

# Community Outreach Unit in the Allentown Police Department

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [George Floyd killing](#) April 20, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 

*“We’ve been expanding our community engagement unit. We’re looking to get back to some of the things we did in the past with some of our bicycle patrol units. With the reorganization of our department, we’ve put a really strong emphasis on the community policing philosophy.”*  
*Bethlehem police Capt. Tim Cooper*

The post-GeorgeFloyd activities by the Allentown Police are getting a lot of news coverage as you can see from recent Gadfly posts. We don’t get as much. Here Allentown’s Community Outreach Unit is profiled. We have a new Community Services Division, though Gadfly doesn’t believe we know much in the way of its specific activities yet.

The debate noted in the article over whether the police should be doing what the Allentown COU is doing or “someone else” is interesting and one that we should be having.

In any event, Gadfly hopes that we can soon start being the lead instead of the tail in articles like this about the interesting ways public safety is being reimagined.

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selections from [Andrew Scott](#), *“Allentown police outreach unit reassures neighborhoods traumatized by shootings, other crimes.” Morning Call, April 19, 2021.*

In the early morning hours March 27, “I was in bed, but awake, when I heard gunshots,” [Erlinda Aguiar] said. That was a 23-year-old man being killed in that same block. Police are still investigating and have made no arrests. Aguiar and her neighbors were shocked.

Incidents like that shooting can traumatize not just victims and their loved ones, but others in the neighborhood where they happen. That is where the Allentown police Community Outreach Unit comes in. Begun Jan. 1, the unit has eight main officers and a crisis intervention specialist, who work on building a better relationship between police and the community. One of the ways they do that is by visiting residents near the sites of potentially traumatic crimes, but not just in an investigative capacity. “We want to provide the community with an opportunity to heal from what’s happened,” said Sgt. John Leonard, who helps coordinate the COU. In the days following the March shooting, COU members went door to door in the area. Officers spoke with neighbors and addressed any questions and concerns about the shooting and neighborhood quality of life in general.

“We answer as many questions and share as many details as we can about the incident, such as whether the crime was random or targeted and whether the suspect had any ties to the victim, provided those details won’t jeopardize our investigation in any way,” Leonard said. “We reassure residents that we’re there, maintaining a presence to keep them safe. Equally as important, we offer them a way to gauge how much the incident has negatively impacted their mental peace, and we offer information on how to restore that peace.” COU members hand out a questionnaire to see if residents are experiencing any post-traumatic stress or anxiety. Officers also refer neighbors to a crisis intervention specialist, who follows up with anyone experiencing PTSD and refers them to agencies providing mental wellness services. Pinebrook Family Answers in Allentown, an agency whose services include working with traumatized people, has two community intervention specialists. One is assigned to Allentown police while the second is available to other Lehigh Valley police departments.

The idea for these post-incident follow-ups with neighbors is “based out of restorative and trauma-informed care practices,” Allentown police Chief Glenn Granitz Jr. said. “I began doing these door-to-door walks

and follow-ups years ago by myself as a captain,” Granitz said. “I see great value in this. Our officers do, as well, and have been remarkable in following up on significant incidents and quality-of-life concerns. We’ve been doing these follow-ups in other capacities, but have found that returning to the neighborhood with our COU members, patrol officers and crisis intervention specialist is often the most effective.”

Aguiar hopes others will share her appreciation for the police’s efforts, calling the COU’s visit to her home “so refreshing.” “Imagine seeing a police officer when there’s nothing bad going on *and* they’re visiting our homes to share helpful information,” she said. “They’re not breaking up a fight or arresting anyone. They’re stopping by to say hello and tell us we can call them about community events and block parties so we can meet them.”

But not every is as appreciative. Ashleigh Strange of Allentown, regional director of Lehigh Valley Stands Up, believes police should be more limited in their role in the community. Lehigh Valley Stands Up and other organizations took part in last year’s protests for racial justice after incidents involving police officers killing or violently restraining people of color. “I haven’t seen the type of police response to incidents in my neighborhood that was seen on North Fourth Street and, honestly, I don’t want to,” said Strange, a Black resident of South Street. “Because of the historically racist and negative relationship between police and people of color in this country, the reaction I and many others have when we see a police officer at someone’s door is not, ‘Oh good, the police are here, I feel safe.’ It’s, ‘Oh no, the police are here, something’s wrong.’” Strange and others are part of the defund the police movement calling for money to be reallocated from police departments toward community social services. “I don’t need a police officer coming to my door to check if I’m OK after a crime in the neighborhood,” she said. “I’d rather [someone else](#) do that instead or just call me on the phone. We can train other people to do some of the things police do, such as responding to mental health crises. We say we want officers to be part of the

community they serve, but we don't have a residency requirement as part of the police hiring process. The best way to have police officers be part of the community is to hire from among residents who know the community."

Keiser agrees with hiring qualified residents, but not with limiting police involvement. More community policing is what's needed, he said. The concept began with the traditional image of the police officer walking the beat, knowing everyone in the neighborhood by name. "When I joined the Allentown Police Department in '97, we had officers stationed in offices throughout the community," Keiser said. "They would go out and interact with people, find out their concerns and have those issues looked into. We had things like the quality of life patrol to develop and implement solutions to neighborhood concerns. We've always been a community-oriented department, from the newest patrol officer right up to the chief." What's changed over time is the method of getting the word out about what police do in the community. "Now, we have social media, where we can post news about our department's community activities and events like the Police Athletic League, our youth-mentoring programs and our neighborhood-oriented holiday celebrations throughout the year," Leonard said. "But, nothing takes the place of that face-to-face interaction with fellow human beings, which I think is even more important in this digital age."

"Trust" is the key motivation behind community policing/outreach efforts, Keiser said. Now more than ever, residents need to know they can trust their local police. "People think the negative actions of a few police officers are the actions of all police officers, which is not the case, and that perception causes a lack of trust," Keiser said. "We want to destroy the negative stereotypes of police as being racist or just being there to arrest people. We're not here to be adversarial, but to serve and help our communities."

Police departments in the Lehigh Valley's other major cities are trying to build trust with their own outreach efforts. "We're encouraging a lot of our officers to actually get out of the cars and get to know not just victims, but also complainants," Bethlehem police Capt. Tim Cooper

said. “We’ve been expanding our community engagement unit. We’re looking to get back to some of the things we did in the past with some of our bicycle patrol units. With the **reorganization of our department**, we’ve put a really strong emphasis on the community policing philosophy.”

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