordinators responsible for providing leadership in identifying major crime problems, arriving at solutions, coordinating task force efforts, and training task force members.

The emergence of task forces in the investigations unit marked two important shifts. First, detectives were now expected to look more broadly at the crime issues. Rather than working on a case-by-case basis, a more strategic and integrated approach to the control and prevention of crime was adopted. That meant that detectives could no longer wait for a lucky break on a case. Now, a detective assigned to the robbery task force is expected to look beyond individual cases to identification of robbery trends and patterns. Moreover, detectives are expected to investigate conditions that led to commission of the robberies.

Using this information, detectives can view robberies as problems to solve rather than as cases to crack. If a neighborhood watch needs to be started, detectives are expected to work with the community and other departmental units to do so. If streetlights need to be fixed, detectives are expected to work with city services to restore proper lighting. If a certain neighborhood is being hit unusually hard with crimes, detectives are expected to work with the patrol unit to beef up patrol in the area or work with the gangs unit to determine whether a gang is targeting the area.

Second, detectives are no longer islands unto themselves. The development of task forces imposes a collaborative structure that forces intra- and interdepartmental collaboration and collaborations with the community and other city departments. For example, the Auto Crimes Task Force consists of representatives from other NMBPD units (e.g., the community policing unit), the Hollywood Police Department, the Broward County Sheriff's Office, the Metro Dade Police Department, insurance companies, the state's attorney's office, the National Crime Insurance Bureau, local car dealers, and others.

Accountability and New Mandates

Overnight, detectives were asked to think and act in a fundamentally different manner. The desired shift toward community-oriented investigation would not have occurred without proper guidance from department leadership. The chief and his senior staff made it clear that detectives were accountable for meeting the challenges of their new roles.

“We forced them to hold monthly meetings with their task forces. We’d ask ‘When did you hold your last meeting? I want documentation.’ We created a system where there was no way around the changes we were putting in place,” said Loizzo.

Other mandates were intended to foster better communication and operational integration. A department meeting was held, and each unit was asked to make a presentation about its new roles and responsibilities. This was one of the first occasions for officers to gain an understanding about the duties of their colleagues in other units. Detectives and representatives from other units were asked to attend roll call, a daily event previously attended only by patrol officers. Meetings between the chief and the detectives became routine.

“Attitudes started to change,” said Loizzo. “Detectives started to think differently. Detectives in the domestic violence unit began to think about new issues, like helping victims get to court. As detectives developed stronger ties with the community, they discovered new avenues for their dedication. One detective organized a fundraiser for a young man with cancer. When the fundraiser came up a little short, the detective paid for the young man’s plane ticket to Disney World.”

Community Input Was Essential

Improved communication between detectives and other NMBPD units increased the effectiveness of the investigations unit. Better communication meant better intelligence and more manpower. Perhaps the greatest

boost to the investigations unit came from the community. During the transition to community-oriented investigations, the department relied heavily on the community for the development of task forces.

“They were an essential part of our strategy formation and execution,” said Loizzo. “On one occasion, the Economic Crimes Task Force was tackling the issue of elderly victimization. We invited the public to these meetings. Many elderly people attended. They helped us with intelligence, to develop a strategy, and then went back to their condos and made flyers to alert their neighbors.”

The department founded Club Law and Order and invited the most critical members in each of North Miami Beach’s 22 neighborhoods to participate as club representatives. Regular meetings were held in which the representatives would voice concerns and work with the department to devise solutions. Detectives were expected to attend meetings along with representatives from other units and the department’s leadership.

Other changes included a Citizen’s Police Academy to educate the public about police work, regularly held town meetings, and community service projects organized by NMBPD officers. The public began to realize NMBPD was a hands-on operation with the desire to partner with its residents.

“It was a slow process,” said Loizzo. “Early on, I learned that when people say everything is fine, it means there is a lack of trust. At first, complaints went up, and that was a sign of

progress. But over the years, complaints have gone down. That’s real progress.”

The investigations unit reaped the benefits of better community relations. Growing trust for police among residents became an ally to investigative work, because detectives were able to rely on residents for cooperation and intelligence. Friedman recalled a homicide investigation in which a homeless man had been murdered.

