

## Community Relations Officers Who Enforce the Law

City of Decatur, Georgia

*#Authentic Community Connections*

Population: 25,000

### Innovation

#### Criteria:

- Initiative fundamentally changed a process, product or service (fundamental)

OR

- Initiative builds upon existing knowledge to improve a product, process or service (incremental)
- The initiative substantially stretched the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.

### Describe Your Innovation

*(When and how did this innovation get started? Do also detail how the program or policy innovative, how it has changed previous processes, products, or services, and how it has substantially stretched or improved the boundaries of ordinary governmental operations.)*

The Decatur Police Department began to formulate a strategic plan in the early part of 2015. The department was faced with several issues that gained media attention. A major issue it faced was a perception within the community that the department focused unfairly on minorities within its jurisdiction. In order to address the concerns and needs of the citizens, the department truly opened itself up to the public and asked for their input. The department decided to undertake the daunting task of creating a three-year strategic plan in order to guide the future movement of the department. Focus groups were created within the community that targeted specific stakeholders within it. Between March and September 2015, 24 different focus groups met and gave input. The focus group were comprised of all sorts of community members, Decatur Housing Authority Residents, elderly, youth, city employees, Business owners, Decatur Senior Leadership team and various stakeholders within the community.

The focus groups gave insight on what they felt they liked and disliked about the police department that served them. They were able to provide valuable feedback about concerns that truly worried them and what they both needed and wanted from their police department in the future. Once all of the focus groups met, all of their thoughts were put together. Reoccurring themes (action items) in each group were prioritized and placed into the plan. The plan categorized these action items as high, medium, and low priority as well as what could be done fastest to what took more time. The department never had a plan like this to follow before. It was like being given the answers to the test. The community told us exactly what they wanted, we just had to make it happen.

## Collaboration

### Criteria:

- Initiative demonstrated engaging stakeholders both internal and external.
- Initiative demonstrated high performance teaming, breaking down internal silos.
- Strategic partnerships and or community networks were developed as a result of the initiative

**In less than 200 words, what individuals or groups are considered the primary initiators of your program? How does the innovation engage stakeholders or demonstrate high performance teaming? What strategic partnerships and/or community networks, if any, were developed?**

The initiative to change the way the department operates was formulated by Chief Mike Booker. By creating focus groups made up of all sorts of community members from all different walks of life, we really had a representation of the entire community. This gave a voice to groups that felt they were never heard by the police. Groups in the past that felt they were mistreated now had a voice and platform to be heard on. Many groups and people viewed the police in a more positive light once they began to see the strategic plan take shape and the department actually implement their ideas. As a department we are still required to enforce the law so we started looking at things from the perspective of what do you want with an encounter with the police. I.e. How would we like to be approached by police officer during an encounter. By identifying what our stakeholders needed and wanted from our department we became far more efficient in delivering services to those stakeholders.

**If a private consultant was used please describe in detail their involvement, identify the consultant and/or firm and provide contact information. Maintain a 100 word maximum.**

Frank and Alysia Foster (Organizations by Design, LLC) were used as a consulting firm. This firm assisted in creating the three-year strategic plan. The Decatur Police Department set up the meetings with the stakeholders. Once the meetings were set up, the consultants facilitated the conversations with the groups of stakeholders. It gave a way for the police department to get the thoughts and ideas of the groups without the intimidation of a uniformed officer present in the room. This helped tremendously in bridging the gap between the community and the police department.

Organizations by Design, LLC

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## Significance

### Criteria:

- Initiative addresses an area of concern for the majority of local government organizations.
- Initiative can serve as a model and replicated in other jurisdictions.

Please describe the extent to which you believe your program or policy initiative is potentially replicable within other jurisdictions and why? To your knowledge, have any other jurisdictions or organizations established programs or implemented policies modeled specifically on this project? Please also provide verification of the replication.

Many departments across the nation have adopted community policing practices. The majority of departments have community relations officers as a separate division within the department. In Decatur we took a far different approach. We created an entire department focused around community relations and meeting the everyday needs of the public. What we did in Decatur is not hard to replicate. Any agency can do what we did. They just need to take the time to listen to their community and stakeholders. To our knowledge no other jurisdiction has adopted our model of policing. We are often referred to as “different”. Our philosophy is we don't understand what's so difficult about treating people with empathy and respect, hiring the right people, and holding ourselves accountable. Having a culture like this ensures that the community is treated fairly. The model will resonate with citizens from all communities if it is presented to them.

## Effectiveness

### Criteria:

- Initiative addresses a community or organization need.
- Initiative has achieved tangible results.
- Initiative improved the organizational culture or the traditional approach to problem solving.
- Initiative has received recognition for its achievements, i.e. independent evaluation, national recognition, local press, etc.

Please describe the most significant obstacle(s) encountered thus far by your program. How have they been dealt with? Which ones remain?

You have to help officers within the department understand the importance of doing it. Without their understanding the entire effort is futile. This plan and program takes a lot of time. This is all going on while your normal duties within the department are still happening. Its not an easy task to complete while doing your normal duties. You have to have 100% commitment from the department. Its not acceptable for officers to think we “have” to do it, but should feel we need to do it. We told our officers that over time their work would become easier due to the relationships this plan helped form. The test is how the community perceives us. This plan gave us all the answers. That is the hardest point. Making sure everyone understands the advantage of doing this and making sure that people want to do it vs. feeling they have to do it. There is always a challenge when hiring new employees to make sure their mindset fits our model of policing.

