

# Norwalk Police found walking the traditional beat



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(Photo: MICHAEL ROLANDS/RECORD-HERALD)

The Norwalk Police Department is getting back to its roots with "The Walk About Project," which helps officers connect to residents on a personal level.

Friday afternoon, chief Greg Staples and officer Greg Hepperly took to the streets, hoping to find residents to chat with.

As luck would have it, the officers found two boys fixing a remote-controlled car, a former city manager and a woman out walking her dog.

It's the casual conversations about weekend plans, Friday night football games and general town news that Staples is encouraging his officers to have.

"There are people out there who know what's going on in the community and are happy to talk to you about it, but they're not going to call you," Staples said. "You've got to go find it."

He said keeping people happy and familiar with their police departments makes it easy to avoid the angst against police departments, which has played out on national television.

With communities facing uprisings over police tactics, rogue officers and policing in general, Staples said it's very important the Norwalk community doesn't believe his officers are like that.

"Because we wear a uniform and a badge it's easy to associate us with other areas," Staples said. "But there's been no Ferguson effect in Norwalk for a number of reasons. One is because we don't police that way."

Another, he said, is because the community does not feel like it is policed that way.

Staples said he truly believes the community will allow itself to be policed in a manner that it finds acceptable. Norwalkians, he said, will complain if they don't like what's happening.

The breaking point in Ferguson, Mo., Staples said, had been coming for a long time.

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Norwalk police chief Greg Staples describes the department's walkabout program on a map. The program has officers walking neighborhoods to become more familiar with the people and the places. (Photo: MICHAEL ROLANDS/RECORD-HERALD)

"The residents of Ferguson didn't like the way they were being policed and it took the shooting of Michael Brown to figure that out, unfortunately," Staples said. "And now they're going to be policed in a different manner. That's an extreme example of what I'm talking about."

Hepperly said walking around has taught him a few things about the community, like how supportive people generally are.

"In the media, you basically see a lot of negative stuff," Hepperly said. "But out there we get a lot of feedback. People tell us they see us a lot, that they support us."

He said there's more to just meeting people when he's on foot patrol.

In his car, Hepperly said, he's looking for things that are out of place, such as open windows or garage doors. But when he's on foot, he can look for smaller things like tools being left out, smaller items that could possibly be stolen or used as weapons against somebody.

Staples said officers can also take note of who has dogs, who has fences, how tall they are and where they connect.

"You don't see that driving 25-miles-per-hour down the road," Staples said. "Why is that important? Well, if I'm chasing a bad guy and I know three houses down there's a six-foot privacy fence, chances are he didn't go that way."

He said it's also a way for officers to fill their time in a generally low-crime city.

The department is working on other initiatives to have more face-to-face time, like establishing bike patrols and attempting to reach out to every student in the kindergarten through fifth grades in Norwalk schools.

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