“By this time, the detective working the case knew most of the homeless people in the area,” said Friedman. “He saw one of his homeless acquaintances at the crime scene, questioned him onsite, was led to a suspect, and got a full confession on the same day.”

Collaborating for Success

A shift to community-oriented investigations is an acknowledgment that crime is a complex phenomenon that requires a balanced response. Adopting a balanced approach means that detectives must collaborate better among themselves and with other community stakeholders. NMBPD detectives discovered that effective collaboration helped develop partnerships that facilitated their jobs. This sort of change was remarkable in that it was not merely the product of authoritative decrees. Detectives and other officers learned how to think and act differently. Below are some of the partners NMBPD detectives enlisted for success.

Community Policing Unit

Detectives learned that community officers were among their greatest

resources. Because of their assignments, community officers maintain strong relationships with those who live and work in their jurisdictions. Their rapport with the community became an invaluable asset when detectives were gathering intelligence, interviewing suspects, and working with victims.

Crime Prevention Unit

Developing an integrated approach to crime meant learning how to put prevention to work. The head of the prevention unit worked hard to make it an important part of the department’s efforts to fight crime. Unit activities ranged from helping communities with crime prevention through environmental design to running a Law Enforcement Explorers program for local teens.

The unit’s success had been limited by the lack of integration and coordination with investigative functions of NMBPD. Partnering with the detectives enabled enactment of high-yield and targeted prevention measures. Today, if a robbery occurs in a neighborhood, detectives notify the crime prevention unit, which takes followup action. Among other things, the unit will write a letter to the victim offering tips to help prevent revictimization, warn others in the area to prevent their victimization, and determine whether neighborhood-oriented interventions (e.g., fixing streetlights) could prevent future robberies.

Victims

Adopting a problem-solving approach means focusing more on the needs of victims. Because detectives are in contact with victims early on, they

are in a unique position to help them cope with the crime and to serve as their advocates in the criminal justice system. For Friedman, the issue hits close to home: “My brother was the victim of a violent crime in Michigan, and the local police department did a terrible job of investigating the case. It was like my brother had been victimized twice, once by his perpetrators and again by the police department’s poor response. I vowed never to treat victims in that manner.”

Detective Pam Darden described how a community-oriented investigative approach worked to benefit victims of domestic abuse: “Today, if we are dealing with a domestic abuse case, we’ll put the victim up in a hotel, and give the victim money for food and for the kids. We’ll take them downtown to get an injunction, to a shelter

where they can be safe, and stay with them throughout the legal process. We’ll hold their hands in court if necessary. Before these changes took place, a victim would have been lucky to get even a referral to a local shelter.” Victims became more willing to prosecute their assailants because of the support system.

Local Businesses

Paul Templer, president of the North Miami Beach Chamber of Commerce, recalled the changes that took place in the mid-1990s: “The police department reached out to the entire community. Businesses began to trust the department, and investigators found that it easier to address crime concerns with their help. Soon, businesses were eager to help the department through donations and support.

They donated ice cream and donuts for social events, money for operational expenses, and time if needed.” Local insurance companies emerged as one of NMBPD’s strongest corporate partners.

Major Beth Fernandez recalled, “Before these reforms, detectives who attempted to work auto theft cases might have lacked critical information. In one instance, cars were being stolen solely for the purpose of extracting their airbags and selling them on the black market. While our detectives were being notified when the stolen cars were recovered, the insurance companies were often the first to know that the airbags were missing. By working with the insurance companies, we were able to identify the true motive behind the auto thefts. That information led to a

One Community Activist’s Experiences

Peter Roland lives in Highland Village, North Miami Beach’s only trailer park, and is one of its most outspoken community members. In the 1970s and 1980s, Highland Village was nicknamed “Hooligan Village.” The park had many seasonal residents whose trailers, abandoned during warmer months, were looted and robbed. “The police never came here,” said Roland. “In fact, if you called the police department, they would be surprised to learn that the area was even in their jurisdiction.” Roland feared for his wife and children. “Drug dealers had taken over the park across the street. Prostitution rings were being run out of the trailers. This place was lawless.”

