

Shellharbour City Council's Safer Communities Campaign — Engaging Community and Encouraging Participation for a Safer Community

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Abstract

One of the state's fastest growing councils, Shellharbour City Council, encompasses new 'prestige' suburbs as well as long-established suburbs with low socio-economic indicators. The unique challenges posed by these disparate communities are being addressed by a variety of programs aimed at engaging the community to increase community participation, create connections and build attachments. Programs include the Safer Warilla Project, the Good Neighbour Scheme and the Women for a Safer Community group.

The Safer Warilla project operates in a community typified by long-term unemployment, low income levels and relatively high crime. The project encourages community participation through the production of a positive newsletter highlighting opportunities to participate in the community; through free community barbeques and activities; and through programs designed to connect individuals. The project particularly aims at promoting intergenerational activities to increase understanding across generations and demystifying youth culture.

The Good Neighbour Scheme is part of a joint venture being undertaken in partnership with NRMA Insurance Limited and New South Wales Police. The scheme operates to create 'neighbourhoods' within suburbs. It aims to increase connections by encouraging community participation in various projects. The nature of the projects may vary over suburbs, as the local community is consulted to decide what project they would like to be involved in. The scheme coordinator acts as a facilitator, making each suburb's projects possible but allowing local communities to dictate their own project.

The Women for a Safer Community group is comprised of service providers and women from the local community. The group aims to address women's safety issues through projects in which all women are encouraged to participate. The fundamental tenet of the group is that a community which is safe for women is safe for everyone.

In addition, the paper will highlight other projects which seek to engage the community, with the overall objective of highlighting community safety as a participatory practice.

The context

Although one of the newest cities in New South Wales, Shellharbour City is one of Australia's fastest growing communities. Its popularity in modern times is hardly surprising; local Indigenous people, the Wadi Wadi and the Wodi Wodi, have lived in the area for at least 17,000 years.

The physical location of the local government area (LGA), situated as it is between the coast and the mountains of the Great Dividing Range, and separated by Lake Illawarra from its neighbouring LGA of Wollongong; meant that from its early development the area evolved both with beachside suburbs largely comprised of holiday homes, and rural areas heavily dependent on the beef and dairying industries. The availability of a small harbour also gave rise to a small fishing community.

With the influx of migrants to satisfy the labour demands of nearby Port Kembla Steelworks in the 1950s and 1960s came the need for low-cost government housing, which gave rise to the working-class suburbs of Warilla, Mt Warrigal and Albion Park.

Large-scale urban developments have been a feature of the area in recent years with the development of prestige suburbs such as Shell Cove and Woodlands, and affordable family housing developments in Albion Park and Albion Park Rail. Gentrification of working-class and low-cost holiday suburbs is also taking place with holiday homes and small family homes in the beach- and lake-side suburbs of Warilla and Lake South, and in Shellharbour Village, which are now being purchased by affluent individuals from within the area and from nearby Wollongong and Sydney, and being replaced by upscale residences. The city centre and central business district has also grown rapidly and will continue to expand over the next decade.

Shellharbour City has therefore evolved from a largely rural area with regular influxes of visitors in holiday periods to a diverse and expansive community. The challenges of addressing community safety issues within this context are heightened by the extreme disparity between working class suburbs with very low socio-economic indicators and a range of social problems, and wealthy upper-class enclaves which face very different community safety challenges.

The Safer Communities Campaign

The Safer Communities Campaign was established in 2000 following a perception survey to assess attitudes towards community safety across the LGA.

Initially comprised of a single Community Safety Coordinator, the Safer Communities Campaign has evolved to include:

- a Coordinator
- an Assistant Coordinator
- a Good Neighbour Scheme Coordinator
- a Youth Development Worker — graffiti and skateboarding
- a Community Development Worker — Women for a Safer Community
- a Project Officer — The Safer Warilla project.

The prime focus of the campaign is to develop, in conjunction with all sections of the community, crime prevention strategies that not only seek to reduce incidents of crime and fear of crime in the city, but also to increase community cooperation and participation and ultimately create a safer environment for everyone.

Community safety

The paradigm shift from 'crime prevention' in which the obligation was primarily regarded as belonging to the police, to 'community safety' in which local government plays a central role has gradually taken place over the past decade or so. The shift sees the focus not only on preventing criminal behaviour, but also on probing and addressing the social causes of criminal and anti-social behaviour.

In the identification and involvement of active community members, key stakeholders and local services, the shift from the 'Crime Prevention' model to the 'Community Safety' model also reflects the growth of the Assets Based Community Development movement. No longer are we focussing solely on needs, gaps and problems to which, as service providers, we supply solutions. Instead, local community members are at the core, working in conjunction with relevant agencies to address issues. In other words the Community Safety model works from a proactive and positive standpoint and seeks, in partnership with the local community, to address the social issues underlying criminal and anti-social behaviour. This is more than a harm minimisation strategy, it seeks grassroots social change and improved outcomes not only for those at risk of becoming victims of crime, but for those at risk of adopting criminal behaviour.

