
WHITEWATER POLICE DEPARTMENT
INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: City Manager and Police & Fire Commission

FROM: Chief Coan

SUBJECT: Public Safety Report/Annual Review and Update

DATE: February 20, 2009

CC: District Attorney, Sheriff, UW-Whitewater Police Chief, School Superintendent

INTRODUCTION:

This document is intended to provide a review and update of certain public safety concerns, police service delivery issues, and social problems impacting the City of Whitewater and the Whitewater Police Department. It is important that the Police Department be a source of clear and accurate information on the range of public safety issues confronting our community. The information provided in this document is intended to encourage that review.

CRIME AND CRIMINALITY/2008 IN REVIEW:

The Office of Justice Assistance recently released the 2008 Uniform Crime Report for the State of Wisconsin. The report reflects a slight increase of 1% in Total Index Crime for the City of Whitewater (primarily due to an increase in property crime). Index Crime includes the full realm of violent and property offenses, e.g. assault, burglary, robbery, theft, arson, etc.

Theft from motor vehicles (47), theft from buildings (51), and criminal damage to property (193) accounted for the largest number of property crimes in Whitewater last year. Most thefts were from unlocked vehicles, garages, and homes. There were 33 residential and 18 non-residential or business related burglaries last year. Property offenses continue to make up a significant portion of crime reported in Whitewater.

Eight motor vehicles were reported stolen during 2008. Most of the incidents involved keys left in the vehicle. All of the stolen vehicles were recovered and four of the thefts resulted in arrest.

Of the 51 assaults reported in 2008, 47 were cleared by arrest. Thirty-seven were classified as simple assaults, fourteen were aggravated and weapons were used in five of the assaults. There were two assaults on police officers last year. Most of our more violent offenses, including sexual assaults (eight), were situations where the victim knew the assailant. Many of these cases involved alcohol.

Our officers remain very diligent in their attention to matters of law enforcement and public safety. There were 3,441 total adult and juvenile arrests in 2008. The most common categories of arrests made by Whitewater Police Officers were for liquor law violations (468) and disorderly conduct (284). Our officers also completed 60 emergency detentions/protective custodies in 2008.

Officers made 30 arrests for vandalism and 110 arrests for theft. Twelve subjects were arrested on various weapons related offenses. The 69 adult arrests for drug violations included three for sale/manufacture and 66 for possession. Our Department also cleared 669 warrants in 2008.

There were 441 juvenile arrests last year. The most common categories of juvenile arrests were for disorderly conduct (100) and cigarette/tobacco violations (46). Forty three juveniles were arrested for theft, 43 for curfew violations, and 26 for truancy. Ten juveniles were arrested for drug violations and 34 for underage drinking.

In the area of traffic law enforcement our officers wrote 979 traffic citations last year. This figure reflects our focus on traffic safety operations and in particular the problem of speeding on West Main Street. In addition, Whitewater police officers made 155 drunk driving arrests in 2008.

There were 349 motor vehicle accidents in the City of Whitewater last year. Of those accidents, 41 involved personal injury. There were also two pedestrian related traffic fatalities in 2008.

CRIME TRENDS:

There are a variety of complex variables which contribute to the rate of crime. Economic, geographic, and demographic factors are just a few examples. Historically, there also exists a strong correlation between the number of young people in their most crime prone years (teens and early twenties) and the crime rate. Continuing local growth through residential development, annexations, increasing birth rates, continuing immigration, urban sprawl, and a bad economy may result in higher crime rates in the future.

Major challenges facing our Department and community in the area of crime and criminality include the control of juvenile crime and gang activity, combating drug and alcohol related offenses, addressing quality of life concerns, neighborhood stability, and effectively dealing with sensitive crimes (sexual assaults and crimes against children and the elderly).

NON-CRIMINAL ASPECTS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT:

Last year our officers responded to 8,071 calls for service compared to 7,531 in 2007. We also responded to 576 emergency medical calls, conducted 2,716 traffic stops, and engaged in 508 self-initiated activities. Police officers, together with community service officers, wrote 7,138 parking tickets in 2008. These statistics do not reflect the multitude of telephone calls and walk-in inquires that come into our station and communications center.

We continue to place a high priority on a full range of order-maintenance related issues. Because we are a college town, we tend to deal with an inordinate number of ordinance related complaints and violations, e.g. underage drinking, vandalism, parking violations, loud noise, petty theft, disorderly conduct, etc.

