



DELAWARE'S UNIQUE LAW ENFORCEMENT INITIATIVE

By Beth Welch

On an ordinary evening during fall 2000 in Wilmington, Del., probation officer John Dudzinski and Delaware State Police Cpl. Siobhan Sullivan, working together on special assignment, did something extraordinary. The two law enforcement officers, assigned to Delaware's unique crime-fighting initiative, Operation Safe Streets (OSS), noticed a group of young men lurking outside a fast food restaurant. The moment they decided to approach the group was the moment they prevented a murder. The young men scattered but, after a brief chase, the officers took them into custody, one of whom was carrying a shotgun. Later, one of the men would admit to a murder plot — they had been on their way to kill the girlfriend of a group member. Delaware's Operation Safe Streets had literally just saved a life.

The Beginning

Four years earlier, Wilmington was under siege. The city saw a record 108 shootings in 1996 — a 130 percent increase over the 47 shootings reported the year before. Shootings that occurred at all hours of the day and night had city residents

afraid to venture onto the streets. One elderly woman slept in her bathtub for months for fear of being hit by a stray bullet. Police were overwhelmed with the number of shooting cases they had to investigate and city and state officials knew they had to act. As a result, then-Gov. Thomas R. Carper created a special panel to examine ways to combat the escalating violence in Delaware's largest city. Less than a year later, in May 1997, the governor's Task Force on Violent Crime launched OSS.

The Offenders and Their Victims

A study prepared jointly by the Delaware Statistical Analysis Center and the Criminal Justice Council, titled *Wilmington Shootings 1996 — A Comparative Study of Victims and Offenders in Wilmington, Delaware*, found that 91 percent of shooting suspects and 56 percent of shooting victims that year had at least one arrest for a violent felony on their record; 65 percent of the suspects and 31 percent of the victims had at least one weapons charge; and 49 percent of the suspects and 44 percent of the victims had at least one felony drug charge. Further investiga-

tion into the backgrounds of those involved in the shootings revealed that many were on probation at the time of the incidents. During the past five years, the majority of suspects (98 percent) and victims (89 percent) were male. Black males accounted for 90 percent of the known shooting suspects and 79 percent of the victims. The majority of shooting suspects (72 percent) and known victims (65 percent) were ages 14 to 25. Targeting these troublesome populations with some kind of unique law enforcement initiative, it was believed, might make a difference.

Operation Safe Streets

Modeled after a similar program in Boston, OSS partnered state adult probation and parole officers with Wilmington police officers. In spring 1997, these specialized crime-fighting teams took to the same dangerous streets where shootings rose to record levels the year before. They were tasked with combing specific violent crime and drug activity hot spots. Armed with timely crime data, OSS would concentrate on tracking high-risk probationers — those that the state's Department of Correction

deemed likely to be repeat offenders. An analysis outlined earlier supported this strategy.

Many of those involved in Wilmington's record 108 shootings were on probation at the time of the incident. Further, probationers selected for OSS surveillance typically have criminal backgrounds that include violent felonies, or drug or weapons-related offenses. Targeted probationers are advised that their designation as a high-risk offender makes them subject to increased surveillance and infractions on their part will have severe and immediate consequences. Probation and police officer teams hit the streets primarily at night. Statistics show that the majority of shootings and illegal activity occur between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m. Teams conduct unannounced visits to the homes of targeted probationers after curfew, ensuring that they are adhering to the terms of their probation. The teams also visit area hot spots and hang-outs to look for probation violators or those wanted by police.

Justice is swift for those arrested under OSS; probation violators see a judge that night and are detained immediately for their violations. For four years, Pat Cronin, senior probation officer and OSS supervisor for the DOC, has been an OSS officer. He says the program's structure allows an officer to be involved in all aspects of the criminal justice system and see that system played out quickly. "Safe Streets members are involved in everything from the arrest of the offender to the sentencing of that individual for his crime," Cronin says. "After the arrest, we bring the offender before the judge, testify to the details of the crime and make recommendations on bail. Often, punishment comes the next day. Normally, a probation officer has to wait months for a case to be adjudicated. We can see a Safe Streets case resolved in 24 hours. That's swift justice." As a result of Wilmington's positive experience and success with OSS, the program expanded statewide in 1999 to include partnerships with the state police to provide OSS coverage in their jurisdictions and to the City of Dover. Today, the OSS program is a

collaborative effort by the DOC, the Delaware State Police, the Wilmington and Dover police departments and the Division of Youth Rehabilitative Services that targets juvenile probationers.

The Safe Streets Partnerships

Officers assigned to OSS credit one thing in particular for the success of the program — the commitment each participating law enforcement agency makes to the OSS partnerships. Curt Shockley was the OSS supervisor for the DOC between January 1999 and September 2001 and was paired with a state trooper to patrol southern Delaware's hot spots. He says OSS is the best initiative he has ever been a part of during his 13 years with the department. "This is as pro-active an approach to fighting crime that any law enforcement agency can be involved in. We don't wait for crime to occur. We go out and prevent it from happening," Shockley says. "We've had such an impact on the streets that the program's reputation now precedes it. We've shown up in one area of town to conduct curfew checks, and have had people phone their friends on the other side of town, warning them that Safe Streets is on the way. That doesn't diminish the success of the program, though. We just shift our checks to a different time."

