

KNOCK & RAP

A Non-Traditional Intervention Program for Juvenile At-Risk Behavior

Medford Township Police
91 Union Street
Medford, NJ 08055
609-654-7511

Authors:

Edwin Wood, Chief of Police & Director of Public Safety
Rusty Williams, School Resource Officer

In the mid 1990's, there was a dramatic increase in narcotic-related deaths (primarily heroin) within Burlington County, one of 21 counties in New Jersey. Consistent with what was happening in the county, students in the Lenape Regional High School District added to the number of deaths as a result of heroin overdoses. The Lenape Regional High School District, the fourth largest in New Jersey, is located in the southern part of Burlington County. The school district is currently building its fifth high school for a growing student population of over 7000. Eight municipalities send students to the district's schools, and during the heroin epidemic, more than half of the overdose deaths in all of Burlington County came from one of those sending municipalities. The problem was felt to be so serious that Medford Township Police approached the school district in an attempt to foster a partnership and proactively address this matter. Ironically, it was learned that the school district was planning to approach the police for assistance in dealing with the tragic deaths of their children. Both the school district and police learned that their cooperation and communications were extremely deficient and as a group they had to act immediately.

Medford Police solicited the advice of the Burlington County Prosecutor's Office, who was responsible for Statewide narcotics Action Plans through their narcotics unit. Together with the school district, an innovative plan was developed to address the issue. Discussions centered on developing a plan that included objectives on how to address the problem and implement the plan. The goal of the plan was determined to be saving students' lives and aggressively addressing the at-risk behavior. This would be accomplished in a cooperative effort between law enforcement and educators. The plan would be implemented with intelligence gathering, identification of those involved in the at-risk behavior, and immediately conducting interventions with those students and their parents. The schools would be prepared

to provide counseling through their substance abuse counselors. As part of the plan, the school district set parameters of behaviors by adopting a Zero Tolerance Policy regarding substance possession, use, and distribution. This established a main theme that would be supported throughout the initiative – *CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUR ACTIONS*.

It was realized that traditional police tactics would not be feasible in addressing this problem, as those in law enforcement know of the time and money required to build a solid drug case. Arrest warrants and search warrants are always based on facts gathered through intelligence or laborious controlled buys. Unfortunately, a by-product of our traditional methods often allows accurate and factual intelligence to sit because we have been engrained with the need to meet probable cause standards before we can act. As time goes by in building the case, the drug use/at-risk behavior continues. This is and was the first domino, which perpetually falls within our traditional police methods, except in our case children were dying. Traditionally, if we are able to bring forth charges and arrest a student, the bureaucratic wait begins – wait for the court to process the case, wait for the attorneys to review discovery material, wait for professional reports, wait for legal reviews and challenges, and wait for the trial to start through the backlog of cases. During that span of time, the at-risk behavior and problems continue and are not addressed. Once a juvenile goes through the system, he or she is returned to school, and in most cases, school administrators are never told of the incident. The student is permitted to attend the same classes, make the same contacts, and network with the same circle of friends as before the arrest. This often leads, in part, to a return to the at-risk behavior, which often escalates to a student in crisis. The recidivism rate along among juvenile drug users showed us the conventional police measures were not working.

As part of this action plan, a two-prong attack was adopted: conduct interventions on students who were identified as possessing or using drugs; and target the suspected points of origin for the distribution of drugs. Through meetings and discussions with the prosecutor's office, solid legal foundations were established that not only allowed, but in some cases mandated the sharing of information between law enforcement officers and educators in incidents

involving the safety, order and discipline in the school or community. With firm legal backing, school administrators and police shared what they knew or suspected about student drug use and drug sales. It was quickly discovered that both sides were looking at the same student or groups of students, but not moving on the information because they lacked additional needed evidence to make a case that would withstand legal scrutiny. In fact, both sides were mutually ignorant as to the legal authority and latitude that allowed us to share information. With an understanding of the legal parameters and requirements of intelligence and information sharing, a list of students' names was developed and refined. If the police and/or the school had two or more independent intelligence ledgering of a student, that student was identified as a candidate for intervention.

With a list of student names for interventions, "Operation Kick-Off" was launched in March of 1997. Police officers in pairs of two (and in plain clothes) went to students' homes in the early evening hours. The concept involved officers informing parents of the illegal at-risk behavior and immediately confronting the students. Parents were advised that the officers were *not* there to arrest their child but to address the immediate safety concerns regarding the at-risk behavior (possession, use of drugs, possession of weapons). If the parents refused to voluntarily cooperate with the intervention, it would cease. However, they were then informed that the police would establish a record of their refusal, and their child would be identified as a target for traditional law enforcement actions (investigation and arrest). The parents were advised of an additional component of their refusal – that they would be exposing themselves to civil ramifications for their negligence and "deliberate indifference" in not taking action. Secondly, in accordance with state and federal statutes, the respective school principal would be informed of the refusal. If the refusal was found to be in conflict with the zero tolerance policy, the principal may, through the superintendent of schools, educate the student in the afternoon after regular school hours for three hours each day as required by state law, and no transportation services would be provided for the student. Additionally, as extra curricular activities are considered a privilege, the student would no longer be permitted to participate in them. These understandings of inter-agency cooperation were adopted and

KNOCK & RAP continues

supported by the school district and police department.

