

Bernard Melekian

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By Michael J. Keegan

Advancing Public Safety Through Community Policing



We face a new reality in American policing, one requiring a shift in the methods used to ensure public safety, while also dealing with ever-shrinking budgets. As law enforcement agencies throughout the nation continue to face challenges brought about by fiscal constraints, it is increasingly important that they find innovative ways to ensure the safety of the public. As a result, some in the law enforcement community recognize

the importance of maintaining and expanding community policing practices. According to Bernard Melekian, Director, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) within the U.S. Department of Justice, community policing is about building partnerships and solving community problems that proactively and locally address conditions jeopardizing public safety. Melekian leads the federal program, which began in the 1990s and focuses on weaving community policing practices into the fabric of the country's law enforcement community. "Our mission," declares Melekian, "is to help local law enforcement make the communities that they serve safer, and we do that through a variety of means." Melekian's office pursues its mission by providing grants, offering technical assistance, being a convener of best practices, and for Melekian, being "that voice for law enforcement inside the Beltway."

To do this effectively, Melekian has crafted a strategic vision that works to rebrand the office and reposition its programs. "My first priority is to depoliticize the office. The office is not a federal jobs program. We help advance public safety across the country. Secondly, I want to ensure that the office is the voice for law enforcement. Thirdly, I want to stress the concept

of evidence-based practice: identifying what works best and how we can make that part of law enforcement thinking. The fourth strategic area wasn't on my radar when I first arrived in Washington, and that's helping law enforcement agencies deal with the fiscal reality of today," describes Melekian.

In 2011, his office improved the integration of community policing principles into its grant programs. As a result, grant applicants must provide a more comprehensive community policing plan. According to Melekian, COPS hiring grants are now problem-solving grants. "What we've tried to do over the last three years is challenge these law enforcement agencies to focus on specific community problems that they're trying to address." These problems can run the gamut from homicide and school policing to policing in rural areas, gang violence, and homeland security. He has sought to change the mindset of the awardees from viewing the grant as a long-term or permanent addition to their department. Rather, he wants them to "think about it as a four-year problem-solving grant that enables them to tackle a specific community issue with some extra, yet finite resources." In FY2010, the office received more than 4,000 applications requesting \$2.2 billion in funding. "The size of the grants portfolio varies from year to year. This year [FY12], for example, we had roughly \$111 million in hiring grants; that's down almost 90 percent from three years ago when we had a billion dollars as part of the Recovery Act," explains Melekian. Tighter resources require a more focused approach.

It also involves identifying better ways of assessing grantees' implementation of community policing. Melekian admits the office measured the success of its grant programs from a technical process-driven standpoint: Did the authorized money get to awardees? Did they spend it on what they said they would? Were they timely? "The Community Policing Self-Assessment



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Tool (CP-SAT),” explains Melekian, “is really the first attempt to measure the effectiveness of a specific grant on a specific agency.” It is an online survey designed to measure implementation efforts across three critical dimensions—community partnerships, problem-solving, and organizational transformation. Grantees must complete the CP-SAT at the beginning and at the end of their grant period. “It’s very hard to measure the success of community policing,” Melekian acknowledges. “Probably the most common way to do that has been through community opinion polls: do you like your police department? That’s not a bad measure, but it’s certainly not complete. We hope CP-SAT is a step in the right direction.”

The COPS office has also refocused its efforts on grants monitoring. “Our monitoring activities are critical. We’re currently monitoring over \$266 million in outstanding grants,” notes Melekian. To do this, the office performs a series of desk audits. “We review what the agencies say they’re doing. We also do site visits, where we send teams to agencies and review firsthand what they’re doing beyond what the paperwork says they’re doing,” Melekian explains. He points out that the office is planning over 150 site visits this year to different agencies. “It is not enough to say how many officers the program funded or hired. We have to understand what these officers accomplished, and more specifically, are the communities safer?”

Making communities safer can also be done by providing law enforcement agencies with technical assistance, training, the development of innovative community policing strategies, and the sharing of best practices. The Community Policing Development (CPD) funds are used in this way to advance the practice of community policing. “The community policing development grants,” says Melekian, “really span a very wide spectrum of activities and projects. One effort that I’m most proud of this year began in Hawthorne, California, [and is] called Coffee With a Cop. It’s an incredibly simple idea; you have a local restaurant donate space, advertise the event, and folks from the community can just come in and have a cup of coffee. “When I first saw that I thought, well, okay, this might be interesting, but is it really going to catch on? It has caught on nationwide.” The CDP program

also funded a report assessing the successes and failures of creating joint police-fire agencies, sometimes called public safety agencies. “We think that report will be enormously valuable to the field, to city managers and county administrators, as they try to make decisions about how to manage their local budgets,” says Melekian.

Without exception, the recent economic downturn has fundamentally changed policing. Melekian’s office issued a report last fall finding that at least 12,000 officers across the U.S. in the previous 24 months had been laid off, an additional 35,000 positions had gone unfilled, and at least 28,000 officers had been furloughed. “It’s an enormous loss of capacity; you have to figure out different ways to do business,” exclaims Melekian. It will require a greater reliance on technology; greater use of civilians, both as employees and as volunteers; use of an alternative response to non-emergency radio calls; and regionalization and consolidation of departments across a number of fronts. “These things are happening right now,” admits Melekian.

In light of these difficult times, he continues to position his office as a resource for law enforcement agencies around this country. Along with many challenges, difficult times can offer opportunities to transform. “At some point, community policing has to cease to be a project or a series of special projects; it has to become the operating philosophy of an organization. When that transformation occurs, then you can say that community policing has arrived,” declares Melekian. ■

To learn more about DOJ’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) go to www.cops.usdoj.gov.



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