A Brief History of Community Policing in Albany

Though racial tensions between the police department and African Americans date back to World War II, most observers point to the 1984 police killing of Jesse Davis in his Arbor Hill home as the catalyst for calls for change in the department. Davis, an unarmed, mentally ill black man was shot several times by police, including once in the back and once in the top of the head. The police officers claimed they had to shoot Davis because he came at them with a knife in one hand and a fork in the other. Though a grand jury cleared the police of any wrongdoing, a police department photograph uncovered years later showed Davis’ lifeless body clutching only a key case in one hand and a toy truck in the other. Several well-publicized lawsuits during the late 1980’s and 1990’s added to citizen mistrust of the police. Albany paid out nearly a million dollars, either in out-of-court settlements or by court order, for violating the civil rights of plaintiffs.

With the increasing availability of federal and state funding, in 1991 the Department looked to change its style of policing and embraced parts of a new concept — “community policing.” Under community policing, the police would assist neighborhood groups in preventing crimes and solving problems. Albany’s first black police chief, John Dale (appointed to the position by Mayor Whalen) had been sworn in on November 3, 1989. Dale initiated the department’s version of elements of community policing, stating, “We have to listen to people in all of our activities.” Community policing efforts Dale operationalized in the Arbor Hill, West Hill, and
South End neighborhoods were well-received and applauded by community residents and civic groups.

However, these measures were met with opposition from sources internal to the police department, most notably Detective James Tuffey, president of the Albany Police Officers Union. Tuffey claimed that before community policing could take hold, the department needed manpower to conduct clean sweeps of some neighborhoods. After Tuffey was appointed Police Chief in 2005 by Mayor Jerry Jennings, he slowly replaced community policing elements with a decidedly more “law enforcement” approach. He announced a “reorganization” of the department in 2006 --- a reorganization that was widely opposed by community activists. CFLJ’s director, Dr. Alice Green, stated in an op ed at the time that this new approach reversed the APD’s earlier commitment to community policing, and predicted that under this new system Albany could expect an increase in citizen complaints and lawsuits. Indeed, police/community relations withered during Tuffey’s administration, culminating with his early retirement in 2009 after allegedly using a racial epithet.

In September 2009 Mayor Jennings organized a search committee to find a replacement for Tuffey. For the first time in Albany’s history, the Mayor’s choice for police chief would have to be approved by the Common Council. Jennings’ appointment of the search committee’s recommendation, Steven Krokoff, was unanimously approved by the Common Council and he was sworn in as chief in July 2010. In interviews with officials and meetings with the community during the search process Krokoff, with many years of experience in the Albany Police Department, had voiced a clear, forceful commitment to community policing, the desire for which was just as clearly and forcefully conveyed by the community during the search process. The Albany Community Police Advisory Committee (ACPAC), comprised of community members appointed by Common Council members in 2010 to ascertain the community’s expectations of the police department, exists to this day.

After assuming office in 2010, Chief Krokoff implemented several structural changes, training programs, and public communication efforts to promote community policing in Albany. A lead officer for each area of the city was identified to attend all neighborhood association meetings; keep the neighborhood association up to date on all crime trends; and work to establish “walk and watch” programs. In a June 2013 interview with CFLJ, Krokoff stressed that these officers should NOT be viewed as a Community Policing Unit. To create a Community Policing Unit, the Chief said, would be a mistake because it would compartmentalize community policing into one unit; the whole department would not be responsible for community policing. According to Krokoff, this is a mistake the department made in implementing community policing in the 1990’s; it is important that the entire force embrace community policing. After his departure in 2015 to take a position closer to family in another part of the country, Krokoff was succeeded by Brendan Cox. Chief Cox maintained Krokoff’s community policing efforts, including the establishment of the LEAD program, until his departure for a position with a national law enforcement organization in 2016.
Eric Hawkins was appointed as Albany’s second African American Police Chief by Mayor Kathy Sheehan on September 7, 2018. Unlike previous police chiefs, Hawkins was not chosen from among the ranks of the Albany Police Department. Prior to his Albany appointment, Hawkins served as police chief in Southfield, Michigan. Unknown in the Capital District, Hawkins had much to prove to both the police department and the community. Said the new Chief upon his appointment: “I am honored to be chosen to lead the men and women of the Albany Police Department. The Albany Police Department has a rich history of working with the community in resolving issues and enhancing safety and security. I look forward to continuing that tradition.”

In August of 2019, the Center published the findings of its community survey indicating that only 18% of Blacks agree that the APD effectively practices community policing; 15% agree that the APD is trustworthy; 11% agree that the APD treats ALL people with respect; and 11% agree that the APD develops positive relationships with ALL community members. Yet, in November 2019 Chief Hawkins announced plans to reorganize the department, cutting the number of neighborhood beats nearly in half.

Albany needs a “Recommitment to Community Policing” Symposium to re-examine and realign the community’s and the APD’s concepts of community policing.

NEXT FRIDAY: The Last Half Century of Systemic Racism in Albany