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# **The SPARC Task Force**

## *Solving Problems and Restarting Communities*

By

JAMES J. NOLAN, M. Ed.  
and J.J. NUTTALL, M.S.W.

Community policing has recently gained prominence in the United States. While one might think that this often-used phrase has a clear-cut definition, it is, in reality, fast-becoming the law enforcement buzzword for the 1990s. In fact, community policing has different meanings for different people. How it is defined, perceived, and implemented depends on many things, such as the type of jurisdiction; the environment; the culture, including institutional and social roles and norms; and the demographics and socioeconomic conditions of the area.

Despite this ambiguity, all successful community policing efforts incorporate several core principles. They include empowering communities to solve their own problems, creating a process for addressing complex community safety problems, developing comprehensive solutions, and implementing these solutions through a coordination of services.

The Wilmington, Delaware, Police Department proved that these principles work when it applied them to a situation encountered in the community that had both law enforcement and social considerations. This article discusses how

the department successfully combined these concepts with an interdisciplinary task force in order to solve a complex and chronic community safety problem.

### **THE PROBLEM**

Residents of a Wilmington community frequently complained to police about a home in their neighborhood. Officers made service calls to this address for a variety of reasons, including drug sales, disorderly conduct, gambling violations, assaults, domestic disputes, and health and fire code violations. In fact, police records showed that officers responded to this particular

address 50 times during a single month.

Thirty-five people—all family members—lived in the dilapidated, owner-occupied, three-story, city row home. The bathroom and kitchen were virtually inoperable. Residents had no food, refrigeration, or bathing facilities. Dirty clothes were piled almost to the ceiling. Eight beds accommodated all 35 residents, many of whom were school-aged children.

Various State social service agencies made many attempts to encourage the occupants to improve their living conditions. The city's Department of Licenses and Inspections declared the house unfit. The fire department cited the owners of the residence with numerous fire code violations. The State's Division of Child Protective Services was intermittently involved with the family, as was the Department of

Health and Human Services. Officers from the police department's drug unit made cocaine buys from the house and raided it—finding crack cocaine, heroin, and drug paraphernalia during the search.

Despite these *individual* attempts to resolve the problem, it worsened, further upsetting area residents. Clearly, the police department and the city needed to commit to solving this dilemma collectively.

Finally, all agencies coordinated their efforts to address the problem. By forming a task force, the agencies helped both the family and the community. They also developed a strategy to address future issues of this type.

#### **THE PROBLEM-SOLVING STRATEGY**

A vast range of problems occur in communities and subsequently

come to the attention of police. The majority of problems are relatively minor ones reported to an officer by a citizen. The officer then solves the problem personally or refers the citizen to the appropriate government agency.

Some problems are more complex and require more planning and collaboration between police, government agencies, and citizens in order to develop effective solutions. Ideally, these problems are discussed at community meetings held within the affected neighborhood.

The most complex problems encountered by police officers require a maximum coordination of effort to resolve. A task force consisting of department/agency heads committed to developing comprehensive solutions to complex neighborhood issues can best address these problems. The case encountered by the Wilmington Police Department required exactly this type of solution, and thus, the Solving Problems and Restarting Communities (SPARC) Task Force was created.

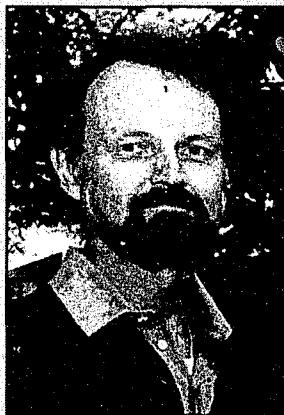
#### **THE SPARC TASK FORCE**

In July 1992, the Wilmington Police Department began formulating a process to address complex community safety problems. What evolved over a period of several months—and is actually still evolving—is an interdepartment/agency task force named SPARC.

The SPARC Task Force consists of one representative and one alternate from each city department. Each member must possess the authority to make decisions and



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to commit the resources of the department they represent. In addition, for efficiency, SPARC divides its responsibilities between community policing officers, who play a primary role in the problem-solving process, and task force members.

The task force, which meets monthly, strives to develop comprehensive, holistic solutions for the city's most complex problems. To do this, the task force applies what is known as the SARA Model.

#### **The SARA Model**

SARA is a four-step, problem-solving model used to examine and respond to community problems systematically.<sup>1</sup> It includes scanning, analysis, response, and assessment.

##### *Scanning*

In the scanning phase, community policing officers first identify and frame the problem(s) that the task force will address. The officers formulate potential task force problems based on their own individual experience on the street, as well as observations or information provided by other police officers, city departments, or organized neighborhood groups.

Issues of concern can also result from the identification of clusters of similar problems. These problems may be grouped by location, type of complaint, time of day, or time of year. For example, police officers responding to a certain location each shift—even if the types of complaints are different—would cluster these complaints together to form one problem area. After formulating the problem, the officers conduct their analysis.

##### *Analysis*

During the analysis phase, community policing officers conduct a thorough, preliminary background study of the problem. This study includes such elements as prior calls for service via 911, the location's history, background interviews with neighbors, arrest histories of suspects, and so on. The analysis—like an investigation—incorporates information from a variety of criminal

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justice and noncriminal justice sources. As a result of this analysis, officers can create more effective responses that concentrate on developing complete, rather than piecemeal, solutions to problems.

