

# Comprehensive Social Services Information and Referral

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## *Abstract*

*Currently, very few police agencies have formalized policies and procedures that guide their personnel in providing appropriate information and referrals to citizens. For community policing efforts to be successful, officers must have access to current, comprehensive information on all the community resources available to citizens, and make the needed referral(s) to address specific problems.*

*A major premise of community policing is that citizens, government agencies (local, state, and federal), community resource agencies, and the police work in concert with one another to resolve community problems. In order to accomplish this, the police (as well as other community members) must be familiar with available resources in the community, as well as how to access those resources. Research has been conducted on the community policing concept and the need for improved information and referrals in order to make the concept effective. Two police departments and one non-profit agency who have implemented different types of information and referral models have also been researched, and will be discussed as part of this paper.*

## Introduction

Law enforcement officers, as problem solvers, are called on to respond to a myriad of circumstances and situations. While the officers are able to respond to the initial crisis, they are not trained or staffed to handle more long-term needs of citizens. Consequently, to resolve long-term needs, officers should be able to direct citizens (customers) to appropriate community resources, or make contact with other agencies that are better able to address specific concerns or problems.

Since it is impossible for officers to know everything about all the available resources in a community, there is a need for a service to provide information for potential referrals. Ideally, this centralized information and referral service would be available on a 24-hour basis providing comprehensive data on all available community resources. Unfortunately, most communities do not have such a service.

Until such time as these information and referral services exist and officers are trained thoroughly in the use of referrals, officers will continue to police using traditional methods. Officers can be much more effective in solving problems and assisting citizens when all the data on community resources are available to them through one phone call or the mobile digital computer in the squad car. In addition, citizens could begin to help themselves more and solve their own problems if a readily available, easy to use, data system on community resources and services was properly advertised and available to them through a telephone call.

Currently, little effort is being made to resolve this problem that is effecting most communities throughout America. Very little has been written on this topic, and usually it is in the context of other material and only briefly mentioned. While there are information and referral services available in many communities, most are not 24-hour operations and do not offer the comprehensive information on the spectrum of community

resources and services. Too often, there are many services that an individual needs to call or visit; thus requiring the need to spend countless hours to find the appropriate information to solve a problem or find a much needed service. Many people are unwilling, or unable, to put forth that kind of effort.

This paper will look at the traditional versus community policing model, and the historical role of information and referral. In addition, it will touch on how some law enforcement agencies are addressing the issue of information and referral, including Florida's statewide organization of information and referral services.

### Historical Perspective

What is commonly called "traditional policing" remains this country's dominant policing style. Most police agencies still spend the majority of their time reacting to citizen demands for service. Traditional police response involves a patrol officer responding in a vehicle to a person(s) in crisis and providing intervention so that order is established. "The police officer is to government as the general practitioner is to the entire medical establishment. Officers can recognize needs, diagnose problems, and handle some of them directly, but they do not have the time, training, or resources to handle all of the problems that come their way in their entirety" (Goldstein, 1990, p. 106). There is still a commitment by most agencies to respond to every call for police service and to do so quickly. In the vast majority of agencies, the telephone, more than any policy decision by the community or by management, continues to dictate how police resources will be used. Clearly, this reactive posture encourages superficial responses, placing a higher value on getting to the incident and on getting out, than on what actually happens in the handling of the incident. This is especially true in this era of budget cutbacks, especially with respect to reductions in personnel.

Other traditional policing characteristics are as follows:

- Patrol officers are restrained in their role. They are not encouraged or expected to be creative in addressing problems.
- Training is geared toward the law enforcement role of the police (only 15-20% of their time is spent on such activities).
- Rewards are associated with participating in daring events, rather than in involvement in service activities in the community.
- Police agencies operate as distinct entities with few collaborative links to other agencies and services in the community.

Community policing, by definition, is an interactive process between the police and the community to mutually identify and resolve community problems. Citizens, governmental agencies (local, state, and federal), community resource agencies, and the police work in partnership to resolve issues.

This policing strategy alters, in important ways, the police officer's job. An officer's responsibilities expand beyond attempting to control criminal activity -- to preventing crime, promoting order, settling disputes, and providing assistance in emergency social

crises. The officer's methods and resources extend beyond arrests and citations; they now include mediation and negotiation, referrals to other public and private agencies, and community mobilization. Community policing focuses on results as well as process. Incorporated into routine operations are the techniques of problem identification, problem analysis, and problem resolution.

Current police training focuses on how individual officers handle the immediate problems they encounter -- the intoxicated person, domestic dispute, mentally ill person, person on narcotics, etc. Rarely do officers receive training on problem solving and how to provide referrals to individuals in need of community services. All too often, the information that the officer needs to provide a referral is unavailable or out-dated. In addition, most police departments throughout the country, let alone Florida, do not have policies or established procedures for providing information and referrals to citizens in need of additional services. A study by Scott in 1980 revealed the following:

*Interviews with police administrators and field observation of patrol officers revealed no clear cut departmental referral policy. Although most administrators interviewed at least paid lip service to referral, they produced few clearly specified written policies or procedures regarding referral other than those dictated by state law (usually in the case of alcoholics or the mentally ill). Initial observation of more than 900 full patrol shifts in 24 police departments, across three metropolitan areas suggests that referral by patrol officers during encounters with citizens is infrequent. (Scott, 1980, pp. 18-21).*

Unfortunately, little has changed over the past 13 years. Most departments still do not have established policies and procedures with regard to referrals, let alone provide their officers with the comprehensive data on available community resources. "More effective procedures must be established for referring individuals to services that will help them deal with problems that otherwise continue to require police attention. Police officers should be given some incentive to make referrals, and they should become sufficiently familiar with the services available to determine when referral is appropriate." (Goldstein, 1990, p. 106).