OSS consists of strong partnerships solidified by the vast and various talents and capabilities of the participating law enforcement agencies. Each side brings valuable resources to the table. The DOC's administrative warrant and administrative search powers allow probation officers to enter a probationer's home at any time for any reason. While state and local police officers do not have these powers, they gain immediate access to a probationer's home as a result of the OSS partnership. "Our administrative search and administrative warrant capabilities are invaluable if we want to be able to catch probationers in the act of possessing drugs or weapons, or failing to comply with any of the terms of their probation," Cronin says.

He and Shockley say it is a two-

way street. The greater statewide jurisdictional authority the state police has is extremely important to the OSS program. Shockley also says police agencies, the state police in particular, bring instant access to their state-of-the-art equipment to the OSS partnership. "The Delaware state police can have infrared goggles, heat-seeking devices, a helicopter, or a special operations team on-site pretty quickly," Shockley says. "This close interaction also results in each side becoming familiar with the unique law enforcement duties of the other. Probation officers learn the tactics of vehicle and pedestrian stops and developing confidential informants — typical police officer responsibilities. Conversely, police officers learn about typical probation officer duties, including overseeing probationer behavior and counseling. In some areas, specialized cross-training is made available. Shockley also notes the mutual respect the agencies have for one another. "Once we're in that car, on the streets, it doesn't matter who you work for. It's not a DOC guy and a state trooper. It's an OSS team. I knew I could rely on my partner and he knew he could rely on me — no matter what happened," he says.

The Results

The City of Wilmington, where OSS originated, has not seen triple-digit shootings since 1997. In 1998, one year after OSS was implemented in Wilmington, shootings dropped by 32 percent from 107 to 73. Shootings decreased by 48 percent and 44 percent in 1999 and 2000, respectively, compared with 1996. From Jan. 1, 1999, to June 30, 2002, OSS in Wilmington conducted 8,128 curfew checks (4,890 positive and 3,238 negative), made 1,769 arrests (334 violation of probation arrests, 878 administrative warrant arrests, 557 collateral arrests), seized nearly 10,000 grams of controlled substances, recovered more than \$364,000 worth of stolen property and U.S. currency, and removed 92 guns and other weapons from the streets. Statewide statistics since the program's inception show that teams across Delaware have performed

more than 30,000 curfew checks, made more than 7,000 arrests, seized more than 85,000 grams of controlled substances, recovered more than \$1.26 million worth of stolen property and U.S. currency, and seized approximately 500 guns and other weapons.

Making a Difference

Cronin knows talk is cheap so he enjoys telling the many stories of how OSS has saved lives, cleaned up neighborhoods and made streets safer for citizens. One of Cronin's favorite stories is about an OSS team in Wilmington interrupting a rape in progress. "This guy had gone to his ex-girlfriend's home, dragged her out into the street and was about to rape her," Cronin explains. "She started screaming. The OSS team heard the screams and arrived in time to break up the crime. Had it not been for the OSS team patrolling the streets, the man would likely have been successful in assaulting the woman."

The OSS partnership can also mean the difference between life and death for the officers assigned to the program. In March 2001, probation officer Doug Watts and Dover City patrolman David Spicer were on OSS duty in a high-crime area of Dover. Watts and Spicer stopped two individuals they saw engaged in a drug transaction but the two fled. The officers pursued one suspect and after being cornered, the suspect opened fire on the officers. Three shots hit Spicer, two wounding him badly. Spicer fell to the ground. As the suspect was preparing to fire again, point-blank at the downed officer, Watts returned fire, hitting the suspect twice. This drew the attention of the suspect away from Spicer, saving him from being shot again — potentially fatally. Watts also drew fire from the suspect. He is credited with saving Spicer's life.

Overwhelming Support

DOC Commissioner Stan Taylor has no problem with the program's tough reputation. "The Department of Correction is committed to ensuring the safety of the public, whether the offender is in prison or super-

vised in the community," he says. "Since 97 percent of offenders who serve prison time will return to the streets, it's vital we provide appropriate supervision once they get there. We take our partnerships with Operation Safe Streets and the work we do together very seriously. We want probationers to know that we'll be watching. We won't tolerate violations of probation. Probationers who break curfew, miss meetings or commit new crimes will be held responsible for their actions." State police superintendent Col. Aaron Chaffinch says, "The overall results of this particular program, in a relatively short period of time, are indicative of the impact that several agencies communicating and working together can have on crime and on improving the quality of life within our communities." Dover police chief Jeffrey Horvath agrees. "By pulling resources together and sharing information, all the participating law enforcement agencies are having a real, positive impact on the streets," he says. "I am convinced that Operation Safe Streets, from one end of the state to the other, is playing a significant role in making Delaware a safer place to live."

The Future

Following the success of this unique crime-fighting initiative, it would be easy for officials to call for its expansion. But OSS leaders, for now, speak frankly about keeping the program as it is. Joseph Paesani, deputy bureau chief of community corrections for the department, oversees the program for the department. He says the program is right where officials want it to be. "It is doing a great job of targeting the state's most serious probationer population and it is doing so across the state. OSS teams are making significant strides in reducing crime, removing drugs from the streets, seizing illegal weapons and recovering stolen property," Paesani says. "This means fewer Delawareans are becoming new victims of crime." OSS officials praise the current structure of the program, but do not plan to change it in the near future. There is one change, though, officials will welcome any

time — fewer Delawareans sleeping in their bathtubs at night.

Beth Welch is chief of media relations for the Delaware Department of Correction.