During Operation Kick-Off, all but one parent was receptive and cooperative. The rest were completely cooperative in the process of determining the truth and involvement in the illegal, at-risk behavior. This led to direct contact with students, who always admitted their involvement in the illegal activity and to the retrieval of illegal contraband (illicit drugs, prescription drugs, paraphernalia, stolen property, and weapons). It is important to note that our *use of discretion* in not charging the student was **always** adhered to. The only exception to this rule, which was explained to both student and parent, would be if the student was not completely truthful -- *No Omissions*. The parents were told to schedule a meeting with their school principal and substance abuse counselor. Parents were advised that as long as the student and family complied with the school's recommendations for treatment and counseling, the police would consider the incident closed. The final question, always asked prior to ending the intervention was "who else may be having similar problems or need help?" Officers obtained names of other students, and in many cases those names were on current interventions list, which corroborated information already at hand. Those names were codified into an intelligence database that assisted in developing lists of names for future interventions. The school principal was immediately made aware of the interventions so that the appropriate professional services could be in place the following morning.

As you can imagine, some of the parents reported having no idea that their child was involved in drug use or illegal activity. Others said they had suspicions about the activities, but didn't know where to turn for help. Although skeptical at first, most of the parents were receptive and successful interventions took place at the students' homes. As officers went from house to house and collected more drugs, paraphernalia, stolen property, and especially intelligence, we began to understand just how widespread the epidemic had become. Instead of decreasing the number of students who would be visited, lists grew from information received in the interventions. Officers found themselves working until two or three in the morning due to community care-taking and liability issues. If information was received at midnight that another student was in possession of drugs, officers had no choice but to conduct an intervention at that home in an effort to retrieve the drugs and notify the

parents. If the child at that home gave the name of another student who was in possession of a potentially dangerous drug, that home would be visited next, and the process became perpetual. The following morning, the principal's office was packed with students and their parents waiting for their conference. A positive side-effect to this was that as students tried to figure out how the police and school knew so much about everyone, they assumed that the police were everywhere and knew everything that was going on. As interventions continued in the days that followed, some students told the officers that they knew an intervention was going to take place and that they had already told their parents about the at-risk behavior/drug use.

The program became known as **Knock and Rap** due to the way and manner that the interventions were handled – the police would first *knock* at the door, then *rap* with the family. It was truly amazing to see the results of the interventions: dozens of packets of suspected heroin, cocaine, and other CDS were recovered, as well as drug paraphernalia, weapons, and stolen property (some of which we had no idea was related to the student). Officers reported very emotional times at the houses between the family members. They also witnessed children asking their parents for help, and parents telling their children that they loved them – some saying this aloud for the first time.

Although this was conducted in a non-traditional fashion, numerous boxes of evidence were stored after the first week of interventions, and intelligence information was developed on other crimes including thefts, burglaries, and credit card fraud. It was evident to everyone that the results of the Knock and Rap initiative resulted in a much more efficient use of law enforcement personnel, and traditional law enforcement goals were met in a very short period of time: dangerous drugs were immediately removed from the possibility of use, and juveniles received immediate help for their problems. In reality, we were more effective with immediate results in getting help to our children than the juvenile justice system could provide. This was accomplished without giving the juvenile a police record, and with the full cooperation and support of the family, school and law enforcement.

The school district has seen a steady decline in violence, vandalism and substance abuse, with a dramatic decline in drug offenses. The positive relationship

between the school district and the police is one that is talked about throughout the state. Medford Township Police and the Lenape Regional School District now enjoy a partnership that is held-up as a model by the Department of Criminal Justice.

The Knock and rap program has been featured on the Philadelphia CBS affiliate's television news magazine program; the New York Times referred to the program in a news article on alternatives for juvenile crime; and in 1999, vice President Al Gore's office contacted the Medford Police about the successes of the program. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Justice surveyed selected departments across the county that received federal COPS funding, and the Knock and Rap Program was recognized as a Community Policing Innovation.

Since Operation Kick-off in 1997, more than 500 interventions have been conducted. Knock and Rap is not limited to substance abuse. Medford Police now use it for any type of at-risk behavior, including fights, threats, and certain weapons incidents. There have been many examples of the success of this program. Utilizing the S.A.R.A. Model of community policing, assessment of the Knock and Rap Program has reviewed only 7 juveniles were re-arrested by Medford Police after interventions at their homes. That recidivism rate is less than two percent and is considerably lower than national statistics on juvenile drug use. Intelligence databases have increased and numerous crimes have been solved as a result of over six years of interventions. But most importantly, students' lives were changed, and in some cases lives were saved.

About the Authors:

Chief Ed Wood is a 27-year veteran of the Medford Police Department. As a detective sergeant, he was instrumental in starting the **Knock and Rap** Program. He oversaw Operation Kick-Off, and conducted some of the first interventions in the department. He has supervised most of the interventions conducted by the department to date.

Officer Rusty Williams is a 17-year veteran of the Medford Police Department. A former detective, he has been assigned to the School Resource Unit for the past six years. He has conducted numerous interventions and compiled intelligence information for the **Knock and Rap** database.