The major challenges to our Department in the years to come, in the non-criminal area, will be to continue to find economical and creative ways to meet reasonable expectations by our citizens, cope with the adverse impacts of a bad economy, maintain a feeling of stability and security in our neighborhoods, while at the same time seeking to reduce or minimize unreasonable demand for police service. We are a growing community and managing calls for service will continue to present a challenge to us into the foreseeable future.

UNIVERSITY ISSUES/CONCERNS:

Since Whitewater is home to the nearly 11,000 students of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater the welfare and safety of our student population is of significant concern. One of the most important issues confronting us is the threat of a school or campus related shooting. Unfortunately, these incidents have been occurring more frequently around the country.

The shooting spree last year at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb is just one more sobering reminder that these types of things can happen anywhere and at anytime. No campus, school, or community is immune from the threat of a deranged subject bent on committing an act of extreme violence.

In recent years we have been planning, training, and equipping ourselves to confront and mitigate the threat of an “active shooter” if it should ever happen here. We have conducted extensive training exercises in our public schools and on the university campus. Last year our training included the use of simunition weapons coupled with active shooter response scenarios at Heidi Hall on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Our mutual aid agreement with the Campus Police, our joint training efforts, and our acquisition of state-of-the-art weapons and equipment, have built a sound tactical base with which to continue to build on. We are very proud of the strong relationship that we have with the Campus Police Department and of our readiness to confront a school shooting.

At the same time, we continue to ensure intervention and assistance for those young people who we identify as in need of treatment for psychiatric and/or substance abuse problems. For example, last year we initiated 60 emergency detentions/protective custodies in order to ensure such treatment. We also work very closely with the Dean of Students Office in matters of mutual concern.

Intervention, early warning, and rapid response by well trained and well armed police officers provide an integrated approach to this problem.

MINORITY COMMUNITY/CULTURAL ISSUES:

Latinos are the fastest growing minority population in Whitewater. It is expected that the Hispanic population will become an even bigger economic and social force in the future and that they will further contribute to the cultural diversity and prosperity of our community. At the same time, Latino residents of Whitewater are an underserved population because of language barriers and cultural misperceptions. In addition, crime in the Hispanic community sometimes goes unreported.

Over the years our Department has been very sensitive to minority victimization, cultural issues, and community concerns. We value diversity and have long reflected minority representation on our Police and Fire Commission, in our Police – Citizen Academies, and within our Department as police officers and community service officers. We have conducted cultural diversity and Spanish speaking training for our personnel, made available bi-lingual interpreters, and our Hispanic officers have hosted a variety of formal and informal outreach and listening sessions. It is anticipated that minority community issues and concerns will continue to be of importance to us and to our City Government for years to come.

JUVENILE CRIME/GANG ACTIVITY:

Juvenile crime represents one of the most important issues in law enforcement here and across the country. Although there has been a general decline in the overall crime rate in the United States, juvenile crime remains of concern. There is also a disturbing trend in which young people seek to settle problems, real or perceived, with violence. In addition, we sometimes see disenfranchised or “at-risk” youths seeking to associate themselves with street gangs.

The issue of gang activity is, appropriately, an issue of concern to our Department and to our community. We believe that it is still safe to characterize most of our local juvenile “gang” members as relatively unsophisticated by contemporary standards, few in number, loose-knit in organization, and less violent than gang members in more urban areas. Local gang members have engaged in occasional acts of vandalism (graffiti), intimidation, threats, assault, drug abuse, and disorderly conduct.

Local “gangsters” have primarily been affiliated with the Tres Puntos, otherwise known as the 3P’s, and to a lesser extent the Original White Gangsters (OWG’s). There are also some young adults who have been tied to the Latin King organization. So far, these gangs have not seriously challenged each other. Therefore, we have not yet had to contend with any violent turf battles in our area.

Although relatively few in number, some of these gang members support themselves and their gangs through the sale of drugs and the commission of burglary or robbery. By way of a number of key arrests, search warrants, close surveillance and intelligence gathering, and through a variety of other aggressive policing tactics we have been very successful, thus far, in preventing gangs from gaining a stronghold here in Whitewater.

The most common categories of juvenile related violations are disorderly conduct, truancy, theft, vandalism, and the consumption of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. It is our belief that we need to continue to work closely with our schools, courts, social services, and with parents in an effort to address juvenile crime and disorder.

