Beyond Cost Savings: Online Community Reporting Tools Forge Stronger Community Bonds

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Research shows that one of the best ways to improve the bonds between law enforcement agencies and the community members they serve is to foster more community involvement in crime reduction efforts. A 2015 survey of more than 2,000 adults found that community policing efforts enjoy particularly strong support, and a majority of residents are open to working with police. It also found that most residents would welcome greater use of digital communication tools by law enforcement to improve community participation.[1]

This interest by community members is a big reason why law enforcement agencies from Syracuse, New York, to Salt Lake City, Utah, are turning to online interfaces that allow community members to report nonemergency incidents.[2] A new generation of community self-reporting software enables police departments to more efficiently prioritize where officers direct their attention so that they provide the best service.

In turn, residents' satisfaction with law enforcement can improve because the time officers previously spent reporting minor incidents can now be deployed toward enhancing the safety and security of that community.

Community self-reporting technologies, sometimes referred to as desk officer reporting systems or citizen and community incident reporting programs, address the chronic challenge of officers having to spend valuable time investigating and completing crime reports for what are considered to be nonemergency issues. Taking low severity, minor incident reports directly from community members saves important law enforcement time and resources. Dozens of incident types can be filed by various community members and then automatically imported into a law enforcement agency's records management system (RMS).

Force Multiplier Effect

One of the biggest benefits of community self-reporting systems is the ability for an agency to reallocate valuable officer resources toward more important crime-fighting tasks and other public safety issues that matter most to the community. In many districts without online reporting, there is no way for anyone, from small shop owners to managers of big box retail stores, to report petty theft of stolen merchandise unless they call an officer onto the scene. Now, combine those incidents with other nonemergency events like minor motor vehicle accidents, vandalism, bullying, harassing phone calls, or identity theft, and it's easy to see how a police force's resources can be stretched thin.

Community self-reporting technologies can help by giving law enforcement agencies a community-facing application that can take up to 30 percent of their overall reports online.[3] As these self-reports make their way through the processing system, 9-1-1 dispatchers and deployed officers are no longer forced to choose between helping someone in need or helping the next person in line waiting for a hard copy record.

Consider Detroit, Michigan, for example. The city's police force was able to optimize its resources while drastically reducing urgent emergency incident response times by reclassifying what reports should be considered high priority, as well as by opening up jobs in payroll, fleet maintenance, and dispatch to civilians so that more officers could be deployed in their communities. The reallocation of resources helped improve goodwill with residents.[4]

Time Savings

Individuals within the community also save time with the technology. It eliminates the need to wait for officers to arrive at the scene of a minor incident to investigate and write and submit their reports, usually at the end of a shift or many hours later. Instead, reports from residents, schools, and businesses can be filed immediately through a simple web-based portal from any computer or mobile device 24/7, 365 days of the year.

The online incident or accident report is reviewed by the department's personnel who can reject it, ask for clarification, or approve the report, instantly integrating it into the department's RMS to initiate faster action. It also gives community members the ability to immediately print out a copy of the report for their insurance company, if needed, rather than waiting on the police department to provide it.

Most importantly, it greatly helps reduce officer response times for high-priority calls because fewer officers are tied up doing paperwork and responding to low-priority calls.

Cost Savings

Budget pressure has created the need for law enforcement agencies to provide the highest level of service with fewer resources. Community self-reporting systems have also been proven to yield must-needed cost savings in this belt-tightening environment.

For example, more than 400 law enforcement agencies received over 875,000 incident reports filed by community members across North America in 2016 using the LexisNexis Desk Officer Reporting System. By offloading minor incident reports to the online automated system, the agencies collectively saved more than $43.7 million along with approximately 875,000 work hours.[5]

This is possible because systems like these can collect more than 40 different types of incident reports and forms directly from community members, including minor vehicle accident reports from involved parties, shoplifting reports from security guards, and bullying reports from school administrators.

Addressing and processing these forms manually used to consume significant amounts of officers' time. Now, when a fender bender occurs on a city street, community members can file minor and noninjury motor vehicle accident reports online from the smartphones at the scene. Reports can include a list of those involved, their role, and a narrative describing what happened along with uploaded images of the damage and insurance documents.

