

SAPD SURVEY: Building a better rapport

Survey helps boost relations between police and community

By Jennifer Rios

Saturday, August 27, 2011

SAN ANGELO, Texas — When the San Angelo Police Department published a 50-question survey earlier this year, it wanted to generate more dialogue and more interaction with residents.

Police administrators said once residents, as well as officers, realized actual changes would result from the outcome of the survey, attitudes began to shift.

"It's something we're very committed to," Police Chief Tim Vasquez said. "Officers are saying, 'This is my area, this is my town, this is my responsibility, and I'm going to make it better.'"

With the results of the department's satisfaction reviewed, Vasquez and leaders in the agency are hatching ideas.

Assistant Chief Jeff Fant, who was tasked with organizing strategies and processes for the department, said he took comments and ideas out of the survey and is working to apply them in day-to-day operations.

One survey issue seen across the city was a cry for more police involvement with communities and families.

"We have a pretty good rapport, but we want to do more," Fant said.

One idea was to appoint a public information officer to each sector to act as a liaison between beat officers and residents, a move Vasquez said is in the planning stage.

The city held a meeting earlier this month in the Bluffs to talk about traffic around Tree of Life Church, speeders and drivers who violate stop signs.

While similar trends were seen across the city in survey results — burglary and drug concerns — neighborhoods have a wide range of worries. With an officer assigned to one area, acting directly on behalf of residents, it would leave detectives and patrol officers free to concentrate on crime-solving.

And with the survey results published, Fant and Vasquez said officers are taking more ownership over their areas — a goal of the community-oriented policing the department has been pursuing.

During meetings, officers spend more time on recurring issues in certain areas, Vasquez said. On radio calls, they don't want other beat officers responding to calls in

their area.

"They want to know what's going on in their sector," Vasquez said. "It's competitive and proactive."

"It's gotten a lot better results," Fant said.

"And an improved team concept," Vasquez added.

Vasquez pointed to a recent increase in competition among sector commanders to clear the most cases. With more officers taking a more vested interest in the neighborhoods they work, the policing can only improve.

More surveys can be expected from the department — including another large-scale survey late summer or fall of next year and smaller ones in the meantime.

With the data compiled by Angelo State University's Community Wellness, Engagement and Development program in the first round, the second citywide assessment will be a way to build.

It's a way to show that, "now that (this data) has been brought to our attention, what are we doing with it?" Vasquez said.

Lt. David Howard, head of the community services division, said one service his division offers — one that's free and available to everyone — is home or business security assessments.

An officer from community services walks through a building looking for ways to improve security, then sends the results to the owner.

"We recently did one for a hotel complex," Howard said. "It's been an ongoing program for years, (but) we don't do them as often as you'd think."

What he's also seen over the past year is more awareness among residents.

The department cited arrests in a recent string of vehicle burglaries — and the man who reported the crime — as one example.

Rolando Gonzalez, 20, was woken by his mother about 2 a.m. one weekend at his apartment complex.

From his window, he saw four people rattling car and truck doors and taking items from the seats and consoles. He called police, who later took three juveniles and one adult into custody.

"It's important to not stand by and hope nothing happens," he said. "A lot of times you have to take action. That's how things change. By people actually doing something."

