

Creating Safer Communities Through Partnerships

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Abstract

This paper will examine the opportunities and challenges faced by service delivery agencies in enhancing the capability of communities to prevent crime and improve safety.

The core of the Community Safety Project is the establishment of a local partnership between the Department of Emergency Services (DES), the Queensland Police Service (QPS), the Department of Housing through the Community Renewal program, community organisations and residents to identify and address local community safety priorities. Residents, locally-based emergency services operational staff and police officers work collaboratively to assess the safety needs of the community and to develop tailored programs to address those needs.

The Community Safety Project builds on, strengthens and rejuvenates an existing community network (Neighbourhood Watch). While DES and QPS staff assist with the identification of community safety issues and provide advice on how to address them, the project is driven by the targeted Neighbourhood Watch group.

The project builds community capacity to identify and implement local solutions to local problems and demonstrates the effectiveness of strengthening and building on existing community structures. Learnings from the project have confirmed that community safety issues need to be identified and addressed locally. Sustainability requires community capacity development, local ownership and high-level commitment.

The roles and responsibilities of both community and government participants must be clearly defined, communicated and shared.

Keywords

Neighbourhood Watch, partnerships, emergency, police, community safety

Introduction

In early 2002 the Department of Emergency Services (DES) and Queensland Police Service (QPS) formed a partnership to enhance the capability of communities to prevent crime and improve personal and public safety.

The DES incorporates Queensland Fire and Rescue Service (QFRS), Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) and Counter Disaster and Rescue Services (CDRS). The department plays a vital role in every community in Queensland and directly delivers or provides funding for a range of emergency and counter disaster services.

The mission of the QPS is to serve the people of Queensland by protecting life and property, preserving peace and safety, preventing crime and upholding the law in a manner that has regard for the public good and the rights of the individual.

Emergency Services and Police play an important community safety role in every community in Queensland, regardless of location or size. Both agencies have become increasingly focussed on prevention and mitigation strategies to complement the work of frontline personnel. However, there is agreement across the agencies that safer communities can be better achieved through a collaborative effort involving community.

A result of this collaboration was the development of the Community Safety Project, which includes a partnership with the existing Neighbourhood Watch program.

Neighbourhood Watch is a worldwide, community-based crime prevention program designed to reduce the incidence of residential crime in a defined area. International research has proven that an active program can be successful in reducing crime in residential areas.

This paper provides an overview of the Community Safety Project, progress of the project to date and, in particular, engagement methods and community safety outcomes generated through implementation of the project.

Community Safety Project

The Community Safety Project, a partnership between DES, QPS and targeted Neighbourhood Watch (NHW) communities throughout Queensland, has been developed to broaden the current crime prevention focus of the NHW program to incorporate community safety, particularly in the home.

The project seeks to strengthen and rejuvenate an existing community network and also to overcome the predominantly 'siloed' approach across the Queensland Government to addressing community safety needs.

Primarily, the objective of the Community Safety Project is to improve the level of safety in targeted NHW communities across Queensland. The project aims to achieve its objective by:

- engaging Queensland communities and building partnerships between government and community
- increasing the number of residents actively involved in improving safety in their communities
- encouraging and supporting community participation in identifying and addressing local community safety issues
- developing a more collaborative and flexible approach to safety in Queensland communities
- raising awareness of the role of Emergency Services and Queensland Police and the programs and initiatives of both agencies aimed at creating safer communities
- raising the profile of NHW within the community.

Following the successful piloting of the project in the NHW communities of Andergrove (Mackay) Maryborough 3 and Camp Hill 1 in 2002, a further six NHW communities were targeted as participants in the roll-out of the project for a 12-month period in 2003–04.

These communities were Edmonton, in Cairns, Kirwan in Townsville, Highfields in Toowoomba, Riverview in Ipswich, Harris Fields in Logan and Upper Mount Gravatt.