What outcomes did this program or policy have? Could you share one or two objective measures that demonstrate these outcomes? Ultimately, how did you measure the change based on the intervention, and why do you believe in the credibility of this assessment?

We track complaints, use of force, and encounters with different races. We post our racial profiling statistics Online for the public to view and see we are transparent. Over time our numbers have stabilized, but initially the amount of sustained complaints dropped drastically. This can be attributed to our program based on a number of factors but namely the reinvigorated partnership with the police department and the stakeholders within the community. We spend a great deal of time on integrity checks, customer call backs and video reviews. As a department, we do

not know what we have in an employee until we check. This is the reason we have such a stringent system of holding employees accountable. These acts lower the number of use of force incidents our officers are involved in. Getting in front of a potential problem early and taking corrective action will not only better the employee, but the department as well.

**Has the program received any press or other media coverage to date? If yes, please list the sources and briefly describe relevant coverage.**

Decatur Chosen as Finalist for All-America City Award Decatur Metro I am happy to announce that the City of Decatur has been chosen as one of 20 finalist for this year's All-America City Award. The award, given to 10 communities each year, celebrates and recognizes neighborhoods, villages, towns, cities, counties, tribes and regions that engage residents in innovative, ... City of Decatur- Sustaining Member Focused on Community Policing ... <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/city-of-decatur-sustaining-member-focused-on-c...>

Jul 25, 2018 - The process, which involved extensive community outreach and guidance, has led to community policing being embedded in the Decatur ... 6 Ways the City of Decatur Became a Model of Inclusion – CitiesSpeak <https://cityspeak.org/.../6-ways-the-city-of-decatur-became-a-model-of-inclusion-div...>

Aug 15, 2017 - The city of Decatur, Georgia, answered those questions with its Better ... prioritizing racially-just community policing; ensuring the availability of ... Metro Atlanta police, city leaders explore ways to improve community ... [https://www.mdjonline.com/...police-city...community/article\\_96f0db40-c072-11e6-a...](https://www.mdjonline.com/...police-city...community/article_96f0db40-c072-11e6-a...)

Dec 12, 2016 - "It is imperative that our role in community policing be properly defined so ... Decatur Chief of Police Mike Booker offered solutions from public ... Decatur, Georgia: Diversity, Gentrification, and the Art of Community ... <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ncr.21270> by M McGrath - 2016 - Cited by 1 - Related articles

Jul 19, 2016 - "People would talk in small groups and report out," said Decatur City ... Prioritize racially just community policing by improving relationships ...

## Presentation

### Criteria:

- Presentation will be delivered by a team.
- Presentation will be highly interactive and engaging.

## Example Social Media Post

From badges to blacktops and coffee with cops! Discover what a Community Relations Officer who Enforces the Law means, and how the City of Decatur Police Department's approach to community policing has gained trust within the community. #TLG2019

**Please write an abstract or short description for your innovation that would make conference attendees say "Well, I need to attend this session!"**

The Police. What do these words bring to mind when you hear them? Those towards alone can strike fear into the hearts of some and act as a savior for others. The police in this nation are painted with a very broad brush. An

officer in California acts outside of the law and is arrested. His / her actions are felt across the nation in New York. Citizens often base their view of police based on negative publicity they receive in the media.

What does it take to overcome this negative view that is cast indifferently on departments across the nation? Here at the City of Decatur Police Department, we pulled out all the stops in forging strong and lasting bonds with the community members we serve. It is completely 100% possible to change the view of the community and show off your ability to serve others in a positive light!

**How will you make the session creative and unique?- How do you plan to be both entertaining and educational?- Include a description of how your session will facilitate group activities and/or interaction.- What will attendees be able to have as an actionable "takeaway" from the session?**

1. Police related sessions are often few and far between at the TLG Conference. This is an opportunity to have two certified police officers speak to a nation about how they assisted in changing the negative views of a community.
2. Both John Bender and Mark Hensel have taught for the City of Decatur's Citizens Police Academy on a bi-annual basis. Both are good public speakers and can deliver to an audience. John and Mark have dozens of real life witty stories from real life scenarios from a combined 30 years of police street experience which can add color to what may otherwise be a dry commentary.
3. Participants will witness a brief role play scenario involving police and citizens. The audience will be separated by tables and a scenario will be assigned to each. They will then be afforded the opportunity to act as a citizen being surveyed by a police supervisor to see how they felt they were treated by an officer.
4. We know that attendees will have a brand new perspective to take back to their community that will allow them to cater and direct services more efficiently and personally to their stakeholders.

**Anything else you would like to add?**

In conclusion, thank you all very much for taking the time to look over our application. We are both very excited and proud of the work our department has done in building a lasting bond with the community. We believe that our strategic plan and vision is definitive and breaks new ground in community relations. We feel the direction we are moving is fast paced and on track to lead the policing initiative into the future. We look forward to being able to share our proactive approach to policing in the current age with your audience.