

XXIII – SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS AND MEETINGS WITH CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES

This chapter describes the findings from a series of focus groups and meetings with citizens and community representatives conducted throughout the study. Findings from individual interviews with external agency leaders, focus group sessions with community representatives, and drop-in sessions in which individual citizens were invited to share their views on the police department are presented. In addition, a final section summarizes the findings from the focus groups, meetings with community representatives and drop-in sessions.

A – EXTERNAL AGENCY LEADERS

Interviews were conducted with the leaders or former leaders of eighteen external agencies who are familiar with the operations of the department. Individuals were selected based on their first-hand experience working closely with the police department and to achieve a balance among the perspectives of various interest groups. Leaders of the following entities were interviewed as part of this process:

- Police Chief's Advisory Committee
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD)
- Dallas Citizens Council
- Apartment Association of Greater Dallas
- Uniform Organization for Justice
- Greater Dallas Crime Commission
- Mexicanos Unidos 2000
- Dallas County Commissioner's Court
- Downtown Dallas Resident Council
- League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)
- Dallas Gay and Lesbian Alliance
- Federation of DFW Chinese Organization
- Vietnamese American Community of Dallas
- Greater Dallas Korean Chamber of Commerce
- Former City of Dallas City Council

In addition, meetings were held with a Hispanic attorney and African American clergymen – all of whom are based in the City of Dallas. Meetings were held in Assistant City Manager Charles Daniels' conference room or the individual's office.

The individuals were encouraged to share their individual and group feelings about the efficiency, fairness and effectiveness of the department. Overall, with a few exceptions, the individuals were concerned with the performance of officers and expressed great displeasure with the structure and responsiveness of the department. The following specific issues and comments were identified as being key concerns:

- The fake drug scandal has seriously damaged the Hispanic community's feelings for the department
- The general feeling among members of the Hispanic community is to "stay clear of officers;" few crimes are reported because of this fear and the fear of deportation
- Feelings were expressed by African American and Hispanic individuals that racial profiling happens on a daily basis
- Officers have little understanding of the cultural aspects associated with serving minority communities
- There are too few Spanish speaking officers
- Too many officers live outside the Dallas city limits
- Many officers have "cocky and belligerent attitudes"
- Some officers have quit working hard because they are dissatisfied with their pay
- Officer morale is at an all time low
- The city council and city manager are too involved in the running of the department
- A disproportionately low level of service is rendered to south Dallas residents as compared to north Dallas residents.

B – FOCUS GROUP SESSIONS

Focus group sessions were conducted with selected community leaders at various recreation centers located in all six police department patrol divisions. These meetings were designed to receive firsthand input from community representatives from all geographic areas of the patrol divisions. To allow participants the opportunity to share ideas, make comments, and speak in an unrestrained manner, three separate meetings of approximately two hours each were held in each patrol division. (Typically, three to five participants attended each session.) A total of 54 residents actively participated in these meetings. Additionally, a meeting was held with the Northwest Improvement District membership in which over 100 citizens participated. This meeting was organized by one of the participants in the regular focus group sessions.

The Dallas citizens who were asked to participate in the focus group sessions were generally residents who work closely with the police department. These citizens represented a range of community organizations including: Crime Watch Patrols, Volunteers-in-Patrol, Extended Neighborhood Crime Watch, Presidents of Homeowner's Associations, Presidents of Business Associations (such as Downtown Dallas Partnership and the Deep Ellum Association) and others. The majority of the people who were contacted to participate in the focus group sessions were recommended by the Dallas Police Department's Interactive Community Policing Coordination Unit, were referred by the department's Office of Community Affairs and Employee Communications, or were referred by other citizens who indicated that a particular resident had had extensive dealings with the police department and wanted to offer comments and advice.

After conducting 18 separate focus group sessions, it was clear that feelings about the department and the services they provide were very consistent across all six patrol divisions. While participants were generally very supportive of the officers that they personally knew (e.g., interactive community policing officers who work in their neighborhoods), they voiced significant criticisms of the City of Dallas and the overall operations of the Dallas Police Department. A number of comments and concerns were made repeatedly in the focus group sessions:¹

- Police officers have a very limited presence on Dallas streets; officers are rarely seen unless responding to an incident
- There is a shortage of police officers in the department
- Citizens had positive comments about their interactive community policing (ICP) officers who they claim are the only ones who “know their neighborhood”
- There is recognition of low morale and apathy throughout the department
- Concerns about an increase of crime in Dallas were raised in all patrol divisions
- There was extensive criticism about poor response times or no response to calls for service
- During peak crime times (weekend evenings) the common perception is that the department is poorly staffed which results in calls holding for excessive periods of time
- Random gunfire, alleged prostitution, and other nuisance complaints get low priority and often no follow-up
- Code violations at high-density apartment complexes cause high levels of crime that over-taxes the department (the general perception is that there is limited, if any, coordination between the police department and the code enforcement department)

¹ It is interesting to note that some of these comments – especially those having to do with perceptions of safety – are at odds with the findings of the citizen survey in which a representative sample of Dallas citizens was surveyed.

- Residents do not feel safe at night on Dallas streets due to reckless drivers, drunk drivers and speeding violations
- Residents do not feel safe in Dallas parks at night, or in many cases during the day
- Many residents do not feel safe in their own neighborhoods at night
- Property crimes are rarely investigated and are typically handled over the telephone by an expediter – most residents found this to be an unacceptable response by the police department

C – DROP IN SESSIONS

In contrast to focus group sessions and the interviews with specific agency leaders where participants were invited to attend, the drop-in sessions were public meetings open to all citizens of Dallas. There was no requirement for affiliation with any neighborhood association, crime watch group, or official dealings with the Dallas Police Department to participate in these meetings. The meetings were advertised in *The Dallas Morning News*. In addition, a meeting targeting Hispanic community members was advertised in several publications serving the Hispanic community (*El Sol de Tejas, Diarion La Estrella, Novedades, El Extra, El Heraldo* and *El Dia*). The advertisements encouraged all residents to attend the meetings and to voice their opinions and perceptions relating to the Dallas Police Department and the services they provide.

