

Two major college towns work together on community policing

While their schools may be rivals in collegiate sports, municipal leaders and police in Orono and Durham, N.H. cooperated on modern police techniques – and got results.

By **Betty Adams**

The outcries following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin in the spring of 2020 served to jump-start a formal program to improve police and community relations halfway across the country in Orono, Maine.

There had been community policing earlier in Orono. The town includes the University of Maine and serves as home to many students living off campus, but Floyd's death and the resulting concerns over racial injustice and use of force were a big wake-up call for both law enforcement and community members.

"It was a clear indication that law enforcement needed to focus on relationship building and partnership building and make it a very overt part of the agency," said Orono Police Chief Josh Ewing, who heads a 15-person force. "This is something that larger agencies do all the time. They have community policing divisions or community services divisions. It is not something that a small agency can typically do. But, still, it was so necessary to act on our own before perhaps it hadn't been thought through by the public, and something was forced upon us."

The new program formally launched in February 2021, but it was in Ewing's mind for two decades after he attended a course on the philosophy of community policing taught by Noel C. March and later visited officials in Durham, New Hampshire, home to the University of New Hampshire. The



University of Maine at Orono

two municipal police forces work closely with their respective campus police departments as the communities face similar challenges.

March, currently director of the Maine Community Policing Institute at the University of Maine at Augusta said, "The incident of the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis was a watershed event in police-community trust in that the hue and cry of citizens demanding transparency and accountability gave rise to a refocus and a renewed commitment to the principles of community policing within our law enforcement agencies throughout the country."

March, who is facilitating a series of regional police "Town Halls" in conjunction with the Maine Municipal Association, offered a definition of community-oriented policing: "Community policing is both a philosophy (a way of thinking) and an organizational strategy (a way to carry out the philosophy) that allows the police and the community to work closely together in creative ways to solve the problems of crime, illicit drugs, fear of crime, physical and social disorder (from graffiti to addiction), neighborhood decay, and the overall quality of life in the community. The philosophy rests on the belief that people deserve input into the

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Collaboration Corner is a regular feature in *Maine Town & City*, highlighting ways that municipalities work together to become more efficient and better serve citizens.



University of New Hampshire

police process, in exchange for their participation and support. It also rests on the belief that solutions to today's community problems demand freeing both people and the police to explore creative, new ways to address neighborhood concerns beyond a narrow focus on individual crime incidents."

Visiting 'rival' town

Ewing pointed to a 2016 trip to Durham arranged by Orono Town Manager Sophie Wilson for the town's senior administrators.

"We all went down and met with our counterparts and just chatted with

them about how they do business in the community," Ewing said. That information helped form the foundation of Orono's new commitment to community policing. "This model has been here, and since we had the model to use, we just implemented it," he said.

In Durham, Paul Dean, chief of police and associate vice president for public safety and risk management at the University of New Hampshire, said the department works closely with the town police force.

"Really what this comes down to is partnerships: two police forces in one community," he explained. "His-

torically, colleges and universities with populations of 10,000 or more have their own police forces, mostly so it shouldn't be a burden on the community. We are guests in a lot of ways in the host community and look at being part of that community."

Dean noted that he and David Kurz, former chief of the Durham, N.H. Police Department, co-authored an article titled, "Town vs. Gown: From Conflict to Collaboration," that appeared in a 2017 issue of the *Campus Law Enforcement Journal* of the International Association of Law Enforcement Administrators.

Today the "Town and Gown" portion of Durham's website says, "The university's location within the Town of Durham creates a special relationship that requires mutual respect, open and continuous communication, and the fulfillment of civic responsibilities by community members. We are collectively committed to cooperation in the resolution of mutual problems."

The federal Department of Justice website notes: "Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It is critical to public safety, ensuring that all stakeholders work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources."

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'Build a rapport'

Community policing was part of the federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 and Orono's Wilson noted that many communities have done some form of community policing.

"I was in a small town before I came to Orono and community policing was kind of a checklist: You went and rattled business doors after hours, and you'd go say 'hi' to kids and people get caught being good, they get an ice cream cone, kind of thing. Orono has always been a lot more active in community policing, really trying to build relationships in the community, really trying to build a rapport with the community."

Wilson said Ewing came to her and they promoted the new program. "It is really about trying to take non-law enforcement or noncriminal matters and resolve them without burdening our patrol," Wilson said.

She said the town created a budget of \$30,000 for the new division of community policing which came out of the traditional police department budget.

"This was a mid-year shift that did

not require additional tax dollars," Wilson said. "I believe the reason that we made the budget shift was to very clearly identify and demonstrate the dollars that were being allocated toward community policing." Edward Leskey, a longtime Orono police officer and a former officer with the U-Maine Police Department, was named Director of Community Policing.

"He's working with our life-safety people, our code enforcement people, community and neighborhood groups to try to solve long-standing community conflicts, whether they be around criminal behavior or just like a junkyard, which is not criminal behavior," said Wilson. "We are seeing significant success. The other piece that makes Orono unique is part of what we're trying to do is build neighborhoods. We have such a transient population that you need something consistent there to help try to knit that neighborhood back together every couple of years."

Wilson said one of Leskey's biggest successes is "getting neighborhoods to understand that kids aren't bad. And getting kids to understand that living in a neighborhood means modifying

your behavior a little bit. It's not a frat house all the time."

Leskey noted that the biggest change with the new post is that Ewing allows him to make his own schedule. "It gives me time off the road so I can spend quality time with what I call 'communities within the larger communities,' so each day I have the opportunity to focus on smaller communities.