Some departments, e.g., Portland, Oregon, and St. Petersburg, Florida, provide their officers with pocket guides and some training regarding referrals, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Initially, the Portland Police Bureau developed a pocket sized book for street officers and a larger version for desk personnel who answer telephone requests for assistance. Recently, a computerized version of this guide has been circulated for use in mobile digital computer terminals and at precinct desks.

*Designed to meet the needs of street officers, desk personnel and citizen volunteers, and reflecting input from hundreds of officers and other bureau members, the guide includes listings of addresses and fax numbers for Portland's three precincts and eight community contact officers; the most frequently used hot line and emergency numbers; a directory of city bureau information, used to refer citizens to the appropriate city bureaus for help with licenses, building code violations, traffic management issues and other city management functions; telephone numbers for federal, state and municipal law enforcement and criminal justice agencies; and community resources,*

*listed by topic or problem heading.*

*Covering subjects from abandoned autos to youths, the "Resources" section addresses such specific topics as AIDS, alarms, drug use and abuse, the elderly, emergency food and shelter, landlord/tenant issues and runaways. Although an experienced officer usually knows the pertinent information for basic response agencies, he may not be aware of other applicable community resources. Thus, each listing includes hours of operation, areas served, contact person and, if necessary, a brief description of services. (Austin and Sweet, 1993, pp. 65-65).*

In addition, the Portland Police Bureau expects to have an information and referral telephone line to provide service to citizens with questions or concerns as well as to the officer in the field in need of specific information. Funding and personnel restrictions prevent most police agencies in this country from implementing a project like Portland's; in this day of limited resources, all projects must be prioritized.

Those departments implementing the community policing and problem oriented policing models are more likely to encourage referrals and the use of a community resources guide. For most police departments, there is still a gap in the continuum of service delivery. Officers return to the same dysfunctional family, individual, or situation, month after month and year after year, and deal with the same problems.

Many police departments across the country attempt to provide their officers with available community resources, but quite frequently these are incomplete and obsolete telephone numbers, contact persons, addresses, etc. Other departments use their communication centers and dispatchers to provide information and referrals to citizens as well as to patrol officers for citizen contacts. Countless hours are spent attempting to update information, let alone provide it to officers and citizens by telephone or radio. Most police departments do not have the monetary or human resources to provide these services to officers and citizens.

It is time for communities to encourage citizens to solve their own problems. In order for citizens to assist themselves and solve personal problems, a centralized information and referral service must be available to them with comprehensive data on all available community resources. Trying to find information and get worthwhile referrals is very difficult in many counties and communities throughout the country.

### The F.L.A.I.R.S. Model

Some states and localities are beginning to develop more organized information and referral organizations. For example, the Florida Alliance of Information and Referral Services (F.L.A.I.R.S.), is a statewide organization of agencies and individuals committed to the provision of quality information and referral services. Members include United Way, libraries, the armed forces family service centers, crisis intervention programs, agencies on aging, and others who provide information and referral to their clients.

While this is a commendable approach, there is no structured format for data. The data that is collected varies from each information and referral agency. Many of the agencies store and retrieve the data through a manual system rather than a computer. Some of these services are available 24 hours a day, but most are not.

Based on this review of the F.L.A.I.R.S. project, which has many different types of

organizations involved and a lack of structured format for comprehensive data, a better alternative exists for implementing a more comprehensive information and referral service. Each county should have one primary comprehensive information and referral service available to all municipalities, citizens, and public service providers. All public agencies, businesses, social service agencies, etc. would contract with the information and referral service. All these organizations would provide routine updates of the needed material such as changed telephone numbers, addresses, contact persons, etc. This centralized information and referral service would be computerized with 24 hour access by telephone or through computer terminals located at other facilities, such as libraries, universities, police departments, city halls, etc. In some existing communities such as Tallahassee, Florida, the information and referral service may be run by the same organization that manages the 24 hour crisis hot line, providing telephone counseling services in addition to information and referral services.

Given the fiscal constraints throughout the country, it only makes sense for communities to reexamine the need for each private organization and public service agency to be involved in their own information and referral business. Those states that have a statewide organization like F.L.A.I.R.S. could facilitate the design and implementation of a comprehensive information and referral service. It is imperative that such an information and referral service exist if police agencies throughout Florida, as well as the rest of the country, are to move away from traditional police service delivery to the more progressive modes of community policing and problem oriented policing. In addition, for citizens to take more responsibility for solving their own problems, there needs to be a convenient service available through a telephone number or computer terminal.

### Conclusion

Most police agencies in Florida and throughout the country are still providing traditional police service delivery. Few agencies have a comprehensive information and referral service available for officers to make referrals after resolving the initial crisis. Few departments have standard policies and procedures regarding the use of referrals.

For police agencies to use community policing or problem oriented policing concepts, information and referral services must be available for officers, citizens, other public service providers, and businesses. Each county throughout Florida needs to establish a centralized information and referral service, that has a comprehensive data bank available on a 24 hour basis by telephone or through computer terminals. Such service, accessed through remote terminals, should be located in strategic areas throughout the county, such as in libraries, universities, police departments, social service centers and hospitals. For communities to solve the myriad of problems facing them, this important resource must be implemented.

Paul Kirkpatrick has 20 years experience in local law enforcement, including 17 years with the Tallahassee Police Department. Presently, he is the Uniform Patrol Division Commander, responsible for uniformed officer response, community service officers and the Tactical Apprehension and Control Team. He holds a bachelor of science in criminology from the Florida State University and is a graduate of the National Crime Prevention Institute.

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