

Self-initiated policing: More than just catching criminals

By NANCY BERGERON

For Ruston police Officer Chad Hamlin, good police work is about more than just catching criminals.

“The relationship between the public and us as police officers is probably the most important part of our job,” said Hamlin, now in his fourth year on the force.

Efforts by the Ruston Police Department to increase positive officer-citizen contact are part of the Ruston 21 “quick response” plan, and are designed to boost community cooperation, assure accountability, and increase the police department’s transparency in effort to strengthen the trust between citizens and law enforcement.

Ruston 21 is a multi-part program aimed at preserving the city’s uniqueness while at the same time positioning Ruston for growth.

“The city has always been concerned about the safety of its citizens,” Alderwoman Marie Riggs said. “I believe this concern has turned into major action by the city and the police department.

“You want to know that the area is safe,” Police Chief Steve Rogers said. “It’s always about visibility in police work. Just being there, being seen.”

Alderman Elmore Mayfield calls the quick-response initiatives “the beginning of one of the most wonderful things that could happen. It’s the beginning of a new kind of relationship in the community.”

RPD Lt. Tim Parker said the department’s proactive stance has been very positive and well received by fellow officers.

“We’ve been able to hire a lot of quality young officers in the last 18 months,” said Parker, a 22-year police veteran.

In fact, the department, which is budgeted for 53 positions, has gone from being eight people short to two more people than it has ever had. Officers say that alone has helped them be more proactive. The department has become more customer-oriented.

Ruston resident Floyd Stinson agrees.

“It seems as though the officers now are more like friendly policemen,” Stinson said. “They look more like help now. They come to you more like a friend. Now you see that Christ-like thing, that they’re here to help.”

The change in approach – officially called self-initiated activity – is one of the key quick-response initiatives. The philosophy is simple, explained Assistant City Administrator Ed Pittman.

“They get out and talk to people,” he said.

Officer Edward Griffith said, “People need to know we’re here for them.”

“If you develop a good rapport with people, they know you’re a fair officer,” 17-year-veteran Sgt. Travis Sullivant said. “I actually go to people and visit in their homes. It’s important to me for them to know that they can trust me.”

Hamlin said the opportunity to get to know city residents is one of things that attracted him into law enforcement.

“I love it,” he said. “That’s one of the things I like about it, the chance to get out and meet people.”

Friday and Saturday evening patrols are prime time for self-initiated contact with residents. And it works.

“So far what we’ve noticed is how much quieter the whole night is,” Pittman said.

“A lot of stuff goes on out there,” said Lt. Greg Duncan, who spent 15 years on the night shift. “We need the community’s help.”

Officers say good relationships with citizens helps to both solve and prevent crime.

“A lot of crimes are solved by tips from the community,” Hamlin said.

Mayfield said he’s convinced the new initiatives are working.

“People are ready for it. Those who want to have a safe community, the Ruston police are meeting them half way,” he said. “We feel good about it.”

The Police Management Team – Rogers, Pittman, Mayor Dan Hollingsworth, City Administrator Lewis Love, and Assistant Police Chief Kevin Peden – meet weekly to discuss public safety issues.

“To have a cooperative spirit among all departments of the city is important,” Riggs said.

“There’s buy-in from the top down,” Pittman said.

Rogers is quick to say the groundwork for both some of the changes and the new headquarters predates him.

“This idea, this thought started way before I came here,” said Rogers, now in his third year as chief. “We just finished it with the help of the Mayor. The Board of Alderman backed us 100 percent. The Ruston 21 initiative helped us to take that giant step.”

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