Our Juvenile Officer/School Liaison is specifically tasked with these responsibilities. She conducts investigations involving juvenile perpetrators or victims, delivers educational presentations to young people and their parents, and works closely with the schools and with various components of the Criminal Justice system.

From an education/prevention standpoint, our Department provides classroom drug and alcohol prevention and anti-gang education through the Life Skills program conducted in our elementary, middle, and high schools. The Life Skills program teaches prevention strategies to young people from Kindergarten thru the twelfth grade. Our officers also place a significant emphasis upon juvenile related enforcement, interaction, and referrals.

We must send a strong message to our young people that there are consequences associated with their actions. At the same time we must continue to seek treatment for those with alcohol, drug, and psychiatric problems. We believe that punishment and treatment are not necessarily inconsistent with one another.

ALCOHOL AND DRUG OFFENSES:

Drugs continue to be a problem in Whitewater just as they are throughout the county, the state, and across the country. The drug of choice here in Whitewater continues to be alcohol. To an overwhelming extent, the problems caused by alcohol far out pace those caused by any other drug. The fact that alcohol is legal (at least for those people over the age of 21) does not in any way reduce its impact on our community. More accidents, more suicide, more family dysfunction, more domestic violence, more crime, more disorderly conduct, and more health problems are caused by alcohol than all of the illegal drugs combined.

Let me now provide an assessment of the illegal drugs in our community. After alcohol, marijuana ranks a far distant second in terms of use and abuse. Far more arrests are made for possession and sale of marijuana than for any other illegal drug. This suggests, and other evidence seems to confirm, that marijuana is the illegal drug used most locally.

Intelligence information, search warrants, and drug related arrests confirm that cocaine is a drug that is also relatively available. We have seen more crimes committed by individuals attempting to support their cocaine addiction. Compared to alcohol and marijuana though, there is far less cocaine use among high school and college age young people in our area.

We are seeing a disturbing increase in the abuse of over the counter medications. It appears that this trend is particularly acute among some teenagers. Although alcohol and marijuana use by minors has been dropping it may only reflect a change in the drug choice.

The sale and abuse of Oxycontin and Vicodin painkillers are examples of prescription medications that are a growing problem nationally, as well as here in the Whitewater area. Oxycontin and heroin have similar effects; therefore, both drugs are attractive to the same abuser population. Sometimes referred to as "poor man's heroin", Oxycontin is abused for its opiate-like effects. Some Oxycontin and Vicodin abusers have been known to resort to theft and prescription fraud to support their habit.

Although we have seen some methamphetamine (METH) used and sold in our area, we are very fortunate that the drug has not taken hold here the way it has in other parts of the state. Methamphetamine is relatively easy to make, highly addictive, and can make the user both combative and paranoid.

This overview is not meant to suggest that any other illegal drug cannot be brought into Whitewater from local metropolitan areas. A study by the Wisconsin Department of Justice notes that street gangs continue to be heavily involved in drug trafficking activities. As such, our attempts to control and suppress the drug problem will continue to parallel our anti-gang efforts. One of our detectives is specifically assigned to work drug related cases and we work in close cooperation with our county-wide drug enforcement unit.

In addition, we continue to be vigilant in our efforts to prevent and/or intervene in underage drinking parties. Several times a year we conduct special operations aimed at identifying and suppressing large scale drinking parties. We also work closely with our local taverns in addressing alcohol related offenses and our officers are very diligent in their arrest of drunk drivers.

In addition, one of our sergeants serves as a member of the University-City Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse (AODA) Committee which proactively addresses such problems as drunk driving, binge drinking, drug abuse, and underage drinking. AODA has been instrumental in helping us create instructional videos which are distributed to all of our local taverns. The videos address such issues as false identification, over-serving of alcohol, and control of disorderly patrons.

SENSITIVE CRIMES:

Sensitive crimes, as defined by Wisconsin Statutes, are criminal offenses relating to child and elder abuse and neglect, and sexual assaults of adults or children. There were 8 sexual assaults of varying degrees reported to our Department in 2008 (a significant decrease from 20 in 2007). Recognizing the intense and painful psychological and social pressure placed on victims of sensitive crimes, the Whitewater Police Department approaches this issue with great sensitivity for the victim and with the unique skill afforded by a specialized Sensitive Crimes Investigative Team.

Sensitive Crimes Team members are activated for the sake of conducting thorough investigations relative to any sexual assault of an adult or crime against a child or senior citizen. Virtually all of these cases involve situations where the assailant was known to the victim. In a proactive sense, our team members deliver self-protection presentations and conduct routine visits of known sex offenders living in our area.

