Public Order and Safety

Springfield and Greene County have joined a small group of U.S. communities recognized for their efforts to become safe communities. On the other hand, as the area’s population increases, the demand for safety services continues to rise, stretching critical resources.

The community is meeting problems head-on, mobilizing to fight gangs and passing a 9-1-1 sales tax, among other efforts. Police staffing and jail overcrowding are challenges that must be addressed.

Springfield is one of three communities in the country recognized by the World Health Organization as a “Safe Community.” Only 110 communities throughout the world have received such distinction. Among the indicators of a WHO Safe Community in Springfield are programs that target high-risk groups and those that promote safety for vulnerable groups.

In addition, Springfield-Greene County was chosen by America’s Promise/The Alliance for Youth as one of 100 Best Communities for Young People. The award is presented to places that have developed programs built on five promises for youth; among them is creating safe places to learn and grow.

The region’s population rise affects police and fire departments and other safety organizations. In 2006, the Springfield Fire Department marked an all time high for service calls and added a twelfth fire station in 2007. Police calls for service have also dramatically increased.

In 2006, more than 36,600 people participated in risk reduction educational programs sponsored by the Fire Department. Fire officials installed 743 free smoke alarms.

PUBLIC SAFETY SNAPSHOT, City of Springfield

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<th></th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traffic Accidents</td>
<td>6,898</td>
<td>7,226</td>
<td>6,915</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcohol Related Accidents</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>226</td>
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<tr>
<td>DWIs</td>
<td>1,752</td>
<td>1,415</td>
<td>1,099</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red Light Violations</td>
<td>1,431</td>
<td>1,378</td>
<td>938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Disturbance Calls</td>
<td>4,877</td>
<td>5,286</td>
<td>5,590</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police Response Time to Priority 1 Calls (in minutes)</td>
<td>8.92</td>
<td>8.16</td>
<td>8.73</td>
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COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION. The community came together in 2006–07 to aggressively tackle two major problems associated with a surge in crime: gang activity and illegal use of drugs. The Police Department targeted gang-related activity, resulting in more than 450 arrests and the confiscation of weapons, drugs and cash. The Greene County prosecuting attorney empanelled a special grand jury to investigate gang activity.

A graffiti reporting and paint out program helped eliminate the visual blight that accompanies gang culture. Education programs sponsored by Community Partnership of the Ozarks curbed gang activity. The Gang Task Force brought a national expert to Springfield who spoke to middle and high school students and trained school personnel to respond to the problem.

9-1-1 SALES TAX. To enhance police and fire response and citizen access to emergency services, Greene County voters in 2007 passed a one-eighth of one cent sales tax to support and upgrade the 9-1-1 emergency call center.

CRIME LAB GRANT. The Southwest Missouri Crime Lab received a federal grant for $1.5 million in 2007 to construct a state-of-the-art $5.9 million facility in downtown Springfield. The city of Springfield is matching the federal commitment and the state of Missouri allocated $400,000 to cover the funding gap. Due to open in October 2008, the lab will reduce the time it takes to analyze evidence for investigations and trials. The state’s only other full-service crime lab is in Jefferson City.

JUVENILE OFFENSES DECLINE. The Juvenile Justice system handles a wide variety of juvenile cases, including neglected children and status offenses (acts that are prohibited by law based on age or “status” of the offender, such as disobeying a parent or being truant).

Partnerships among agencies and community groups are addressing the issues young people face. The declining number of

“We can be proud of the strong relationships between law enforcement agencies in our community. This sharing of resources is not only economically sound but also more efficient.”

Jack Merritt, Greene County Sheriff
offenses indicates that these efforts are proving effective. From a long-term perspective, this is important since reducing juvenile deviance correspondingly reduces the probability of adult criminal behavior.

Demand for drug treatment remains strong. In Greene County, admissions for meth treatment went from 358 to 512 from 2004 to 2006.

RISING CRIME RATES. Government statistics indicate a rise in violent crime and property crime in Springfield and Greene County during the last few years. This rise has been attributed to increases in both drug use and gang activity. Aggressive steps are being taken by law enforcement, the prosecutor’s office and the community to address this problem.

POLICE RESPONSE TIME. The time required for law enforcement to respond to a citizen’s call for service varies based on many factors, primarily related to the seriousness of the crime and the number of available officers.

In Springfield, the police department has a goal of arriving on the scene of the most serious calls in less than six minutes. Unfortunately, Priority 1 response time has steadily increased from 6.70 in 2002 to 8.73 minutes in 2006. The actual impact of a slow police response varies based on the circumstances presented, but this trend clearly has a negative effect. One of the variables impacting response time is staffing, addressed below.

POLICE STAFFING. Area law enforcement agencies are significantly understaffed and face ever-increasing difficulties in their attempts to fill vacancies with qualified applicants. This is a nationwide trend, but one that is especially challenging at the local level, as agencies are unable to compete with the pay and benefits offered by larger departments. Inadequate staffing has a negative impact on public safety and service issues such as response time, crime prevention and the ability to assign cases for follow-up criminal investigation.

METHAMPHETAMINE USE. The number of Southwest Missouri methamphetamine labs dramatically dropped by 2007, but undercover drug purchases, possession arrests, and hospital emergency room overdose reports strongly suggest that methamphetamine use is still a very serious regional problem. While local production declined, the drug is now being brought in from Mexico and other regions and use remains high. Meth use by parents and caregivers puts children at high risk. It also plays a significant role in the escalating number of property crimes, as users resort to stealing, forgery, and identity theft to obtain money to buy the drug.

JAIL SPACE. Greene County Justice Center is significantly overcrowded. Steps have been taken to address the situation, but the facility runs at maximum capacity on an almost daily basis. This has a negative impact on public safety, as many suspects who used to be kept in jail are now being released to free up space. This also creates a dangerous environment for the custody staff working there, as the ratio of inmates to jailers steadily increases.