##### *Response*

After defining (scanning) and analyzing the problem, the community policing officers present the case at the monthly SPARC Task Force meeting. The task force then develops an action plan based on information accumulated in the analysis. Responses are comprehensive in scope and address all aspects of the problem, including a strategy to implement the response.

##### *Assessment*

After implementing the response, community policing officers conclude the process by conducting an assessment to determine whether it was resolved either totally or in part. Due to the complexity and recurrence of certain problems, the task force may work on a single problem for several months, while reporting back monthly on the "work in progress."

To determine whether an issue was resolved, officers research the number of calls for service reported through 911. A substantial reduction in the number of calls would be a measure of success.

In addition, community feedback indicates the effectiveness of a response. While officers may perceive that a problem has been solved, the community may disagree. Therefore, a quality control survey, including such questions as, "From your perspective, is the problem completely solved?" and "What more would you like to see accomplished regarding this problem?" can help officers to determine whether the problem was solved to the community's satisfaction. These surveys measure the success of a program in terms of quality, rather than quantity, as is normally the case in police environments.

#### **SPARC In Action**

After reviewing the previously described case, Wilmington's SPARC Task Force decided to take immediate action to remove the family from the house, something that the city had unsuccessfully attempted for more than a year. Because cooperation from the family

would facilitate the move, the task force developed what they referred to as "the hammer," a not-so-subtle form of encouragement. That is, the task force threatened intensified legal action against the owner for the previously cited violations, if the conditions were not resolved immediately.

As a result, the fire chief issued a letter demanding that the family vacate immediately because of imminent risk to the family and the neighborhood if the house caught

fire. In addition, the licenses and inspections department sent criminal citations.

Finally, the task force offered to help the family. The task force decided that a smaller working group made up of representatives from city departments, State agencies, and private, community-based organizations that already had a stake in the successful resolution of this problem seemed best suited to work with the family. This group worked to find alternative housing and

immediate services needed by the family during this transition period.

During the first few weeks of the project, the family divided itself into seven smaller units and worked with the task force group and a private, community-based organization to find temporary, and in some cases, permanent housing. The State's Division of Child Protective Services and Health & Social Services began working more closely with the remaining family members to obtain the services they needed. The city's Department of Public Works, the Department of Licenses & Inspections, and the police helped the family to clean out the house and secure the windows and doors with boards. The city's Department of Real Estate and Housing is currently renovating the house with funding, materials, and labor provided by private, nonprofit, community-based organizations.

## Results

After this action, calls for police service at the residence fell from 50 a month to 0. The neighbors have expressed appreciation for the comprehensive process and results. Criminal activity no longer occurs at the residence. Further, the city helped the family by providing housing and services, instead of arresting them. Equally important, the family and the community now perceive the police as helpers, not just punitive enforcers.

Indeed, throughout this process, the police and other agency employees viewed the family neither as poor souls who needed help nor as criminals who were committing crimes. Rather, they regarded the

### The SARA Model Task Force Member Responsibilities

Step	Task	Primary Responsibility	Secondary Responsibility
Scanning	Identify and Formulate Problem(s)	Community Policing Officers	SPARC Task Force Members
Analysis	Conduct Background Investigation	Community Policing Officers	SPARC Task Force Members
Response	Develop Action Plan	SPARC Task Force Members	Community Policing Officers
Assessment	Evaluate Program Success	Community Policing Officers	SPARC Task Force Members

family members as equals on whom the rest of the team depended to do their share in getting the jobs done. In this way, the family met the objectives that they participated in setting. They also learned how to use community resources to assist them in the future, if necessary.

A key factor in the success of this scenario was the commitment, cooperation, and coordination of all city departments and participating agencies in developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to solve this problem. Many of the agencies had worked separately with this family for years without success. However, by working together, they enhanced their effectiveness and actually solved the problem.

## CONCLUSION

The SPARC Task Force continues to meet on a monthly basis. In addition to continuing the comprehensive efforts on behalf of this family, the task force has identified other complex and chronic social/law enforcement problems deemed suitable for this holistic strategy.

Instead of responding reactively to individual community complaints, community policing officers apply the principles of problem-oriented policing to the issues they face every day. This proactive approach benefits not only law enforcement and other service agencies but also the citizens they serve. ♦

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> W. Spelman and J.E. Eck, "Problem-Oriented Policing," *National Institute of Justice, Research in Brief*, Washington, DC, 1987.

# Author Guidelines

## Manuscript Specifications

*Length:* 1,000 to 3,000 words or 5 to 12 pages double-spaced.

*Format:* All manuscripts should be double-spaced and typed on 8 1/2" by 11" white paper. All pages should be numbered, and three copies should be submitted for review purposes.

## Publication

*Basis For Judging Manuscripts:* Manuscripts are judged on the following points: Factual accuracy, style and ease of reading, structure and logical flow, length, relevance to audience, and analysis of information. Favorable consideration will generally not be given to an article that has been published previously or that is being considered for publication by another magazine. Articles that are used to advertise a product or a service will be rejected.

*Query Letters:* The editor suggests that authors submit a detailed one- to two-page outline before writing an article. This is intended to help authors but does not guarantee publication of the article.

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