Strategies to engage community and encourage participation

Good Neighbour Scheme

Twelve months ago a joint venture partnership to address community safety issues was established between NRMA Insurance (New South Wales' largest insurance provider), New South Wales Police Lake Illawarra Local Area Command and Shellharbour City Council. Such a partnership is unprecedented within the Shellharbour local community safety discourse. Partnerships between local government and non-government agencies have traditionally been relatively simple to establish and have been regarded as vital to the efficient use of limited resources of both and to the very survival of small services. Attracting the involvement of the corporate sector in partnerships to address community issues has been more problematic. Thus this joint venture partnership, it is hoped, will be a pilot project to attract more active participation by the corporate sector.

The focus of the partnership is threefold:

- The Good Neighbour Scheme, which aims to increase community safety through a recognition and development of the role played by individuals at a neighbourhood level
- Operation Never Again which aims to reduce repeat victimisation amongst burglary victims
- Crime Prevention Van which is a vehicle for disseminating information and promoting target hardening techniques

For the purpose of this paper, I will concentrate only on the work of the Good Neighbour Scheme.

Whilst on a research scholarship, Shellharbour City Council's Group Manager, Community Services and Development, visited projects in Seattle city in the United States. There she observed the Neighbour Appreciation Scheme and developed a fervour to create such a scheme in Shellharbour. Thus the Good Neighbour Scheme is loosely based on the Seattle project.

The initial stage of this scheme involved extensive community consultation within each suburb to establish what sort of projects the local community were likely to participate in. Thus the Good Neighbour programs may vary from suburb to suburb, with the overall aim of recognising and developing those informal arrangements that add value and safety to suburban life, and recognising and empowering individuals who actively — and most often without acknowledgment — participate in promoting community safety. Such programs include:

- ‘Blockwatcher’ Barbeques — aimed at individuals who are at home through the day, these barbeques act as community development tools to extend networks and connections. The title of Blockwatcher recognises the ‘capable guardianship’ role these individuals often play within their neighbourhood by being aware of movements in and around their streets, acting as sources of information for neighbours. These valuable participants are encouraged and empowered through the provision of ‘Blockwatcher Kits’, which include fact sheets on dealing with emergencies or contacting appropriate services.

It is important here to note the distinction between ‘Blockwatchers’ and the now almost defunct Neighbourhood Watch scheme. Blockwatchers is far less formal than the Neighbourhood Watch scheme, and involves no meetings or membership requirements. There is also no formal police involvement or provision of crime statistics, which can often have a detrimental effect on community safety perceptions.

- Shopwatch — aimed at promoting neighbourliness among small business owners, this program encourages shop owners and staff to get to know those people working nearby and provides a resource to keep phone numbers of nearby business close to the phone. Shop staff are encouraged to keep an eye on their neighbours and to contact them and/or police should problems occur.
- Good Neighbour Day — a scheme that allows local residents to nominate their neighbours for Good Neighbour awards. This scheme seeks to recognise and reward those small services neighbours often spontaneously perform for each other, and which increase community connections and the sense of community safety. It recognises that activities such as mowing a neighbour’s lawn, checking on a sick or house-bound neighbour and collecting mail while neighbours are away are valuable community-building and community safety-building actions. The business community is also encouraged to participate by donating prizes and promoting the scheme.

Women for a Safer Community

The Women for a Safer Community group is comprised of service providers and women from the local community. The aims of the group are:

- to encourage and empower women to create a sense of community by changing the conditions and environments that induce fear
- to increase women’s safety when using public and private spaces
- to reduce women’s’ fear of harassment and attack in the streets and other places, and in the home.

The overriding tenet of the group is “a city which is safe for women is safe for everyone”.

Addressing community safety from women’s perspective makes sense when we consider that women are more likely than men to fear crime, and the type of crime women are most likely to fear is physical or sexual violence. Fear of crime may affect the way some women live their lives. It may reduce their participation in community and social activities, particularly evening activities. It may cause them to stay at home behind locked doors and windows to avoid situations which may feel unsafe. It may create a fortress mentality which in turn may lead to social isolation and even to depression and other mental illness. Such outcomes are not only detrimental to women’s lives, but ultimately affect the social and cultural life of a community.

