

Residents want more police on the streets. Here is what Atlantic City is doing.

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ATLANTIC CITY — Sharon Aloï remembers years ago when she saw more patrol cars parked in the city, including one near her property in Lower Chelsea.

“It made me feel good when it was there because people aren’t going to be breaking into cars and they’re going to think twice about breaking into a house on that street,” said Aloï, who doesn’t think that kind of crime is taking place in her neighborhood now but worries about other areas of the city.

Residents and former police agree that making people feel safer in Atlantic City needs to start on the streets.

The need to foster a better sense of safety and improve police and community relations was stressed in a report released last year by Jim Johnson, special counsel to Gov. Phil Murphy.

The plan, which aims to strengthen the city’s government and community partnerships, says residents want more done to provide a law-enforcement presence that is “visually reassuring.”

In light of that, the department plans to hire more officers and reposition the ones they already have through a new community policing initiative set to start early this summer.

“Just having that police presence I think keeps a lot of the people away,” said Ian Pullman, manager of Wood’s Loan Office in the 1700 block of Atlantic Avenue. He said police had recently been coming inside the pawn shop and signing a sign-in sheet, aiding what he sees as a decrease in loitering and drug dealing outside.

Michael Mason, an Atlantic City police officer for 25 years who retired in 2017, once made it a point to park his patrol car outside this local business, which rests in an area he called an “open-air drug market.”

He said people loitering outside Wood’s would leave when his car was around but would return when he had to leave for a call.

In 1994, The Casino Reinvestment Development Authority introduced the “cop next door” program, a \$5 million program that offered officers 35 marked police cars for them to take home along with low-interest mortgages as incentives for them to stay in the city.

At the time, about 25% of the city’s 400-member police force lived in the city. Under New Jersey law, cities may not impose residency requirements on police officers to force them to live where they work.

Now, Atlantic City has about 252 officers for a year-round population of about 39,000, plus millions of seasonal visitors who stay in the resort each year.

Retired Officer Connie Hackney, who grew up in the city and still lives there, said he was one of the last officers in the program to have a patrol car parked in his driveway in Chelsea Heights.

“The cars gave exposure,” said Hackney, who served in the department from 1998 to 2017. “You have police cars in your neighborhood, it gives a little image. It helps a little safetywise.”

While marked police cars provide visibility, residents call for even more of a return to basic policing, urging that officers “walk the beat” and patrol on foot.

“Perception is reality,” Pullman said. “Just being able to see one police officer, more often than not, walking the beat, that gives the impression that things are safe.”

Mason and Hackney both said that when there were more police, they had more time for face-to-face interactions with the community.

Hackney rode a bike he kept on his patrol car around neighborhoods when he had the time. It was something he took pride in.

But with less manpower and a city under a tight budget, this downtime got shorter and shorter.

“You got to get to these calls because your boy might be in trouble, your girl might be in trouble,” Hackney said. “If you do nothing else in patrol, you get to that call.”

In 2018, police were called 8.5% more than the prior year, for a total of 109,536 calls.

The Casino Reinvestment Development Authority agreed in March to provide \$1.5 million a year for five years for the Atlantic City Police Department to hire 15 officers. These officers will replace veteran officers, who in turn will be assigned to the city’s six wards in pairs, along with three officers who will be assigned to addressing vagrancy and homelessness in the Tourism District, said White.

“They will be more proactively engaging in the community — both residential and business communities,” police Chief Henry White said in March. “They will be getting problems solved. We are going to take veteran officers who know the terrain of the city and know how government operates.”

The initiative is based on a 2015 neighborhood policing plan implemented in New York.

New York police assigned two specially trained “neighborhood coordinating officers” in each sector. NCOs answered calls part of their shifts but served primarily as community contacts and monitored neighborhood crime trends.

CRDA Executive Director Matt Doherty said the plan aims to address quality-of-life issues. Along with stationing police in neighborhoods, they plan to reach out to organizations that work with people in need of social services to include them in policing.

CRDA currently invests \$3 million a year into the Police Department and contracts 45 Class 2 officers, Doherty said.

“I think you’ll start seeing a difference this summer. It may take another full year to get everything up and running, but I think you’ll start seeing the impact,” he said.

Longtime resident Victor Jenkins, who lives on Ocean Avenue, wants to see an officer walking on his street, especially during the night and early morning hours.

“The approach has to be presence and persistence of presence,” Jenkins said. “That’s the way to solve the problem.”