

Executive Overview

In response to the community's calling for a fight against under-age alcohol abuse, the Hinsdale Police Department's Community Policing unit launched a multi-faceted approach aimed at curbing the problem. Operation STAAT (Stop Teen Alcohol Abuse Together) was developed using community input and information learned from a town meeting held where representatives from the Police Department, high school student groups, parents, teachers, substance abuse experts, and community members joined hands to fight the increasing trend of under-age alcohol abuse.

STAAT consists of a multi-strategy approach that includes community service for offenders, recording license plates of vehicles in the vicinity of a party, and establishing a "tip" hotline for the community to use as an anonymous method of reporting suspected teen parties. Coupled with zero-tolerance enforcement, this approach introduces a negative stigma about under-age alcohol abuse in the community.

Since its inception, the STAAT program has been welcomed by parents, schools, and the community as a whole. Posters throughout the high school that advertise "If you drink on Friday, you will work on Saturday." These advertisements picture teens doing community service and warn them of the consequences of drinking. Other public announcements include "Top Ten Reasons to Stop the Teenage Party Before it Starts." The STAAT tip line is used commonly to report under age drinking parties, and parents are thankful when they receive a notice in the mail that their vehicle was observed in an area where underage alcohol abuse was suspected.

The STAAT program has been successful in the Village of Hinsdale at not only reducing the number of alcohol violations, but also educating teens about the consequences of breaking the law. In the first two evaluation years, violations for underage alcohol use decreased 43%.

Framework Questions

The Hinsdale Police Department Mission Statement makes it clear that the members of this agency strive to “provide the community with community-oriented services and police protection.” However, perhaps the most powerful testament to this practice is the level of appreciation and respect received by the community. Regularly, citizen surveys show that the residents of the Village of Hinsdale are satisfied with the proactive efforts and partnerships the Police Department forms with its various community groups.

The community policing efforts are present in this agency at many levels. Administratively, the Chief of Police and Deputy Chiefs regularly attend community “Strategic Exploration Group” meetings which seek to guide the Village’s progressive efforts to increasing traffic conditions, health, and safety for the residents. The Community Policing unit is responsible for the Operations of many of the agencies’ community-policing programs, which target intervention and partnerships with juveniles, adults, and the elderly. This unit reports to the Chief of Police about current community concerns, potential problems, and recommended actions based on previously identified concerns and problems. On a daily basis, the patrol officers are responsible for delivering service in accordance with the agency community-policing objectives.

Community partnerships with the police department have allowed for a powerful relationship that inhibits communication with the residents. The community helps the police department by not only identifying concerns and problems, but also including itself in the solution. Town meetings are regularly held to solicit input from residents, as well as an avenue for disseminating information back to the community. Various communication sources such as newsletters, public access channels, and special presentations allow the Community Policing unit to progress in meeting its objectives. The relationship fosters a strong support of the police department from the people it serves.

Initiative Questions

The Village of Hinsdale originated the STAAT (Stop Alcohol Abuse Together) program in the spring of 2004. At that time, the police department identified that increased abuse of alcohol by teens was an important community concern that should be addressed. The police department called a town meeting and invited residents, parents, teachers, students, principals, Village trustees, and substance abuse professionals to a question and answer session about tackling this concern. The meeting was attended by more than 100 people who presented their ideas, concerns, suggestions, and challenges.

As a result of this meeting, the Community Policing unit began to develop a program which would include a multi-facet approach that targets prevention, education, and enforcement. The police officers assigned to this unit worked with high school officials, students, and parents to create a means of curbing the number of teenagers abusing alcohol in Hinsdale. The partnership extended into the judicial system to include the support of the Village Prosecutor and Circuit Court Judges. It was then decided that a wide-scaled effort must be presented that will create a negative stigma about drinking in Hinsdale. The program was developed and titled STAAT. In April of 2004, the program was launched in the community.

There were multiple objectives considered in the development of the program. The first objective was to *prevent* teens from turning to alcohol use. By establishing a “tip line,” a means was created that allowed for anybody to anonymously report a teen alcohol party to the police department. A police officer was assigned to respond to these tips by making contact with a parent or adult at the residence in question. The purpose of the phone call is to advise them that there is suspicion of a party at that location, and that the police would be monitoring this area on the date and time in question. Often times, such a phone call would surprise a parent who had plans to leave their teen home alone during the evening hours. If the party is already in progress, the tip line allows for police officers to investigate and arrest violators.

The second objective is *education*. Extensive resources were used to advertise the STAAT program to the community, particularly targeted at the teenaged population. Posters were distributed through the high school, middle school, skate park, and other public areas. The efforts were also introduced in the village newsletter, public access channel, the village internet webpage, and local media networks. The advertising materials displayed photos of teens performing community service, combined with educational messages such as “Top Ten Reasons to Stop the Teenage Party Before it Starts.” The education campaign focused on spreading the message that stopping teen alcohol abuse is important to this community and it will not be tolerated.

The final objective of STAAT is *enforcement*. Members of the police department were advised that in support of the STAAT campaign, a zero tolerance enforcement effort was necessary. Aggressive enforcement measures made the message clear to the teens that unlawful use would not be tolerated. As the word spread by word of mouth, hopefully more teens would catch on that the only ride the Hinsdale Police would give is to the

police station booking room. If the offenders were found guilty, they would then be sentenced to ten hours of community service at the police department. Since most of Hinsdale's offenders come from an affluent background, the police department found that the penalties for alcohol violations were often paid by parents. As a result, there were no consequences to the offender to act as a deterrent. It was believed that community service would act as a deterrent to teens from using alcohol.