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Hashing things out

He offered an example of one his first assignments in the new post where he was asked to resolve a conflict in a residential neighborhood that had been very quiet for years until college students moved into two of the homes and began having parties.

"The neighbors would have noise at 3 o'clock in the morning, which they were not used to, and they would call the police often," Leskey said. He went there during the day, meeting with the long-time residents to hear their complaints and concerns and then talking to the college students, and finally the

property manager. He continued to meet with all three parties over several months.

"Every now and then there would be a party, and I would go back to the college students and say, 'Guys, you took it too far,' and they would actually apologize, and I'd be in contact with the residents." He said the issue resolved itself after some give and take for both sides. "If I worked the road, I would never have been able to have these extended meetings. I have time now to reach people and get both sides and work it out."

He anticipates working with prop-

erty managers this summer so that students who move in will better understand the rules of the neighborhood.

Ewing said that example shows the value of "solving problems instead of trying to enforce our way out of the problem."

And Wilson added, "That investment of time allows this to not be a law enforcement issue, but it actually allows students and the community to take ownership of the problem. The idea that the community decides how it is going to be policed is still true here."

"I think every agency probably does some version of this," Ewing said. "We just wanted to make it more formal and dedicate officers to it."

The Durham (N.H.) Police Department also has one officer dedicated to community policing. Chief Rene Kelley said Detective Holly Malasky has held the post of "problem-oriented policing" officer for the past three years.

"We don't pigeon-hole what our POP officer does," Kelley said, noting that Malasky deals with problems with students in off-campus housing, scams targeting the elderly, and issues



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where individuals wander away from local memory care units. The post was originally funded for three years by a federal grant with the condition that the town support it for an additional three years. Now, the position is built into the regular police budget.

Kelley is from Rockland, Maine, and graduated from Rockland High School in 1979. He attended the Maine Criminal Justice Academy and was a Rockland Police officer from 1988-1989, before relocating to New Hampshire.

He credited his predecessor, former Durham Police Chief David Kurz, who retired in July 2020, with initiating community policing efforts there 25 years ago.

Building bridges

“When he was hired, he went to downtown businesses and to residents he’d meet on the street and at the coffee shop and said, ‘Tell me about the police department and what you want to see done. What do you expect?’ ”

Kurz also built a partnership with the UNH Police Department, Kelley said, sharing information and arrest



Rene Kelley



Todd Selig

logs and doing some patrols jointly.

“The university committed to the Town of Durham that if one of our students is involved in criminal activity, you let us know and we can initiate conduct violations. If it’s significant enough, a student could be expelled for a semester. It got to a point where students would much rather deal with consequences from the police than the university,” Kelley said.

Kelley also pointed to an adopt-a-cop program where each fraternity and sorority has an officer assigned to it. “It kind of humanized the police department to the Greek life community.”

UNH Police Chief Dean said the university and town police forces strive to have a unified strategy. Students cited for such things as drugs or alcohol violations are sent to counseling and their behavior is monitored by their



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deans, which keeps the recidivism rate low. “I don’t want their money,” Dean said. “I want their compliance.”

Kelley is proud of the fact that officers who worked in Durham have gone on to become chiefs in other police departments in New Hampshire and brought many of Durham’s community policing methods along with them.

Durham Town Administrator Todd Selig offered three pieces of advice to community leaders regarding police departments and community policing:

- Have a good process in place for hiring police officers, one that includes representatives from the community, and keep the post vacant rather than hire the wrong person.
- Have policies that are up to date and reflective of best practices in policing.
- Train, train, train: Show them

what to do, reinforce it and hold them accountable.

Ewing spoke of the value of building relationships so that people – especially college students – would feel more comfortable around police officers, and cited a long-standing relationship with a U-Maine sorority where members pitched in to help if the police needed volunteers for community programs.

This past semester, at the invitation of UMaine Police Department Lt. Robert Norman, Leskey attended a meeting held via Zoom with a number of international students, including students of color, and answered questions about why police officers did things in a certain way.

“It was a wonderful conversation,” Leskey said. By the end of that meeting Leskey made an offer. “I said, ‘For you to understand what police do, once

COVID is over, I’m opening up the opportunity for you to go on ride-alongs with me on busy nights so you can see the police in action.’ Almost 90 percent of them said, ‘Yes, please.’ ”

U-Maine Vice President Robert Dana said the university has been doing community policing for many years and he added, “The collaboration and cooperation between the town and the university is very strong. We have thousands of students who live in student housing and they also live in neighborhoods. They have unique needs, and the town has been mindful of creating environments where students and long-standing town members can live in harmony. It’s worked very well.”

Off-campus students

Dana estimated that 3,600 students live on campus with an additional 4,000-5,000 within the Town of Orono. Many others live in surrounding communities. The university reported 11,700 students, with about a quarter of those attending part-time.

U-Maine Police Chief Roland LaCroix emphasized the importance of his department’s collaboration with the town’s law enforcement department, particularly in staffing large events at the university. “We couldn’t do it without the Town of Orono,” he said.

March said that while Maine is rated as the safest state in the country by *U.S. News & World Report*, “We still are feeling the effects of questioning the credibility of law enforcement, and this is where community policing becomes more important than ever.”

Ratings published this year by the magazine indicate that Maine “ranks first in the nation for public safety,” with the lowest violent crime rate and the fourth lowest property crime rate. New Hampshire placed second in both categories. The figures are based on national data from 2019.

In Durham, Police Chief Rene Kelley said, “Here we have a view that our police officers are guardians of the community to ensure people can live their lives happily and they want to keep them safe.”

UNH Police Chief Dean has a similar view: “My goal is to make sure the 16,000-plus students at UNH can concentrate on their education and not worry about their safety.” ■

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