



BJA Bureau of Justice Assistance Bulletin

Building Relationships Between Police and the Vietnamese Community in Roanoke, Virginia

by Garry Coventry, Ph.D., and Kelly Dedel Johnson, Ph.D.

The resettlement of refugees from various conflicts around the globe in communities in the United States presents local criminal justice agencies with a range of community-based problems. Roanoke, Virginia, with a population of approximately 97,000, has become a major middle-size city for refugee placement. In the past decade, refugees from troubled regions including Vietnam, Bosnia, Croatia, Iraq, and Kosovo have formed significant immigrant groups in Roanoke. The city also is expected to become a resettlement site for increasing numbers of African and Cuban refugees in the future.

The rapid and considerable influx of refugee populations has contributed to a sense of community instability that requires responsive changes in the way police departments operate with regard to crime prevention and police officer training. By the community's focusing on one specific refugee group, these issues were addressed successfully under the Roanoke City Police Department's Vietnamese Community Outreach Program, which was funded under the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) FY 1998 Open Solicitation Discretionary Grant Program. This Bulletin details the initial results of Roanoke's outreach program.

Project Background

In May 1997, the Roanoke police department initiated a dialogue with several community and local government agencies, including Refugee Immigration Services, a civic group known as the Vietnamese Association, legal offices, housing authorities, local schools, and health and social services. This dialogue revealed significant cultural, ethnic, and language challenges in the interaction between the police department and the Vietnamese community. Many refugees did not understand or trust the American criminal justice system, and local police officers did not understand the Vietnamese language or the community's cultural mores. The BJA project was structured to provide concrete outreach services to the Vietnamese community and to develop a cultural awareness training program for police officers.



Roanoke police officers being taught Vietnamese culture by Refugee Immigration Services Instructor Kathy Varney.

Although recent Federal Bureau of Investigation Uniform Crime Reports had indicated that the level of crime in Roanoke was not a significant problem, there was growing concern that disaffected Vietnamese youth were being recruited into organized gangs by transient Vietnamese refugees from other communities. In addition, family and school difficulties were increasing the youth's risk of participating in delinquent activities. Specific programs were designed to create positive activities for youth and to foster police/community involvement that went beyond traditional law enforcement activities.

Project Goals

The two principal goals of the Vietnamese Community Outreach Program are to

- ❑ Develop greater understanding and trust between the Vietnamese community and the police.
- ❑ Demonstrate the police department's commitment to the Vietnamese community.

The police department also hopes to develop a greater Vietnamese presence among sworn officers on the force. As a first step, the department created a position for a community resource specialist and filled it with a member of the Vietnamese community. Through daily interaction with the police officers, the resource specialist, in tandem with supportive training for police staff, is acting as a liaison between the police and the local community and providing a channel for improved communication among police officers, court personnel, and Vietnamese residents.

The project is addressing these goals through a number of programs. The four main components of the outreach program are as follows:

- ❑ Cultural activities and tutoring for Vietnamese youth.
- ❑ Outreach and education for Vietnamese adults.
- ❑ Cultural training for police department staff.



A citizenship class session for Vietnamese adults.

- ❑ Assistance to Vietnamese businesses.

Preliminary Findings

The community resource specialist has a central role in the implementation of the components listed above. Education is at the core of each component, including the cultural program and tutoring of Vietnamese youth, outreach citizenship training of Vietnamese adults, and cultural diversity training for police officers.

An important resource for the outreach project is the Vietnamese Youth Group, organized through the Catholic Church. This nonprofit group, which depends on volunteer support and does not receive federal funding, provides a critical entry mechanism for the outreach program to develop proactive community policing activities. The youth group meets 2 times a month for 5-hour sessions and averages 40 youth in attendance. Adult community leaders conduct Vietnamese language and history classes and provide recreational and cultural activities. Staff from the police department conduct sessions on substance-abuse prevention and other crime-related topics.

