

“The Boys in Blue Are in the Red”

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Few victims expect to call the police to find the number has been disconnected. Fewer still would feel comfortable if, after returning home to find they'd been burglarized, the police took over an hour to respond. Yet that's precisely the dilemma facing many cities across the country. Budget/staffing cuts have departments scrambling to police effectively, as community relations atrophy.

In August 2010, Clarkston, Mich., voted down its police department – outsourcing its needs to nearby Independence Township. This case is not unique. Several towns in California have turned to nearby communities for policing support. Oakland, Calif., and Colorado Springs, Colo., are two growing cities with budget concerns that have turned to alternative methods of self reporting in order to cope with their call for service load. In its June 2010 “Fast Facts” sheet, the Colorado Springs Police Department (CSPD) outlines “Alternative Response,” with Internet reporting the preferred method of crime reporting for all but violent crimes.

In a recent interview, Colorado Springs Police Chief Richard W. Myers laments the burden faced by the department and community. “For officers, the impact is inadequate backup or cover officers for critical incidents. If it takes longer for backup to arrive, there's the threat of risk to officers on scene. In the broader sense, our customer service has deteriorated considerably...We have retreated such that for property crimes that are not in progress, and don't have overwhelming suspect evidence, we're not even going to the scene. We take that call by telephone, or by Internet. That's just poor customer service.” Increase in gun violence, coupled with a decrease in police resources, could amount to a recipe for disaster nationwide.

Departments like Colorado Springs' must work smarter to overcome their fiscal limitations. Computer models and software provide analysis of patterns of activity, enabling crimes to be solved. Existing officers, such as the motor units, are required to be more adaptive. Myers explains police priorities, “We make our focus primarily responding to and solving violent crimes, crimes against persons – targeting repeat offenders, known repeat offenders, and patterns of crimes.”

Despite their efforts, police face a tough task improving community perceptions. For many citizens, response time is the overwhelming measure of effectiveness. Shrinking departments covering a wide area will suffer in that test. “It *is* a valid

measure for crime in progress effectiveness,” Myers insists. “If someone is kicking in your back door, the *only* measure that matters to you is 'how quickly can that cop get there.' But after-the-fact reporting – it's meaningless. We have to better help educate the community to understand the difference between an in progress, 'get here as quick as you can,' and an after the fact, 'what can we do to document and analyze, and actually try and do something with your crime report.’”

It's clearly not the ideal model, but it's how departments are coping. Citizens are free to register complaints – provided the budget allows for public relations staff on hand to take their calls.