Evening meetings were scheduled at eight park department recreation centers located throughout Dallas in an attempt to provide a location convenient to citizens in all six patrol divisions. A central meeting was also held at Dallas City Hall. Additionally, a meeting scheduled at the Latino Cultural Center was organized to specifically accommodate Spanish-speaking residents who may not feel comfortable or be capable of participating in an English speaking forum. Attendance at the drop-in sessions varied from a high of 41 attendees at the meeting at the Tommie B. Allen Recreation Center in the Southeast Patrol Division, to a low of seven attendees at both the City Hall drop-in session and the Latino Cultural Center. In all, approximately 216 citizens participated in the ten drop-in sessions.²

Contrary to the findings of the citizen telephone survey (which solicited input from a representative sample of Dallas citizens) which revealed that most Dallas respondents continued to support and trust in department and its services, citizens at the drop-in sessions expressed vocal displeasure with the department and corroborated the comments made by community representatives in the focus group sessions. Participants in the drop-in sessions consistently exhibited a high level of frustration with the department and its services.³ A number of consistent themes and comments were reiterated in these sessions:

² This number may somewhat understate the actual participation in the sessions as not all participants signed-in.

³ One reason for the difference in perceptions between citizen survey respondents and participants in the focus group and drop-in sessions is that most respondents to the citizen survey have had no or only limited interaction with the police department. Participants in the focus group

- Great concern for the high level of violent crime and property crime in Dallas
- A vocal disgust with the overall level of service provided and with response times in particular
- Fear related to increased incidences of random gunfire, prostitution (conducted in broad daylight), drug houses, and illicit activities at night that go unchecked
- Burglaries reported to 911 that are expedited via telephone with no officer visiting the crime scene and no post-reporting investigation or follow-up
- Excessive vehicular violations such as red-light running, speeding, automobile wrecks, and drunken driving with little pro-active attempts to deter such activities
- Lack of police presence and police patrols except during response to crime incidents
- No response to calls for service or calls held an excessively long time during periods of peak activity
- Officers who respond to a 911 call by going to the door of the complainant to get more information instead of to the alleged crime scene
- Not enough officers and not enough police patrols to proactively prevent crime
- Lack of support from city hall, and no cooperation and coordination between departments
- Lack of trust and respect due to highly publicized scandals and incomplete investigations conducted by the Internal Affairs Division
- Generally poor communication from the department

D – SUMMARY

The universal theme communicated by citizens in individual interviews, focus groups and drop-in sessions (more than 450 citizens total) is that the Dallas Police Department is not providing an acceptable level of service. While respondents generally appeared to believe that the department as a whole is understaffed or mismanaged, they also expressed concern that the responding officers do not seem interested in resolving community related crime issues. Indifference and apathy were frequently discussed as prevailing officer traits. While citizens recognized that many of the problems facing the department are beyond the ability of individual officers to address, they also suggested that officers exacerbate the problems by showing indifference to citizen needs and concerns.

and drop-in sessions, by contrast, had had direct and, sometimes, frequent interaction with the department and its employees.

The lack of neighborhood patrols was mentioned in each of the six patrol divisions as a major shortfall of the department and contributes to a perception among many citizens that they are not safe. Many participants indicated that they did not feel safe at any time in their neighborhoods. They also emphatically stated that they not only do not feel safe walking in their neighborhoods at night but do not feel safe in their neighborhoods during the day either.

Many of the issues raised by participants were similar regardless of where they live. For example, citizens from all areas of the city expressed displeasure with the handling of both 911 emergency calls and routine calls for service. Additionally, little to no acceptance of expediter handled calls where no officer is dispatched to the reported crime scene was voiced by individuals regardless of the patrol division in which they reside.

In addition to these common concerns, specific issues were also raised by interviewees, focus group participants and participants in the drop-in sessions who reside in the areas served by the various patrol divisions. For example, there are a significant number of individuals in the southeast and southwest divisions that expressed the feeling that street crime is ruling their neighborhoods. Drugs, prostitution, gang violence, random gunfire and burglaries are described as “every day” events in many of these neighborhoods. Individuals in the northeast and northwest divisions have serious concerns about apartment related incidents and other street related crimes. Gang related activity is allegedly quite prevalent. Central division issues include serious concerns of increased criminal activity in the Deep Ellum and Lower Greenville areas. There is also a grave concern among business owners in Deep Ellum that the city’s entertainment districts should be addressed by the department differently from other areas. Gang related activity is mentioned as a prominent issue. Apartment related crimes were mentioned frequently in the north central division.

One other serious issue that is prevalent is the growing population of non-English speaking citizens, especially those of Spanish speaking origins. While the participation of Hispanic citizens in the drop-in sessions was quite small⁴, those who participated expressed great concern over the shortage of Spanish speaking officers. A lack of understanding of cultural differences was also cited as a barrier to improving police services. In particular, it was noted that because so many of the Hispanic immigrants living in Dallas are undocumented they feel a reluctance to contact the authorities over any committed or observed crime. Representatives of various Asian communities expressed a similar concern over language and cultural issues, but they seemed to be satisfied with the department’s effort to address these issues. In particular, the Office of Community Affairs and Employee Communications was cited as being responsive to the needs of these communities.

⁴ A special drop in session was held in the Latino Cultural Center and Spanish speaking individuals were encouraged to attend and express their concerns. Very few Spanish speaking individuals participated in this session, however.