



The City of Port Orange Sexual Offender Accountability Program (SOAP)

City Spirit Award

“Children are our most valuable natural resource.”

- Herbert Clark Hoover

31st President of the United States

In an era when the protection of natural resources, such as forests and fossil fuels, has been thrust into the forefront of public policy, it seems that some have forgotten about protecting the most valuable natural resource, children.

The City of Port Orange, Florida has not ignored this fundamental principle and the Sexual Offender Accountability Program (SOAP) is evidence of Port Orange’s spirited endeavor towards protecting the children that reside within the community. The City’s Vision Statement asserts that Port Orange is a “place where people feel at home and experience a sense of community and safety.” An integral part in creating the “sense of community and safety” is to provide for the protection of all residents and SOAP enables the City to concentrate on protecting those most vulnerable.

Timely

*Child abduction, lewd and lascivious acts, sexual abuse, sexual battery...*these terms are all too common in public discourse. The Port Orange Police Department (POPD) recognized that these terms are not merely words, they are reality. The POPD

worked proactively and created SOAP in August of 2005 as a response to the fact that sexual offenders/predators that reside within the City can threaten public safety. The POPD recognized two problems with the monitoring of sexual offenders/predators: (1) sexual offenders/predators who fail to comply with registration requirements pose a serious risk to the community and (2) information posted on public registry sites are often inaccurate or outdated. These two issues can provide offenders/predators with a window of opportunity to abscond from both law enforcement and the community. SOAP helps shut that window.

Innovative

The individual behind SOAP was Police Captain Frank Surmaczewicz. Captain Surmaczewicz proposed the idea of a monthly address verification program of registered sex offenders/predators and suggested that patrol officers could incorporate monthly checks into their duties to ensure that address information on sex offenders is current.

SOAP helps renew address information for all registered sexual offenders and predators living in Port Orange each month. SOAP exceeds current Florida mandates, which require law enforcement to verify the addresses of sexual predators only once every three months and sexual offenders annually.

In addition to improving offender/predator address accuracy, the program also improved the exchange of information within the department, among other law enforcement agencies, and with the community. The POPD is confident that the program also serves as a deterrent, by preventing offenders/predators from failing to register.

Process

The POPD employs the one-officer-to-one-offender/predator (1:1) method in conducting monthly in-person address verification checks. This strategy evolved from discussions between agency administrators who wanted to implement a best practice approach while at the same time preventing the workload from becoming overwhelming. In pairing a particular patrol officer with a specific offender/predator, the program administrator will pair the most experienced officers with the offenders/predators who pose the greatest threat to the community.

The detective sergeant provides each patrol officer with information on the offender, conditions of release, and preprinted address verification forms. Each officer is responsible for conducting random face-to-face meetings with their assigned offender/predator each month to verify the addresses and ensure that the offender/predator has not altered his/her appearance in any way.

Patrol supervisors forward all completed address verification forms to the detective sergeant before the end of each month, and a civilian employee documents the face-to-face meetings through the use of an *Excel* spreadsheet. The Chief of Police receives a monthly management report of all verifications that took place.

The detective sergeant functions as a liaison with numerous other law enforcement agencies involved in tracking and registering sexual offenders/predators. Information is frequently shared between the POPD, the Volusia County Sheriff's Office (VCSO), and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

Effectiveness

During the first six months of the program, the exchange of information between the various agencies increased considerably and was more accurate. In the first 11 months of the program, only one registered sex offender absconded, which resulted in an arrest warrant and apprehension.

SOAP has strengthened cooperation and relationships between the various law enforcement agencies previously mentioned. The cohesion created by SOAP is invaluable, in terms of information sharing. The unified effort by the POPD, VCSO, and the FDLE have turned SOAP into a powerful operation used to monitor sexual violators, and will not let them slip away as easily the program's acronym may suggest.

Success

SOAP has proven to be beneficial for multiple parties. The primary beneficiaries of SOAP are the residents of Port Orange. The residents are more secure, the children of Port Orange are more protected, and overall, SOAP can help provide residents with that "sense of community and safety," that was set forth in the Vision Statement.

The POPD has benefited greatly from SOAP because it now has a more accurate and expedient system to respond to any sexual crimes involving minors. The program provides the POPD with more accurate information and helps seal any loopholes that sexual offenders/predators may attempt to exploit.

Various law enforcement entities have benefited from this program because of the voluminous amount of information being shared. The VCSO and FDLE now have the ability to garner more information to use to prevent sexual offenders/predators from violating any innocent civilians.

Finally, in terms of educating and informing officers, the verification checks have increased overall awareness among patrol officers of the sex offender/predator population and the laws pertaining to offender registration.

Cost Effective

The 1:1 offender/officer ratio is a concept that could be easily replicated by other law enforcement agencies, regardless of size or budget. The addition of address verification tasks does not put a strain on the patrol officer's existing responsibilities. The program has improved public safety to the point that if an incident were to occur in Port Orange, such as child abduction or a sex crime, officers have the ability to respond immediately by going out into the community to check on their assigned offenders.

Knowing where to locate the offender/predator at all times is an invaluable investigative resource for the POPD. The City of Port Orange has not incurred any additional expenses because there is no cost over and above the salaries of the employees involved as everything is done while on regular duty hours.

Adaptable

Other law enforcement agencies have contacted the POPD for information to establish a program of their own. Already, 20 local governments through out the United States have contacted the POPD interested in implementing a program similar to SOAP in their respective locales.

SOAP is a unique and innovative program that can protect children and improve overall public safety, while creating no additional expenditures. The City of Port Orange is proud to have taken heed to President Herbert Hoover's call and programs like SOAP can allow others to follow suit and protect our most valuable natural resources.