Following the government's 2004 election commitment to rollout the project into further communities as identified by community renewal, the DES/QPS partnership has been strengthened through the inclusion of the Department of Housing's Community Renewal Program.

The Community Renewal Program is one of the flagship community engagement initiatives of the Queensland Government. Community Renewal is a place-based program that engages residents to identify and develop locally relevant, sustainable solutions to issues faced by their communities.

For a three-year period from 1 July 2004, the project will be implemented in targeted NHW communities. In each of the targeted communities, the project is coordinated by a local working group consisting of representatives from NHW, QPS, Community Renewal and the operational divisions of DES. Local government is also involved in the project in many communities.

Key features of the project include:

- enthusiastic and adhesive local working groups
- one point of contact within government for the participating Neighbourhood Watch groups
- local government and community champions
- high-level commitment in DES and QPS
- funding and resources to support the project in each location
- evaluation to inform the project.

The Community Safety Project implements strategies that directly contribute to building safer Queensland communities. The project has demonstrated outcomes that minimise the risk and impact of accidents, emergencies and disasters in the targeted communities including:

- the development of tailored prevention programs to meet local community needs
- improved coordination and integration of government community safety programs
- a more coordinated and targeted use of government and community resources
- increased community awareness of local safety needs and resources available to address those needs
- increased community capacity to identify and implement local solutions to local community safety issues
- increased community capacity in a range of skills and knowledge not only related to safety, but also communication, organisation, negotiation and networking.

Project outcomes

The Queensland Government has recognised the outcomes that have been achieved through the Community Safety Project and has allocated \$300,000 over a three-year period from 1 July 2004 to facilitate the rollout of the project into further NHW communities, particularly those in areas identified by Community Renewal.

An early outcome of the project was the inclusion of the Department of Housing as a project partner. The Department of Housing recognised the clear links between the Community Safety Project and the Community Renewal Program.

Another direct outcome of the project is a greater understanding by community participants of the processes of government and an understanding of the opportunities and constraints of working with government. The government–community relationships developed through the implementation of this project will provide the foundation for future engagement.

Key community outcomes of the Community Safety Project include:

- tailored prevention programs to meet community needs
- increased community awareness of local safety needs and the resources available to address those needs
- capability development in a range of skills and knowledge not only related to safety, but also communication, organisation, negotiation and networking skills.

The project has resulted in improved coordination and integration of community safety programs across government, in the targeted communities. Community safety outcomes have been maximised through a more coordinated and targeted use of government and community resources.

To maximise the opportunity for long-term sustainability of the project, a number of NHW communities have also been targeted to take advantage of the Police Beat located within that community.

The QPS Police Beat Program is a proactive policing initiative designed to reduce demands on and complement the work of existing services. Police Beats create an increased and highly visible police presence in the community, which acts as a deterrent to crime. Police Beats serve to increase community access to policing services and strengthen partnerships between the local community and police.

The prospective benefits of this strategy are expected to be:

- an enhanced sense of community ownership, as the Police Beat officer both lives and works in the beat community
- a strengthening of community partnerships through the commitment and leadership of the resident Police Beat officer
- enhanced sustainability, as direct community engagement and liaison are explicitly incorporated into the core business and objectives of Police Beats.

The project also builds community capacity to identify and implement local solutions to local problems and demonstrates the effectiveness of strengthening and building on existing community structures. Some examples include:

- Andergrove communities identified issues unique to their local area: a local storm surge awareness campaign was instigated, which targeted the use of available resources and maximised outcomes
- communities have identified difficulties in the accurate location of homes by emergency services vehicles; a kerbside numbering program was instigated with contributions by local government, residents, the school community and the business community
- cardio pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training of community groups and service clubs, including training of NHW members as CPR Peer Trainers to attend to the future CPR training in their communities
- development and circulation of brochures relevant to specific community safety issues.

Another key outcome of the Community Safety Project in the Harris Fields NHW community in Woodridge is the establishment of Queensland's first Junior NHW.