The Women for a Safer Community group aims to address women’s safety issues (and therefore community safety issues) through projects in which all women are encouraged to participate. Some recent initiatives include:

- Drink Spiking Awareness Campaign — to recognise Reclaim the Night in a positive manner, the group visits local licensed venues on the last Friday in October to hand out information about reducing incidents of drink spiking. This campaign has operated over the past two years and enjoys the support and participation of workers from local community agencies, community members, local police, licensees and venue management.
- No Respect, No Relationship letter writing campaign — a strategy to protest the federal governments’ cancellation of a vital and progressive anti relationship violence campaign, this letter writing drive was evidence of the ability of the group to mobilise women from the community at short notice. Over three weeks the group was able to amass 487 letters from local community members demanding the immediate instatement of the campaign.
- Creating Safe Space Art Exhibition — an exhibition of artwork which explores the concept of safe space by local women. Local women were encouraged to participate by creating an artwork, resulting in over 100 pieces, which have been displayed throughout the LGA.
- regular newsletters — one of the tools the group uses to keep local women from the community involved is the production of regular newsletters. The group has a large database of women who are interested in the work of the group. Newsletters are sent to this database and to local libraries and community centres. The newsletters are bright and informative and act as mechanisms to encourage community members to be involved in the activities of the group.

The Safer Warilla Project

Safer Warilla is a Community Solutions project funded by the New South Wales Premier's Office. Community Solutions is a New South Wales government initiative that aims at improving outcomes in disadvantaged areas by identifying communities in trouble and allocating funds to programs designed to improve outcomes and reduce crime. It recognises that the best results are likely if the local community identifies its needs. Under Community Solutions, various disadvantaged areas were identified for funding for projects to address issues such as crime reduction, community safety and improved outcomes. Warilla was one of the areas targeted for Community Solutions projects.

Warilla is a suburb of extreme contrasts. Whilst often perceived as a lower class or public housing area, the suburb also contains some of the most expensive real estate in the LGA. The area closest to the beaches of Warilla and Little Lake has seen a rapid rate of purchase and redevelopment of older fibro homes, which are being replaced by luxury mansions and up-market family homes.

Despite the recent influx of wealthy residents, Warilla still has the lowest average income levels in the LGA as well as the lowest incidence of home purchase. Rental prices are the lowest in the LGA, with 21 per cent of homes still owned by the Department of Housing. There are far fewer married couples living in Warilla, higher levels of unemployment, and the lowest levels of education. There is a larger number of people aged 75 and over in Warilla than in any other suburb, and a fewer number of people aged 25 to 49. This effectively means that the social problems often exacerbated by poverty and unemployment are compounded by a lack of intergenerational understanding.

The aims and objectives of the two-year Safer Warilla project are:

- to reduce crime and fear of crime
- to improve attachment to the suburb
- to increase connections between community members.

Programs include:

- Warilla Neighbourhood Newsletter — produced quarterly and delivered to all homes in the suburb as well as being made available in the local library and community centres. The newsletter highlights positive community initiatives, encourages involvement in local community groups, and promotes upcoming community events.
- Community Harmony Barbeques — held quarterly in parks and green space in the area, the free barbeques aim to draw local residents together to create new connections. The aim is

also to improve intergenerational relations, so activities to attract people of all ages are included, e.g. jumping castle, break-dance lessons and graffiti art displays as well as music and information stalls. Community members are encouraged to participate both by helping to organise and run the event and by attending.

- Warilla Calling — a chance for business members of the community to become more involved, Warilla Calling is linked to the Red Cross Telecross program. Local business people are rostered to phone a sick, frail-aged or socially-isolated resident every morning and make sure they are safe and well.
- Oral Histories — local high school students interview long-term residents of Warilla in safe and positive environment to record their memories of life in the early development of the suburb. The interviews are transcribed, bound into volumes and placed as a permanent resource in the local studies section of the local library.
- In My Backyard Photographic project — students at local schools were given disposable cameras and asked to take photographs which explored their place in their suburb. They were asked to think about where they felt safe and welcome, and where they belonged. Twenty-four of the resulting photographs were enlarged, mounted and exhibited.
- Safer Warilla Forum — a regular monthly meeting of stakeholders from the area including local community representatives, business people, council representatives, local school principals, youth workers, representatives from New South Wales police, the local Community Advocate, local Ward Councillors, representatives from the local PCYC, Centrelink, church communities and the Community Justice Centre.

The Forum meets to address issues raised by community representatives. Issues are discussed and a cooperative approach is taken to developing tactics to address the issue. Community representatives are a vital part both of the process and the tactics.

In conclusion

Shellharbour City Council's Safer Communities Campaign continues to seek new and innovative ways to encourage the local community to participate in community safety initiatives. Whilst we have enjoyed a number of successes and attracted a large support base amongst local residents for a wide range of community safety initiatives, we continue to be challenged by some community members who question the relevance of some projects. Target hardening and the use of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design techniques to create defensible space and capable guardianship are also vital elements of the campaign, and with the community participation initiatives, will continue being part of the future Safer Communities Campaign.