

# Sherman Police Youth Mentor Program

Drawing upon his life experience as a retired U.S. Navy chief petty officer and his work with at-risk youth in the Illinois National Guard's Lincoln's Challenge Program, senior patrol officer Philip Brown knew that the answer to many small town police problems was to intervene early when situations are identified.

Officer Brown, a police officer in the village of Sherman, became the department's lead juvenile officer in 1999. He began to see quickly that without some intervention, Sherman police were dealing with the same troubled youth on multiple occasions. Additionally, he found that communication between police, schools and courts regarding these youth was very limited. Officer Brown decided to present a program to Police Chief Eric Smith that would take the department's youth services into unknown territory. He researched programs, reviewed criteria, and sought input from peer officer and supervisors. In December of 1999, Sherman Police Department's Youth Mentor Program gained its first enrollments.

All juvenile offenders were processed as an arrest and given the option of agreeing to participate in the Youth Mentor Program as part of a formal station adjustment. The station adjustment is essentially a contract setting boundaries and prohibits certain activities. It outlines the terms of participating in the five-month program which meets every other week. To participate, the youth ages 10 to 17 and the parents or guardian agree to all items proposed in the station adjustment. This may include professional counseling, drug or alcohol treatment programs or mental health care. To ensure efforts are not counter-productive, an authorization is signed by participants with approved access to school and medical professional as needed.

The county juvenile probation department receives reports on all juvenile offenders. Officer Brown communicates with the chief intake officer in the event the youth fails to meet the expectations of the station adjustment or is arrested for subsequent offenses.

The goals were simple. Match young offenders with a strong adult mentor in a structured program to eliminate barriers to a safe and productive life. Mentors come from many walks of life. Most are recruited through personal contacts. All mentors complete an application and submit to a criminal background check. Mentors attend the scheduled meetings but most are available to their assigned youth by phone or in-person throughout the week to provide support or simply touch base. During the program, many of the participants developed better abilities to

communicate, especially with adults whom had previously be "the enemy".

A reciprocal reporting agreement was signed between the school district and the Sherman Police regarding minors who are enrolled in the school district and have been arrested for certain criminal offenses. The agreement improved flow of information between educators and law enforcement and fosters the desire to keep the schools safe and violence-free.

Fellow officer William Hill, also a juvenile officer, submitted a request to Sprint PCS on behalf of the program. Sprint's "Call for Safety" program provided the two officers with cellular phones. The numbers are promoted to all participants and posted within the schools. Youth with questions or concerns have easy access to an officer.

Most of the participants are from the immediate area, however the program has also accepted enrollments from school referrals and the county's juvenile probations department. Officer Brown makes weekly visits to the school to speak with counselors regarding participants' progress or safety concerns. It is also an opportunity to meet with participants and non-participants in a more informal setting—the cafeteria! He has developed a strong partnership with the schools that helps to keep all stakeholders informed.

To the present, the program has had 85 youth enrolled with a 96 percent success rate. These youth have met all the requirements set and have not re-offended within the jurisdiction. Officer Brown continues to oversee the program and seeks to improve services. Current projects include a "Tough Love" parent support group, development of a teen court system and a SAVE (Students Against Violence Everywhere) chapter in the high school.

According to Officer Brown, a strong core group of volunteers and the support of the Sherman Police administration, the village government, schools and community organizations are the reason for the success of the program.

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

This feature is designed to provide a snapshot into the efforts that are occurring across Illinois to collectively combat substance abuse. If you would like to submit a program, project, or initiative for consideration as a Highlight From The Field, please send a one page article about your feature to: Editor, Best of IDEA, Prevention First Inc., 2800 Montvale Drive, Springfield, IL 62704, or via e-mail: [zoelled@prevention.org](mailto:zoelled@prevention.org)