Retail loss prevention is another area where the technology has already made a positive impact. Police departments can give shop owners and store security guards special reporting privileges with which they can file reports involving suspects in custody. This frees up officers to only transport the suspects and issue a supplement to the report.

The Stockton, California, Police Department worked with loss prevention teams at the larger retailers in the city to implement a solution for streamlining the shoplifting reporting process. The loss prevention teams can now process suspects online in a timely manner and release them in instances where bringing in an officer is not required.[6]

The systems can also be expanded to other special businesses like pawn shops, who can file pawn slips directly online, and tow companies, who can file their own information on illegally parked and other vehicles they had to tow.

In the case of burglaries, police can save time and money on data entry in the field by enabling community members to submit property lists at a later time, when they are less stressed and have taken an inventory of missing goods. Officers can still respond to the scene, calm the victims, and collect information and evidence as usual.

Implementing the technology does not change or disrupt standard reporting processes within the department. All the usual case management, crime analysis, and Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) reporting can be done without having to modify current procedures. All community member–filed reports are imported into the RMS with appropriate UCR- and NIBRS-compliant coding.

Nor does it require significant disruption and investment in IT resources. Most community self-reporting systems are cloud-based, making them quickly deployable without any need for additional infrastructure. The technology also improves the accuracy of the information collected. Manual reporting is inefficient and often wrought in data entry errors, inconsistencies, and weak analysis because (1) officers, like all humans, sometimes make mistakes inputting data, and (2) officers can be imperfect filters or interpreters of the information provided to them. Enabling community members to directly report their stories eliminates mistakes and improves information quality tremendously. In the case of the Stockton Police Department deployment, the County District Attorney's Office saw an immediate improvement in the shoplifting reports coming from retailers that implemented the technology because the firsthand account of the incident was more precise.[7]

Final Thoughts

Anything that helps to create an increased sense of safety, security, and engagement with police will ultimately forge stronger bonds with the community. Most officers would agree that time spent reporting minor incidents is time that could be better spent strengthening those community bonds.

Through online community reporting, law enforcement agencies can free up officers who would otherwise be buried under paperwork and redeploy them to the streets. Community members can still guarantee that their nonemergency incidents and crime tips are processed by law enforcement agencies, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, while taking advantage of the safety offered by increased officer presence in and around their communities. ❖

Notes:

[1] Accenture, "Majority of U.S. Citizens Feel Safe in Their Neighborhoods but Want Police to Increase Community Collaboration and Their Use of Digital Communication Tools," news release, April 23, 2015, https://newsroom.accenture.com/news/majority-of-us-citizens-feel-safe-in-their-neighborhoods-but-want-police-to-increase-community-collaboration-and-their-use-of-digital-communication-tools.htm.

[2] Syracuse Police Department, "Citizens' Online Reporting System," http://www.syracusepolice.org/eServe/start-report.html; Salt Lake City Police Department, "Online Police Reporting," http://www.slcpd.com/resources/online-report.

[3] LexisNexis Risk Solutions, internal analysis of over 400 agencies, based on typical agency experience.

[4] Mike Wilkinson, "Tracking Progress in Detroit Police Response Times A Fool's Errand," *Bridge Magazine*, November 10, 2015, http://www.bridgemi.com/detroit-bankruptcy-and-beyond/tracking-progress-detroit-police-response-times-fools-errand.

[5] LexisNexis Risk Solutions, internal analysis of over 400 agencies. Dollars saved based on $50 average cost per dispatched call, based on stat reports from agencies. Work hours based on a conservative estimate of one hour per report filed; report times vary by type of report. Agencies using the solution, in general, advise the solution has saved them anywhere from 30 minutes to over 3 hours per report.

[6] Blair J. Ulring, "On-line Arrest Reporting System for Shoplifting," California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, October 23, 2006, http://lib.post.ca.gov/lib-documents/cc/40-Ulring1.pdf.

[7] Detective Raquel Betti, "Using Technology to Enhance the Relationship between Loss Prevention and Local Law Enforcement," *Loss Prevention Magazine* (September-October 2015), http://images.solutions.lexisnexis.com/Web/LexisNexis/%7B8e1a8f35-c4ab-43f7-a815-f09ea38a844b%7D_16140_R1_My_Turn_0915_Reprint.pdf.