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## Community policing works

By MARY SANCHEZ  
The Kansas City Star

"It's like porn. You know it when you see it."

That's Kansas City police Officer Matt Tomasic. He's talking about "community policing," a favored reference for candidates right now. The wannabe-elected rightly invoke community policing as a remedy to crime.

Tomasic and Octavio Villalobos work out of the Westside CAN Center, often held aloft as an excellent example of community policing.

Problem is, the CAN center is out of sync with police culture.

Just ask people who work in the Kansas City Police Department. They readily admit that the highly praised CAN center exists only because the chief of police has continuously supported it, backing its officers and how they work.

"You can put a CAN center on every block, but unless the Police Department changes their style of policing, it won't matter," said Tomasic.

Ouch. So we have a plethora of political candidates promoting a style the department backs theoretically but is not culturally designed to support.

Yet the concept dates to the early 1990s. Federal funding and a patchwork of local sources sprinkled Community Action Network (CAN) centers around the city.

Five remain, each with two police officers assigned. One is in the Northland, others in the 49/63, Blue Hills and Westside neighborhoods, and one near 34th Street and Indiana Avenue.

What's important is that community policing is about attitudes, not CAN centers.

On Friday, the department will hold a session on how it is attempting this paradigm shift. It's community policing on steroids. I'll attend, along with other media and community leaders.

For now, realize the difference between zero tolerance, which Tomasic once practiced at the CAN center, versus community policing. At one time, zero tolerance was expected there. But tactics are shifting, and that can change police from being an occupying force to working with neighbors on issues germane to that area.

"We still handle business but we go in with a sniper rifle, not a cannon," Tomasic said.

Excuse the colorful language. He means criminals are not given a softie approach.

Unlike many officers, he has some freedom from 911 calls, leaving time for new strategies. Like when he visited elderly women making tamales at a church. One woman later vouched for his character, persuading her grandson to provide Tomasic with a lead. The tip solved a gang-related murder.

Such cooperation is preferable to the backlash engendered by zero-tolerance policies like writing tickets for every violation in sight, which targets crooks and everyday folks alike.

As Tomasic says, "It's the philosophy of fighting crime, not people."

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