

IDENTITY INITIATIVE

A South Carolina sheriff's office uses 'Peace Officer' decals to enhance public perception

By W. Thomas Smith Jr.



In January 2018, the Richland County (South Carolina) Sheriff's Department (RCSD) became the first sheriff's office in the nation to add the words "PEACE OFFICER" to several of its marked patrol vehicles. Ultimately, the office put the inscription on its entire fleet of marked vehicles—more than 600 in all. RCSD and the Redlands (California) Police Department piloted the Police2Peace identity initiative, and several law enforcement agencies around the country have since been brought into the fold.

Why was RCSD chosen as one of the first? "Simple: It's the sheriff and his really good relationship with those within the communities served by RCSD," says Lisa Broderick, executive director of Police2Peace, a national nonprofit that is facilitating the project and accompanying

research now being conducted by BetaGov, a joint public policy institute of New York University and UCLA. Dr. Mitch Javidi, chancellor of the National Command and Staff College, introduced the Police2Peace program to RCSD and Sheriff Leon Lott.

"RCSD was perfect for this program because of the obvious importance we saw Sheriff Leon Lott placing on commitment, discernment, honesty, fair-mindedness, transparency, and compassion within the department," Broderick says. "The sheriff saw that if the PEACE OFFICER reminder could get officers to see the perspective of another—to enhance compassion—then it would be worthwhile.

"Sheriff Lott perceived that reminders like the PEACE OFFICER identity initiative tend to engender an awareness and compassion that can shift how officers show up

to situations in the community, which then changes the energy of the encounter for the better," she adds.

Regional trials

Research began with what Broderick refers to as a "randomized controlled trial," wherein several of RCSD's eight regions had the decal wording placed on vehicles for an initial six-month trial period. Following the six-month trial, decals were placed on all vehicles in all of the county's regions. Those surveyed during the research included RCSD deputies, employees, and citizens living and working in the county's various communities.

The numbers showed that good relations already existed between RCSD and the community. Among the community members surveyed since early 2018, nearly 90%

said they “strongly agree” that the community “is generally very supportive” of RCSD. More than 80% “strongly agree” that RCSD “makes efforts to engage and educate the community on law enforcement matters.”

Nearly 90% of individuals said that they “strongly agree” that they “have enjoyed a good relationship” with RCSD. And nearly 95% “strongly agreed” that the department “should devote time to familiarizing its personnel with the concerns of the community while also being a strong law enforcement presence.”

More of the program’s findings? More than 75% of those within the community who had seen the PEACE OFFICER decals “strongly agreed” that “the community is generally safe,” as opposed to only 55% who did not see the decals. When the question “Do you think people can change?” was posed, nearly 90% of the respondents who had seen the decals

“strongly agreed,” as opposed to about 65% who did not see the decals.

When asked if they perceived the department’s deputies as being “guardians” rather than “warriors,” more than 70% who had seen the decals “strongly agreed;” just 55% percent who did not see the decals said the same.

“We do so much more than simply enforce the law,” says Sheriff Lott, “but ‘peace officer’ is a more accurate description of who we are and what we do. We are keeping the peace. We’re building relationships. And we’re educating the citizens we serve [on] how best to safeguard themselves from all threats.

“With the words PEACE OFFICER on our cars, we are getting people to talk about what a peace officer really is,” he adds. “We are changing perceptions, and we are redefining what we do and what being a peace officer means to us individually and as a department.”

Broderick says the initiative should appeal to the law enforcement agency to work effectively. The numbers must demonstrate that it works, and communities must also lend buy-in. “Agencies deploying the PEACE OFFICER decal are changing the culture for the better,” she says.

“We have presented it to numerous departments nationwide, including police departments, sheriff’s offices, and state and federal law enforcement agencies, and we are now in the pilot or planning stages with a dozen or so,” she says. “This initiative is working, here with RCSD and elsewhere, for departments to develop community engagement and lower the barriers between police and the community.”

W. Thomas Smith Jr. is a special deputy with the Richland County (South Carolina) Sheriff’s Department.



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