Our Department has recently become a member of the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) coalition. Sensitive Crimes Team members can now take a proactive stance when it comes to computer facilitated crimes against children. The commander of our team has become known for her expertise in this area and has been delivering presentations to local law enforcement and school officials.

It is absolutely essential that we continue to place great emphasis on the issue of Sensitive Crimes. We have sought a multi-disciplinary approach to investigating sensitive crime so as to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and sensitivity of all agencies providing services in these matters. We promote close cooperation among law enforcement, child protective services, prosecutors, educators, medical personnel, victim advocates, and other agencies in order to help guide our response to sensitive crimes.

CRIME PREVENTION AND CITIZEN PERCEPTION OF SAFETY:

Our crime prevention goals are to reduce the chance for crime to happen, resolve neighborhood problems, reduce the fear of crime, and to improve community and police cooperation. In an effort to meet these goals we have initiated a variety of programs and projects.

We periodically conduct surveys of our citizens in order to gauge public opinion relative to such issues as the effectiveness of our service and the level of perceived safety in one's neighborhood. We have found such surveys to be very helpful in identifying concerns and in finding solutions to perceived problems.

We are pleased to note that a National Citizen Survey, commissioned by the City Manager and City Council, found that Whitewater was given high marks by our citizens as a very safe place to live. Residents were especially satisfied with their police, fire, and emergency medical services and feel that they receive good value for their taxes.

What was most significant for us is that the majority of respondents rated police service as good to excellent. In addition, people generally feel safe from violent crime in Whitewater, feel safe in Whitewater parks, and feel safe in their neighborhoods after dark. A high percentage rated our crime prevention and traffic enforcement efforts as either excellent or very good.

Our Citizen Police Academies have also played an integral role in our community policing/crime prevention efforts. Academy participants have been very enthused about their experience and seem to come away with a new appreciation for professional policing and public safety. Such a program serves to enhance citizen awareness of safety related issues and provides a forum for which to discuss with citizens issues of mutual concern. We intend to complete our seventh Citizen Police Academy in 2009.

Other crime prevention programs offered by the Whitewater Police Department include crime stoppers, security/safety surveys, operation ID, and a safety fair. We also publish an informational newsletter, maintain a web-site, provide crime prevention and personal safety speeches and brochures, conduct listening sessions and outreach programs, issue public service announcements, and work closely with our schools. We regard all of these programs and projects as an effective means of raising citizen awareness of crime and public safety issues and in the prevention of crime in our community.

MAN-MADE OR NATURAL DISASTERS:

Whitewater is geographically fortunate from a natural disaster standpoint. Spring and early summer tornado activity is the primary threat with winter storm problems of more minor concern. Man-made disaster potential includes hazardous material spills, fires, and major transportation mishaps, e.g. rail, air, highway, etc.

The last year was very busy for Emergency Management, e.g. severe thunderstorms and sustained rains that resulted in record setting flooding throughout the area, a boiler malfunction during routine testing which caused an explosion at the power plant on the UW-Whitewater campus, a residential fire following a lighting strike that displaced two families in town, and several major snow storms which resulted in snow emergencies being declared in the City. In all cases, Emergency Management was mobilized to assist our community in coping with these situations.

The Hurricane Katrina disaster of August, 29, 2005 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, continue to have a profound impact on the lives of most Americans, including the citizens of the City of Whitewater. Within the law enforcement community, these situations raise several significant issues, including the importance of sharing resources and information and the need to strengthen the level of cooperation among all public safety providers (police, fire, EMS, emergency government, etc.) in meeting the potential for future attacks and/or natural disasters.

Although we are very fortunate in that we already had a very good relationship with each other, in the last several years we have sought to strengthen the level of mutual support and collaboration we have with the various safety service providers in our area, namely the Whitewater Fire Department and Rescue Squad, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Campus Police Department, Walworth and Jefferson County Sheriff's Departments, Public Health, Human Services, National Guard, and Emergency Government. From conducting table-top exercises to the sharing of information and resources we continue to strengthen these relationships.

Of particular note is the fact that the City of Whitewater retains an Emergency Management Coordinator (a sergeant in the Police Department). The Emergency Management Coordinator works closely with the fire department, emergency medical service and with the county emergency government director in matters of mutual concern. He also conducts inter and intra departmental training, ensures NIMS compliance, develops policies and procedures, manages state and federal grants, ensures the readiness of our EOC (Emergency Operations Center), and engages in all other aspects of disaster preparedness. All weather and hazardous materials related incidents are reported to the county and state offices of emergency government.

