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Sheriff transforms office, changing approach from reactive to proactive

By ERIN McINTYRE



MATT LEWIS Mesa County sheriff

Gretel Daugherty

Sheriff Matt Lewis is the first person to admit the agency he'd worked at for 22 years needed a new direction.

After returning from training at the FBI National Academy about 18 months ago, he wanted to pursue a new strategy, an organizational change that would transform the way his agency diagnosed crime and dedicated resources toward fighting it.

"We are in the crime business," Lewis said. "There is nothing that is more our responsibility than crime in this county, and we weren't doing a good job at it."

The agency had endured budget cuts, was short-staffed and wasn't able to be proactive or as service-oriented as he liked.

"We had become an organization where our specialty was showing up after you were a victim and documenting what happened to you," he said. "That was who we were, and today we are an organization of problem-solvers."

Leadership at the Mesa County Sheriff's Office didn't like the trend of increasing crime and wanted to do something, too.

"We were frustrated with what crime had done over the previous 10 years," Undersheriff Todd Rowell said.

It was time for a new direction, an intentional effort to reverse the trend of increasing crime that kept creeping upward. And a year into this new effort, the department is seeing a decrease in overall crime reported and the number of property crime cases opened in targeted high-crime areas.

The office's 3,292-square-mile service area is larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined, and the 39 patrol officers the department employs work in shifts, responding to 911 calls. The traditional response to crime consumed the department's resources and didn't allow them to get ahead of criminals.

"We did become very reactive to things that were going on," Rowell said.

For a year, he invested in developing the new organizational structure, obtaining buy-in and identifying barriers to the new culture. Using limited resources in a smarter way is one of the reasons Lewis wanted to initiate the new crime-fighting approach.

Lewis got the idea for the organizational shift by combining techniques used by law enforcement. One is "micro hot spot policing," in which agencies identify sudden increases in types of crime and immediately jump on it to prevent a pattern from forming. Another is

"intelligence-based policing," which focuses on mining crime data the department collects to notice trends and predict crime events when possible.

Until this point, the Sheriff's Office hadn't regularly analyzed crime data, and it wasn't presented in a way that could easily be mined.

The department created a crime analyst position and enlisted the help of Deputy Mark Johnson, who had a background in military intelligence and felt comfortable analyzing data. They started meeting once a week to interpret the numbers, with Johnson highlighting the crime data and the deputies assigned to the high-crime areas presenting to the group, which helped brainstorm possible solutions and resources to solve problems.

Rowell, who was a captain in the department at the time who oversaw operations, had started charting crimes and identifying patterns in different parts of the agency's service area. While violent crimes were harder to predict geographically, he was able to clearly see neighborhoods where property crimes were elevated at times, and identified 36 different high-crime areas the department could target to reduce those crimes.

They mapped out these high-crime areas and assigned patrol deputies to them. In addition to responding to 911 calls, these patrol deputies are expected to invest time in their assigned areas and know what's going on there, to keep tabs on sex offenders registered in the area and the issues that are going on with the neighborhoods.

"You take this area in your free time and you know the people, you affect this area," Rowell said. "It's given them some ownership."

The agency also created a new unit to handle complicated, difficult cases that ate up patrol deputies' resources. These "super-users" of the department's attention are assigned to the Crime Reduction Unit, a team of four that diagnoses the root of the problem and resolves it, no matter how long it takes.

Deputies assigned to the 36 high-crime areas identify ongoing, problematic situations that they can recommend for assignment to the CRU. These cases have a wide range of problems, but one thing they all have in common is they can't be solved easily and they require unique efforts that might not work on the first try, or ongoing attention to resolve.

Many of the CRU's cases involve mental-health issues, drug addiction and poor living conditions. Some of them aren't outright criminal, they're not black and white, but they leech resources from the department because there's really no one else to deal with them.

Sometimes these cases require unconventional solutions, and the reason they haven't been resolved is that just arresting people and putting them in jail temporarily hasn't fixed the problem.

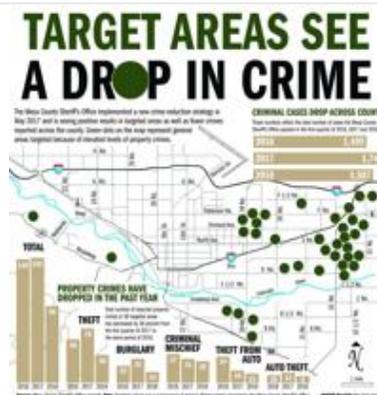
"It is our job to identify the underlying issues and to stop those issues," Lewis said.

When barriers to resolving those issues are found, the team's job is to overcome them.

"Everything we do is with purpose. If we're driving somebody to (drug rehab in) Arizona, it's because it's a hurdle we couldn't get around any other way and we're not going to stop progress because it takes an unconventional method," Rowell said.

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