



GOVERNMENT DIALOGUE

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IN CONVERSATION WITH THE PUBLIC EMPLOYEE

Innovative public sector at work - the Phalaborwa Community Police Forum Call Centre

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Policing is one of the key priority areas of the government, more so because of incidents of crime and the criminals who are becoming smarter in using technology to plan and commit crime and avoid detection and apprehension. This puts police under immense pressure to also find innovative ways of modernising their systems to enable them to combat crime.

The Community Police Forum (CPF) Call Centre project in Phalaborwa, Limpopo Province, is one such initiative where the police became innovative in their fight against crime.

Background

During the period between 2006 and 2008, Phalaborwa and the

neighbouring communities were under siege with an immense challenge of vehicle theft.

Organised syndicates would steal vehicles and transport them over the borders into neighbouring countries.

In an attempt to address this dire situation, the Station Commander of Phalaborwa Police Station set up a 'think tank' which included members of the community. The main objective was to strengthen Hcommunity policing to support the police in their efforts to fight against crime.

From November 2008, a series of public meetings were held to consult with the community and to market the concept of community policing at grass roots level.

This resulted in the birth of the Community Police Forum (CPF) Call Centre project.

The main rationale behind the CPF Call Centre project is to transform the whole approach to policing from being reactionary to being proactive – to be able to predict and prevent crime before it happens.

The project allows for a constant flow of information on any anomalies sighted by the community, to the police patrol vehicles through the Call Centre for immediate intervention before the crime can be committed. This approach contributes to the reduction of crime and at the same time it creates a community that is aware through its participation.



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The Innovation

The solution involves the use of mobile phone technology - community members use cellular phones to alert the police about any suspicious activities in their communities, for a speedy police response.

Members of the new CPF were recruited from within the community. Using a comprehensive electronic web-based database of members' ID numbers and cell phone numbers, the CPF members were assigned to police stations nearer to where they live. A corresponding bulk SMS database was then created to enable the call centre to communicate crime information to relevant sectors or individuals. Currently, signed-up members average around 1 650 members on the system.

The start-up of this project was funded by individuals to test the viability and success of the concept. However, once the benefits were visible to the community, the organised business community adopted the project and provided funding for most of its activities. Crime is a focal point and there has been no shortage of volunteers to assist with the project as it is close to the communities' needs.

The project is unique in that it harnesses readily available resources, such as cell phones and web-based bulk SMS sites to achieve its objective of creating pro-active policing instead of reactive policing.

Impact

The Police Service in Phalaborwa has become an integral part of the community.

The station management is known personally by a large section

of the community and the 'open door policy' of the commander has gone a long way to improve relations between the community and the police.

Communication channels between the police and the community are proactive with an understanding that policing is a joint responsibility between the police and the community. The transparency between the police and the community has vastly improved through healthy dialogue that was developed because of the initiative.

As stated earlier, the area of Phalaborwa and its neighbouring villages were once under siege because of a high incidence of car theft, mostly by organised syndicates.

Since the introduction of this initiative, there has been virtually zero theft of motor vehicles in the Phalaborwa Police precinct.

In addition, the solution has enabled the police in Phalaborwa to intercept and recover passing vehicles that have been stole in other areas. There has also been a marked reduction in other kinds of crimes, such as abductions and burglary because of the involvement of the community.

Dealing with a criminal element that is entrenched in society, is a highly demanding challenge that requires continuity and effort. Crime fighting projects require a mutual collaboration between the police and the community based on transparency and mutual trust.

Conclusion

The Phalaborwa Community Police Forum Call Centre project is a typical example of how a committed community working together, in collaboration with the police, can succeed to improve

their own livelihood by winning the fight against organised crime, despite the lack of resources.



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