In 1989, Chief Berger took office and made it a priority to make NMBPD more responsive to the community’s needs. He asked for help from residents such as Roland. Through outreach and programs like Club Law and Order, the department and the community began to mend the culture of distrust born of neglect. “It was clear that Chief Berger wanted to create change, but we had a huge communication problem with the police that wouldn’t change overnight,” said Roland. “The community policing unit became a perennial presence, and our attitudes about the department began to change.”

By working together, the department and residents transformed Highland Village into a virtually crime-free community. “We believe that the police cannot do their job without our support,” said Roland. “Thanks to Chief Berger’s outreach and our willingness to work with him, we’ve made substantial inroads to dealing with crime in this area. If you look at areas surrounding North Miami Beach, you’ll find departments falling apart at the seams, crime stats out the roof, and rampant resident fear. We have built a fortress in North Miami Beach, using partnerships as our bricks and mortar. Our community is like an oasis in the madness, and it’s because we’ve learned to work together.”

list of suspects and, eventually, we nabbed the guy who was buying the airbags and selling them for a massive profit. Car thefts went down after that.”

Resistance to Change

Ordered to alter the only approach to investigative work they had ever known, NMBPD detectives’ reactions ranged from fierce resistance to general discomfort.

“Police officers, like anyone else, can be resistant to change,” said Chief Berger. “On the other hand, the average IQ of police officers is 120. They can be very creative if they are challenged and given an environment where they can thrive.”

The greatest challenge for detectives was not grasping the theory behind community-oriented investigations but the practicalities associated with implementing it. One of their biggest hurdles was overcoming a shared fear of public speaking. In the beginning, supervisors would encourage detectives through pep talks and during the presentations they were regularly required to give at community meetings, to colleagues in the department, or at monthly task force meetings.

“I was scared to death about running those task force meetings,” admitted Friedman. “In retrospect, it’s pretty funny—a bunch of tough cops scared to make a five-minute speech—but we had never done it before.”

Detectives soon became comfortable in their new public-speaking roles. Eventually, most came around to the new way of doing business. Those who stubbornly resisted change were either asked to leave NMBPD or left on their own. Most detectives opted

to change because they learned that change was needed. Moreover, once the method clicked there was no turning back.

“It was phenomenal,” said Friedman. “It just started to make sense. Our work became more satisfying. We were working more like a team and getting better results. There was no going back to the old way of doing business.”

Measuring Success in Different Ways

In North Miami Beach, crimes in almost every category have gone down since the inception of community-oriented investigations and corresponding changes in departmental structure and policy. Although declines in crime may be attributable in part to changes in NMBPD, factors such as economy, environment, and a dynamic population base could also be part of the equation. This does not bother Fernandez. For NMBPD, success has come to be measured in different terms.

“The real success story here is our improved status in the community,” said Fernandez. “Over the years, our customer satisfaction ratings have skyrocketed. We currently have an 87-percent approval rating.”

Clearly, numbers do not tell the entire story. In fact, many changes in NMBPD can be linked to successes in the community. Over the years, complaints have gone down, as has fear of crime. The community has begun to behave like a community. Citizens and police are working together to improve the quality of life through shared values and the shared mission of reducing crime. That is perhaps the best measure of success.



Corporal Morales and other patrol officers are essential links to the community.

The Current Situation

Today, if you go looking for the community investigations initiative in NMBPD, chances are you won’t find it. You won’t find the six task forces established in 1994. Depending on whom you talk to, you may be hard-pressed to get a good description of NMBPD’s community-oriented approach to investigations. Why?

“After the changes of 1994 took root, we began to outpace ourselves,” said Fernandez. “The structures that were originally in place were no longer needed. The task forces established in 1994 met the priorities of the department in 1994. Today, it would be silly to mandate an auto theft task force if it did not reflect our focus. Instead, we rely on our detectives to establish task forces on an as-needed basis. They’ve now got the skills and the know-how to do that.”

Perhaps the best way to understand this phenomenon is to understand the original intention of the community-oriented investigations initiative.

