

# Community policing: a microcosm

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An employee of the Sweetbay Supermarket in the Tangerine Plaza recognized a man who she knew had an arrest warrant. She quickly went next door to the police resource center and gave the man's name to Officer Marlin Heyward of the St. Petersburg Police Department.

"I was able to confirm the warrant and make an arrest," Heyward said.

The Tangerine Shopping Plaza, at the corner of 22nd Street South and 18th Avenue South in Midtown, anchors the southern corner of the revitalized 22nd Street South historic district, according to the City of St. Petersburg web site. It also exemplifies successful community

policing. Store managers, employees, the St. Petersburg Police and local residents all work together to fight crime in the plaza.

The Tangerine Shopping Plaza is community policing on a micro scale, said Heyward, the officer assigned to the police resource center next to Sweetbay. He has served there since the supermarket opened. His responsibilities include policing the shopping plaza as well as the surrounding neighborhood.

The St. Petersburg Police expanded its community policing model department wide in December 2006. A focus on solving problems and developing partnerships between all officers and residents in the neighborhoods where they work provides the foundation for community policing, according to the Police Department Web site.

Community policing applies not only to

neighborhoods, but to any communities of people, including the University of South Florida St Petersburg.

The idea is to involve the community in fighting crime and to get citizens to actively assist the police, said George Kajtsa, a public information officer with St. Petersburg Police department.

"Logic tells you that if officers have more interaction with the community, people will begin to trust them," Kajtsa said.

Midtown residents enjoy the convenience of a shopping center right in the middle of their neighborhood and a desire for the plaza to succeed has fostered a spirit of cooperation, Heyward said.

"A lot of people have taken ownership in this area because they don't want this plaza to fail."

Heyward said a police presence in the

community allows him to get to know area residents on a more personal level and this makes him a more effective officer.

"Nine out of ten people in urban areas only see the police when they are under stress," he said. "Now you've built a rapport with them. They know what kind of person you are and you can better communicate with them."

Sweetbay employees said having the police in the shopping center helps combat crime and provides a sense of safety.

"There is a police presence here in the store," said Andrea Miller, who works at the customer service desk. "People know it and are reluctant to make a scene."

"I definitely feel safer," said Victoria Taylor, an assistant store manager at Sweetbay. "I really don't know if I would work here if they weren't here."

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Sweetbay shoppers also like having the police on site, Taylor said. "I think it's why a lot of people shop here."

The police benefit from maintaining a presence in the plaza as well.

Employees and patrons watch for suspicious activity and provide information to the police.

Cooperation between police and citizens is key to stopping crime, Heyward said. He sees it work firsthand in the shopping plaza.

"Everybody is looking out for everyone else," he said. "Instead of two or three sets of eyes, we have multiple sets of eyes."

The punishment for some first-time shoplifters demonstrates the importance of the plaza to local residents.

Sometimes people caught shoplifting in Sweetbay are not arrested, but they are cited for trespassing and are no longer allowed in the store, Heyward said.

"They get banned from the store and that really hurts them," he said. "They don't want to lose the privilege of the store."

Cooperation between various businesses in the plaza further exemplifies the concept of community policing in the shopping center.

"We all keep in touch with one another," assistant store manager Taylor said. "If anything happens, we are all aware."

Community policing takes a long-term commitment and results aren't always immediately evident, Heyward said.

"It's a whole different way of police work. It works on a smaller scale," he said. "Sometimes we want to see results on a grand scale, but if you can affect two or three people, maybe they will affect two or three more."