

Citizens on Patrol

Drug busts! Bad guys on the run! More Hartford residents are coming forward to drop a dime on the perps, cops say. Is Chief Pawlina the reason?

By Chris Harris

Two weeks ago, Hartford police officers, acting on intelligence they'd received from several citizens, arrested 33 people and seized over 500 bags of heroin and cocaine, 16 bags of marijuana, two loaded guns, and more than \$20,000 in cash, all as part of a sweeping nine-day crackdown on drug dealing and prostitution.

On March 26, 27 people were arrested, and 215 bags of heroin seized in a comparable operation launched in response to tips from Clay-Arsenal and South End residents.

And again, on March 18 — thanks to tips from residents — Hartford cops booked William Good, a 43-year-old man, on charges of robbery, kidnapping, and an unrelated sexual assault.

While Hartford police have long complained about the trepidation of some citizens to come forward with information about crime in their neighborhoods, it seems the tides have started to shift.

While several cops the *Advocate* spoke with maintain there's always been some level of information-sharing with the public, there's more of a willingness in the city's neighborhoods to cooperate — a willingness like they've never experienced before.

An overwhelming inflow of tips are being called in directly. Others are coming in via e-mail through the department's website, www.hartfordpolice.com. The department's anonymous tip line, 525-GUNS, is also getting more use, as it best eliminates residents' fears they'll have to testify in court, should information they provide lead to arrests.

In a climate of fear it was understandable that potential informants might dread speaking to the police, says Sgt. Franco Sanzo, of vice and narcotics. That fear has kept many residents from speaking out. There's even the perception that criminals have ways of finding out who turned them in.

Said one North End resident: "Once [drug] dealers find out who is talking, you're in trouble."

People didn't "want the police showing up at their doors, which has always been a problem." Andrew Woods, a community activist from Blue Hills, says of the community's reluctance to call in reports of criminal doings. Plus, he says, there was considerable distrust of police officers, and rightly so.



PETER M. MORLOCK PHOTO ILLUSTRATION

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"There was the perception that nothing would be done if you gave police information," adds Liz Dupont-Diehl, a spokesperson for the Community Renewal Team.

But times are changing apparently. "Residents in our neighborhood feel the police are doing a good job, and they're much less reticent about going to them than they were a couple of years ago, and that's because they're seeing positive results," explains Carol Coburn, executive director of the Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon-Charter Oak Neighborhood. "These residents don't see the police as an occupying force anymore — they see them as partners."

Several citizens and civic leaders point to Interim Chief of Police Mark Pawlina's commitment to community policing as the impetus behind this shift in trust. What Mayor Eddie Perez had always wanted ousted

Chief Bruce Marquis to do, Pawlina's doing, it seems — and with fewer resources, even.

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Pawlina named Capt. Joseph J. Buyak the department's ombudsman, making him, in essence, the force's customer service contact. He's asked all higher-ranking supervisors, including captains and assistant chiefs, to spend at least two hours a week on patrol, meeting with people in Hartford's neighborhoods and business districts. He's put out the call to residents, asking for volunteers willing to form "partnerships" with beat cops, in hopes they'll improve relations between cops and the community; he's required all patrol officers to establish at least five of these close relationships in the areas they patrol, and meet with these contacts at least once a week — he wants police to establish a trusting relationship with residents, so they'll be plugged into the crucial community grapevine.

For his part, Lt. G. Malik Merritt, commander of Hartford's North District Community Response Division, says he's even given people he meets on the streets his pager number — several officers have followed his lead. Sure, the calls at 3 a.m. can be annoying, but it's an encouraging sign that "these people are becoming true stakeholders in the community, by taking their neighborhoods back, which is the way it used to be in the old days," he says.

Pawlina says he's seen community policing work well in Hartford, and feels it's the best way to stop crime before it happens, and enhance the quality of life for the city's residents.

"If you do things the same old way, you're going to get the same results," he says. "So, you have to do things differently. Resources are a factor for this department," as they were when Marquis was at the helm, "but it's how you police, it's how you strategize, that makes the difference."

Coburn applauds Pawlina's successes.

"As people see successes out on the streets, they're becoming empowered," she says. "The police are out there, they're doing things, and the people are starting to see results. And they'd never seen that before." ■