Our Emergency Management Coordinator retains his certification as an Emergency Manager for the State of Wisconsin. He is also certified as a hazardous materials technician and serves as a member of the Walworth County Level B Hazardous Materials Emergency Response Team. This multi-jurisdictional team has been trained and equipped to respond to hazardous materials related emergencies anywhere in the county.

Several years ago the City of Whitewater was recognized by the National Weather Service and the Wisconsin Department of Emergency Management as a "Weather Safe" community. This designation recognizes the planning, policies, equipment, and procedures in place to deal with severe weather events. Whitewater was only the second city in the State of Wisconsin to receive this recognition. Since that time we have continued to enhance our emergency management capabilities.

Last year, with the aid of a grant, we conducted a table top exercise in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Wisconsin Emergency Management, and area Police/Fire/EMS and Public Works. The exercise involved a simulated explosion on campus and the associated response by all components of public safety. This exercise tested the functionality of the city's emergency response plan and allowed the City and Campus to work together in dealing with a simulated disaster.

In addition, the first Citizen Emergency Response Team (CERT) for the City of Whitewater has been formed and trained. The Emergency Management Coordinator is now seeking to create a second CERT team. It should also be noted that in the last several years all city employees completed the required courses necessary to be certified by the National Incident Management System (NIMS).

OPERATIONAL STRATEGIES:

By virtue of our relative size, operational strategies are designed to maximize the impact of available resources. We believe in an integrated approach to the delivery of police service, i.e. using a combination of traditional and contemporary techniques, technologies, and tactics to address safety related problems.

We also adhere too many of the precepts of a community-oriented philosophy of policing which places emphasis on problem solving, addressing quality of life concerns, and in developing partnerships with our community such as through our Citizen Police Academy. Our supervisory staff must complete annual team goals which emphasize community policing, problem solving, traffic enforcement, and anti-crime measures. Our Community Service Officers provide additional support for this approach to policing assisting our Neighborhood Services Director in focusing on code enforcement related violations, parking problems, and general quality of life issues.

We maintain a high level enforcement posture in such areas as traffic violations, public order offenses, drug and alcohol violations, gang related offenses, and juvenile crime and misconduct. We seek to target repeat offenders, conduct special enforcement operations, complete thorough criminal investigations, conduct warrant service, and address a variety of municipal code violations. We also place great emphasis on close cooperation with our schools, courts, neighborhood services department, the city and district attorney's offices, social services, and with fellow law enforcement agencies.

From an education/prevention standpoint, our Department has developed a variety of safety brochures, we conduct periodic outreach sessions in our Hispanic community, distribute a newsletter, conduct Life Skills presentations in our schools, maintain a liaison with AODA, maintain an informational website, and deliver a variety of other safety education and prevention programs and presentations aimed at addressing the problems of sexual assault, gangs, underage drinking, and drug abuse.

The Whitewater Police Department continues to provide quality, professional and innovative police service to the citizens of the City of Whitewater. It is our goal to maintain a feeling of stability and security in the neighborhoods of the City, to thwart the proliferation of juvenile crime and gang violence, and to be as responsive as possible to community concerns regarding issues of public safety.

CONCLUSION:

Almost without exception, knowledgeable people in the field of Criminal Justice believe that any strategy which relies exclusively on the police to cope with any of the aforementioned issues is destined to fail. While clearly the police can have an impact on crime and criminality, we must also mobilize and encourage other community resources (e.g. government officials, social services, courts, clergy, public school and university officials, parents, civic organizations, the business community, etc.) which can, over time, more significantly impact these issues.

In the meantime, it is clear that from a public safety standpoint we are doing quite well here in Whitewater, particularly when compared with other communities in our region. We do not have a high level of violent crime, property crime remains relatively low, our arrest rate is very high, we are effectively addressing sensitive crimes, attentive to quality of life concerns, preparing ourselves to cope with the full specter of man-made and natural disasters, citing traffic offenders and drunk drivers, combating drug and alcohol violations, working cooperatively with our schools and other law enforcement agencies, and we have done a very good job of keeping gangs from gaining a stronghold here.

At the same time we can ill afford to be complacent or overconfident. Although our officers have been very diligent in arresting “bad guys”, we must all share in the responsibility of continuing to make Whitewater an inhospitable place for those who would engage in criminal conduct.

