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## 90 Minutes A Day That Shape Fight To Cut Crime

Top D.C. Police Officers Gather and Are Grilled

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Tuesday, June 1, 2004; Page B01

The meetings begin every day at D.C. police headquarters with a rapid-fire rundown of the most recent crimes in the city -- a litany of homicides, shootings, stabbings, robberies, assaults and thefts. Then the attention shifts to the police commanders who are supposed to be doing something about it.

Few big-city police departments bring together commanders so frequently to demand results. A recent run of burglaries in the Takoma and Shepherd Park areas of Northwest Washington did not bode well for neighborhood residents or police brass. A giant screen displayed a map with bright blue dots pinpointing the locations of 20 or so houses hit over the past several weeks -- most in broad daylight.

"We've been talking about this for a month," declared Executive Assistant Chief Michael J. Fitzgerald, the force's second-in-command. "What are you doing about it?"

Fitzgerald's remarks were directed at Cmdr. Hilton Burton of the 4th Police District, who now had to demonstrate that he was on top of the case. Burton announced that more police were patrolling the area and that some were trailing parolees with histories of burglaries. It was a tense yet typical exchange, repeated to varying degrees as Fitzgerald moved onto other pressing problems: car thefts in Anacostia, bicycle thefts in upper Northwest, armed robberies downtown and so on.

"If you are not on top of everything in your district, Chief Fitzgerald will let you know about it," Burton said later.

For 90 minutes each weekday, the force's top commanders and detectives gather to discuss trends and recent incidents in a high-tech, dimly lighted room with large projection screens that display maps and photographs of suspects and crime scenes.

Begun in August 2002, the sessions have evolved into a centerpiece of the anti-crime strategy of D.C. Police Chief Charles H. Ramsey. He said the approach contributed to an 11 percent drop in crime this year compared with last. In 2003, the city recorded a 3 percent overall decrease in crime from 2002.

"It's not just the numbers," Ramsey said. "It's the way people talk about crime and think about crime."

Ramsey expanded on an idea developed in the 1990s by the New York City Police Department, which revolutionized the use of staff meetings and computer-generated

crime analysis to better deploy resources. Agencies across the country -- from Baltimore to Los Angeles -- have adopted the program, known as ComStat, but Washington has taken it a step further by convening five days a week.

Ramsey, a former top officer in Chicago who became the D.C. chief in 1998, said daily sessions encourage the department's leaders to brainstorm and make the force sharper. They also help him size up commanders.

"At the first meetings, it was very apparent how little some folk knew about crime happening in their areas of responsibility," Ramsey said. "You know who is in there working hard and trying."

Criminal justice specialists credited Ramsey with taking an idea that has worked well in other cities and pushing it another step.

"Washington is ahead of any other city I know of," said Chuck Wexler, executive director of the District-based Police Executive Research Forum. "It stands alone as one of the most significant and focused approaches to crime in any city."

A key element of the meetings is having someone such as Fitzgerald hold commanders accountable.

Howard Safir, a former New York City police commissioner, said that his agency conducted rigorous crime-trend meetings twice a week but that he saw the value of Ramsey's daily approach. Besides keeping close tabs on crime trends, Safir said, "you basically get an opportunity to see your senior people perform under pressure."

Not everyone is sold on the plan. Some commanders said the meetings occur too often and last too long, at the expense of work they could do on the street. These commanders, who spoke on the condition that they not be identified, said the gatherings can be grueling and repetitive, especially since they follow an early-morning conference call in which they discuss intelligence, preparation for major events and overnight crime.

"We're just putting out fires," said a top police official who regularly attends the meetings.

Police union officials said the city's patrol districts are shortchanged because commanders are away for a few hours each day.

"They have become absentee managers," said Sgt. G.G. Neill, secretary of the D.C. police labor committee in Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 1.

Ramsey dismissed the criticism, saying, "If you can't take two hours of your day to fight crime, I don't know what I have you around for."

The meetings generally are not open to the public. However, Ramsey permitted The Washington Post to observe six recent sessions.

Fitzgerald, a 32-year veteran, ran the discussions. While he talked and quizzed commanders, he often stood behind a large chair that resembled something out of a "Star Trek" movie.

He was joined by three dozen district commanders, assistant chiefs, detective supervisors and other top officials, sitting behind three rows of desks facing 23 glowing screens. The images changed at the click of a computer mouse.

Leading off the sessions was Capt. Robert J. Contee, head of the violent crimes branch. He provided quick updates on recent killings and the progress of various investigations. One day, for example, Contee described how a 16-year-old was killed inside a carry-out restaurant in Northeast Washington and how detectives were trying to round up witnesses. He also told commanders about the frustration his detectives were feeling as they tried to solve the recent killing of an 18-year-old man in Southeast.

"There was a very large crowd" when the detectives arrived, Contee said into the microphone. "Of course, no one saw the shooting."

Thanks to high-speed computers, the department has access to dozens of databases. Technicians can run national background checks on suspects during the meetings, with the results popping up on the screen. They can plot where cars are stolen and recovered.

When Fitzgerald began to quiz another commander about crimes in his area, he noticed an icon on the projection screen showing that a recent parolee lived in the neighborhood having trouble.

As Fitzgerald stared at the screen, an officer typed silently into a computer, and the man's criminal history and police mug shot flashed onto the big screens.

"Looks to me like that might be a suspect for you guys to follow up on," Fitzgerald told a detective supervisor sitting in the room.

At another recent session, when commanders wanted to know if technicians were able to link any burglaries to suspects through fingerprints, they asked the forensics supervisor across the room.

That conversation revealed a problem in how the agency handles fingerprint results, a gap that visibly frustrated Ramsey and Fitzgerald. Examiners were reporting to detectives that prints did not match suspects when in fact the results were inconclusive.

Detectives had been prematurely ruling out suspects because they erroneously believed that the fingerprints did not match. Ramsey ordered changes in reporting procedures to prevent future misunderstandings.

When Ramsey started the briefings almost two years ago, only the chief, Fitzgerald and the city's three regional assistant chiefs attended.

Then district commanders joined. Soon, representatives from most of the department's other units were summoned, too -- supervisors of detectives, specialized units, narcotics and those in charge of forensics and evidence-gathering. Fitzgerald and the commanders decide where to deploy the agency's extra resources, which include officers on overtime, units of police dogs and horses, and narcotics and vice detectives.

At one recent session, commanders discussed street-level intelligence suggesting that rival gangs from different parts of the District were going to get into a fight and possible gun battle at a Northeast Washington nightclub. The commanders decided to boost the police presence near the club and in the neighborhoods of the feuding groups. The violence did not materialize -- either by luck or planning, it was a victory for the neighborhoods and the commanders.

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