Targeted at sixty Year 7 students of Harris Fields State School, the Junior NHW Project was delivered by local police, emergency services and local government personnel, as well as community members. The development of a school-based Junior NHW program, coordinated through the student council, as well as a dedicated Junior NHW Newsletter were also outcomes of the project.

The Junior NHW project was designed to develop skills and provide increased awareness of accident and injury prevention, crime prevention and personal safety and to encourage students to adopt the objectives of the NHW program, within the school and the larger community.

The development and distribution of the Community Safety Kit is also a key outcome of the Community Safety Project. The kit comprises information about community, home and personal safety initiatives of DES.

The kit is designed to enable communities to identify and address their own safety needs, and encourages NHW groups to broaden their existing crime prevention focus to include other personal and community safety issues. The kit has been distributed widely throughout Queensland.

Engagement methods

The Community Safety Project provides a practical working example of effective community engagement. It enables the participation of citizens, in partnership with government, in identifying and addressing local community issues.

One of the key features of the project is that residents survey and identify their own community safety and enhancement issues. The information gathered in the survey provides the ongoing direction for the project and a benchmark for an evaluation process.

In each targeted community, the Community Safety Project is steered by the local NHW group. DES and QPS provide active support by addressing identified community safety issues. Much of the success of the project is due to the effective, enthusiastic and cohesive local working groups, and the willingness of community members to become actively involved in the project.

The already established networks and relationships developed within the NHW group ensure access to a diversity of community groups, such as community and service clubs and local schools.

The partnership arrangements between the DES, QPS, Community Renewal and the NHW communities are actively promoted from the outset and have served to enhance community engagement. This ensures ownership of the project by all participants, particularly the NHW community, and emphasises the public profile of the partnership arrangements between the state government agencies and the community.

The Community Safety Project has used a wide variety of methods to engage communities including:

- meetings with local DES, QPS and key Neighbourhood Watch personnel to form a local working group
- development and circulation of the Community Safety Survey to determine community safety awareness and practice levels
- involvement of various community groups through CPR training sessions, etc.
- contact with local residents through Safehome visits (Safehome is a program which assists householders recognise potential fire and other safety hazards in and around the home. Fire crews conduct a safety audit of the household and provide advice regarding potential threats and hazards and the corrective action required to minimise hazards)
- school/community open days to promote QAS and QPS community safety initiatives
- joint DES/QPS presentation/static displays at local shows
- visits to local preschools by Queensland Fire and Rescue Services (QFRS) with their mascot, Blazer the Bear
- involvement of various community stakeholders through implementation of kerbside numbering projects
- promotion of the project through the electronic and print media
- involvement of the school community through representation of DES and QPS community safety programs at local primary and high schools
- development of the pilot Junior Neighbourhood Watch project, designed to develop skills and provide increased awareness of accident and injury prevention, crime prevention and personal safety for Year 7 students.

A number of communication methods were utilised to alert the Harris Fields State School and the wider community to the existence of the Junior NHW project and the commitment by the partnering agencies to the development of the first Junior NHW project of its kind in Australia.

These communication methods included:

- inserts in the local NHW newsletter
- articles in the local print media

- development of a dedicated Junior NHW newsletter circulated to the 350 Harris Fields State School families
- presentations at school assemblies
- statewide promotion through articles in the DES corporate publication
- presentation and promotion of the project at NHW conferences
- presentation of the project at a whole-of-government Community Engagement Showcasing event
- promotion of the project by the local member of parliament during parliamentary sessions.

Conclusion

The Community Safety Project enables communities to identify their own safety issues and priorities. These issues and priorities are then addressed through a partnership approach by both government and community.

Initial engagement between government service providers and the targeted neighbourhood watch group is critical to the success of the project.

The project has delivered more responsive government action in the targeted communities by effectively engaging communities in the identification of local issues and solutions. The project provides a model for delivering more responsive government services by building effective partnerships with communities and across government.