Like many new initiatives, the police department faced a few challenges upon launching the STAAT program. One challenge was presented from the judicial system when a new judge took the bench in Hinsdale's courtroom. Upon assignment, this judge was not sentencing alcohol offenders to community service because he felt penalty was too harsh, which contradicted one of the fundamental components of this program. The Chief of Police met with the Judge and explained the STAAT initiative and its objectives. The judge was convinced about the importance of the initiative and subsequently continued sentencing offenders to community service.

Another unique challenge came from parents. Although a majority of the parents within the community supported the efforts of this initiative, there were some that did not. A few parents felt that it was intrusive of the police department to send letters about the whereabouts of their children, and that it was also unfair for the police to assume that their child was involved in unlawful activity because their vehicle was parked in the vicinity of a party. The police department responded to these complaints by reinforcing the principles raised at the town hall meeting, and advising them that this is a community-based program and the police department is acting in accordance with the community needs.

A final challenge facing the program came from the offenders. First-time offenders were sentenced to ten (10) hours of community service, while second-time offenders were sentenced to twenty (20) hours. Most of the offenders took the work seriously and paid their fair share of labor; however, some took the work lightly and did not find the experience to be so difficult or as being a powerful deterrent from drinking. In response, the police department has retained a Community Service Coordinator who will serve as a volunteer to manage the community service workers. This coordinator will place the offenders in various community projects throughout the village, forcing them to give back to the community and learn from their experience. The coordinator removes the burden of monitoring the workers from the police department, and it also expands the opportunities for service work availability.

Initiative Evaluation

One of the most important elements of introducing a new initiative is to evaluate its impact on the community. The multi-facet approach of the STAAT program makes it difficult to produce clear-cut results in achieving the program's objectives; however, there are several indications that this grass roots program has made a successful impact on a teenager's decision to use alcohol.

Approximately six months after the program was introduced, the police department sponsored another community town hall meeting in an effort to seek input on the effects of the program. This meeting was held during Red Ribbon Week, which is a promotion of a drug- and alcohol-free lifestyle. The attendance at this meeting was not as high as the initial town hall meeting; however, the feedback was positive. Community members and parents came out to express their support of the police department's progress with this program. With no criticism or recommendations for changing the program, advocates of the initiative assured the police department that the program should continue.

Officers Mike Coughlin and Mark Keller, both members of the Community Policing unit, were critical members in the organization and administration of the STAAT program. Both Coughlin and Keller report that they routinely hear comments amongst teens about the STAAT program and how difficult the community service work may be. Most of the feedback received from the teens is that the work is not fun, and it is not worth drinking and getting caught.

Perhaps the only quantitatively measurable result of this program is to review arrest activity and make comparisons with historical data. Prior to the inception of this program, the police department would consistently arrest more than 100 teens annually for underage consumption or possession of alcohol. In the first year of this program, there were 129 arrests for these offenses. In the second evaluative year of this program, the number of arrests declined to 73, a 43% decrease in the number of offenders. With respect to recidivism, only two people had been caught drinking again after completing community service time at the police department. Ideally, this decrease should be an indicator that less teenagers are choosing to drink alcohol. However, it may also be an indicator that teenagers are being more attentive to Hinsdale's aggressive enforcement efforts, and they are getting better at not getting caught.

The anticipated results of this program were that teenage alcohol abuse would decrease. Although it cannot be proven that the STAAT program has successfully reduced teenage alcohol abuse, it can be proven that the Hinsdale Police are responding to less teenage house parties, finding less drunken teens, and handling less incidents of disturbances resulting from underage alcohol abuse since the program's inception two years ago.

Lessons Learned

The STAAT program initiative has been a valuable experience for not only the police department, but for the community as a whole. This is an initiative that could not have been developed without the support of the courts, the schools, the teachers, and the parents. Many lasting partnerships have been created, and the community is left with a feeling that the police department is genuinely concerned with making the Village of Hinsdale better.

As the initiation process was cumbersome and required an abundance of planning, there were some unforeseen planning aspects that should be noted for other agencies considering such a program. One unpredicted aspect is the amount of time commitment from police department staff. The Community Policing unit spent many hours preparing for town hall meetings, meeting with community groups, and meeting with judicial system staff. However, the time commitment was most extended when it came time to supervising the community service workers. Since each offender was sentenced to perform at least ten hours of community service work, an officer had to be present to monitor their work and ensure that they were performing it accordingly. On some days, there were 8-10 workers that needed supervision. Quickly, this became burdensome as it distracted the Community Policing unit from performing the primary functions of their positions. Additionally, there was little schedule flexibility in the scheduling hours as most of the offenders were in school during the weekday, daytime hours. Recently, a volunteer Community Service Coordinator has been retained to relieve the Community Policing unit of these responsibilities.

Another notable lesson is that the initiative will not solve the community problems overnight. It must be understood that the effects of this program may not show positive changes in your community for several years following its inception. Each community may respond differently to such a program, and fortunately in this community it was very well received. The positive quantitative results in Hinsdale may be attributable to the strong support and enthusiasm of the community. Even so, it is expected that the long-term positive effects of this program will not be fully realized for another 2-3 years.

Most importantly, this initiative has shown how a community partnership can help a police department shine. Too often, police departments do not take the hands of the community leaders and community groups to tackle difficult problems. In this experience, our agency found that by working together and using our local resources, the police department can reap significant benefits. The STAAT program initiative has yielded lots of “good press” in our community and left a lasting impression on our residents.

Overall, the STAAT program can be deemed a successful effort by the Hinsdale Police Department in providing a high level of community-oriented service to its residents, while making the community a safer place for teens.