“It was not to start a program,” said Loizzo. “Programs have beginnings and ends. We set out to change the culture of policing in our department. Cultural changes endure and are capable of responding to an ever-changing environment.”

Today, detectives no longer have to be told to form a needed task force. Nor do they need to be told to collaborate with the crime prevention unit, community policing unit, businesses, the community, or anyone else. These behaviors have become second nature.

Keeping in Touch

Jodi Schuster is the quintessential community-oriented detective. She’s always in the community. If she’s not tracking down and interviewing suspects, she is talking to residents. “I hate being in the office,” said Schuster. “The community is my most valuable tool. As a detective, I have to know what’s going on to solve cases and help people. I can’t do that from behind a desk.” The joke around NMBPD is that she knows everyone. “You can’t walk anywhere with her,” said Officer Pam Denham, one of Schuster’s partners, “it takes too long. We have to stop every few minutes to talk to someone. But if you ever have a problem or need to gather intelligence on someone, talk to Jodi. She’ll have an answer!”

Unique Factors Contributing to Change

The transformation of NMBPD cannot be explained by a formula. Although it would be impossible to identify a single reason why the shift to community-oriented investigations succeeded in North Miami Beach, several distinct factors played roles.

Change was the only option. After establishment of community-oriented investigations, many senior detectives retired. This enabled the department to bring in new officers who were less likely to resist a community-oriented approach.

The community was hungry for more communication. There was little community resistance when NMBPD shifted to a community-oriented investigative approach. Attendance at town meetings was a good barometer. In the early 1990s, citizen participation in town meetings dwindled to the single digits. After changes in NMBPD took root, routine attendance jumped to more than 100.

NMBPD was part of a larger community-oriented system. Community-oriented government is a theme that runs deep in North Miami Beach. During the mid-1990s, the city’s leadership was determined to be responsive to community needs through the development of policies that were community driven. A supportive mayor meant less political resistance and an easier transition.

Technology was essential. If system reform was the vehicle that carried NMBPD into the era of community investigations, technology was

its major fuel. With its arrival, detectives and other officers could communicate instantly with the entire department. Other powers also came with new technologies: mapping gave detectives a new problem-solving tool, laptop computers made technologies portable, and new information management tools made storage and retrieval of data easy.

Ownership won over change. Because detectives maintained ownership of the shift in policing, they also had a stake in ensuring its success. The chief and his senior staff asked for the detectives’ input throughout the process. Detectives even helped write the grant that seeded the initiative.

Size mattered. With only 105 officers, NMBPD is small in comparison to departments in other urban centers. Yet, in many ways, the size of NMBPD made it an ideal laboratory for change—large enough to demonstrate the power of group transformation and small enough that only a few committed leaders were needed as the principal agents of change. The latter feature played an important role in developing accountability among detectives. Small numbers meant that the department’s leadership could devote time and attention to each detective during the transition. Although the question of a department’s size may be a unique factor in NMBPD’s success, the Miami experience suggests that size need not be a limiting reagent in the equation of change.

Funding was available. Any department wanting to emulate NMBPD will have to contend with funding realities. Change is

expensive. The first year of transition cost NMBPD nearly \$1 million, not including expenditures on new technologies. The department's reputation for innovation helped secure federal funding for the project, which contributed to its success. After providing for the initial shift to community-oriented investigations, the department still had to contend with sustaining the project once federal funding ceased. Fortunately, in North Miami Beach, a healthy law enforcement trust fund (derived principally from police seizures) and a strong relationship with the city government continues to draw the funds needed to continue. Additionally, detectives have become skilled grant writers and are routinely successful in securing funding.

Conclusion

The North Miami Beach experience is an unfolding story. Success in the investigations unit has set a new standard that other department units hope to follow. The next challenge for management is the patrol unit.

"I'd like the patrol unit to be more community focused," said Loizzo. "Right now, they know to seek out help if they have a problem, but I'd like to get them to the point where they can solve those problems on their own initiative."

This point underscores the nature of the shift in policing that took place in 1994. The goal of the initiative was not to create a community investigations unit but to continue a mission that began several years before in Flint, Michigan: to create an entire department equipped to use problem solving in its everyday police work.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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