The resource specialist is the primary leader and organizer of the youth group and its activities. The resource specialist also convenes regular afterschool tutorial sessions with a small number of Vietnamese youth. In the first half of 2000, 34 tutorials were



Roanoke Youth Program Scholarship Winners with Anh Tuan Ngoyen (seated in front wearing a white sweatshirt) at Atlanta's National Youth Crime Prevention Conference 2000.

held that included computer-based curriculums to help the students with their studies. The resource specialist is tracking each student's progress in the targeted courses.

To expand Vietnamese adults' understanding of the justice system, the resource specialist has translated criminal justice system terminology into Vietnamese. Twenty-two legal and criminal justice brochures have been produced and distributed throughout the community. The brochures cover topics such as the court system, domestic violence, gang prevention efforts, and Neighborhood Watch programs.

A total of 250 employees of the Roanoke police department have participated in a 4-hour Vietnamese cultural awareness training program coordinated by Refugee Immigration Services. This training included presentations about Vietnam's history, reasons for Vietnamese refugees' relocation to Roanoke, sources of Vietnamese residents' distrust of uniformed police officers (e.g., family experiences of police brutality and corruption in Vietnam), cultural differences and behavioral protocols, and language difficulties that challenge the residents' understanding of the justice system. The content of this training was partly informed by a survey of Vietnamese community residents who

assessed their current interaction with and understanding of law enforcement services in Roanoke.

A significant feature of this project is its flexibility in addressing matters that are identified by the Vietnamese community or Roanoke police as the problems arise. Continual dialogue with the Vietnamese Association and other agencies enables the resource specialist to be responsive and to help organize community events to address a range of criminal justice issues. Project information initiatives include court procedures, legal issues, crime prevention techniques, police complaint procedures, American culture, and the police subculture. The most recent initiative provided United States citizenship training to 19 Vietnamese residents, all of whom completed the required 20-hour curriculum and submitted formal applications for citizenship.



Crime Prevention Officer Bryan Lawrence, Community Resource Specialist Trung Nguyen, Lieutenant Rick Arrington, and Mr. Nhung Le prepare to present certificates to the first citizenship graduation class.

The final component of the project has been to improve the connection between the Vietnamese business community and the police department. A core element is providing key information regarding bad checks and methods for recovering the loss. In addition, the resource specialist plays a key role in building the relationship among the Vietnamese community, local organizations, and the police for major cultural

events. A local Vietnamese restaurant received a contract to provide catering services to police-sponsored community events. It is likely that, in addition to strengthening ties to the Vietnamese business community, the project will begin to develop connections to other Asian communities and businesses in the future.

The goal of increasing Vietnamese presence among sworn officers has been advanced through frequent interaction between the resource specialist and the corps of police officers. The resource specialist has provided translation services to officers and detectives on 11 investigations ranging from drunk driving to domestic assault. The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court also has consulted the resource specialist regarding matters that concern Vietnamese residents. Although the number of cases has been too small for dependable analysis, an

increase has been noted in the willingness of Vietnamese residents to seek help from law enforcement.

Expansion and Replication

Currently the youth group predominantly attracts Catholic Vietnamese, who account for 60 percent of the Vietnamese residents in Roanoke.

The project needs to expand its services to other faith-based community groups. The outreach program also endeavors to increase attendance at community forums by making them more accessible to residents. Toward this end, the resource specialist is planning to work with local churches to deliver court-related education to residents.

The community resource specialist is critical to the success of this program.

In order to replicate this model in other communities, the person selected for this position must understand community dynamics, be open to the consultative community process, and be able to enlist the support and cooperation of established community leaders.

Proactive community policing within refugee communities presents new challenges for police departments. They must develop connections with the community that are not motivated purely by involvement in criminal activity. To initiate this contact, police departments must overcome stereotypes and entrenched perspectives on police and community relations. Community resource positions within police departments, tasked with creating ongoing dialogue and support, may provide this critical link with a variety of refugee groups.

For Further Information

An evaluation of this project, together with another 30 projects funded by BJA's FY 1998 Open Solicitation Discretionary Grant Program, is being conducted by The Institute on Crime, Justice and Corrections at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

For further information about this project, please contact:

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