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The Story of the Red Hook Public Safety Corps

BJA

Written by

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The Story of the Red Hook Public Safety Corps

Introduction

The Red Hook Public Safety Corps is a community service program that works to improve neighborhood safety in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a low-income community dominated by one of New York's largest public housing developments. Launched in 1995 with funding from the Americorps national service program, the Public Safety Corps puts 50 local residents to work repairing conditions of disorder — cleaning parks, fixing broken windows, painting over graffiti. Corps members also engage in aggressive victim assistance efforts, helping victims of domestic violence obtain protective orders and educating school children about the dangers of drug abuse and date rape.

Written by one of the founders of the Public Safety Corps, this document examines the origins of the program and describes some of its achievements. It also looks at the obstacles that the program has overcome as well as the challenges it must confront in the days ahead. In the process, this essay offers a set of lessons that are relevant to anyone interested in community justice, community organizing or community service.

Urban Blight

Not too long ago, Red Hook blended almost seamlessly into the rest of Brooklyn. From downtown Brooklyn, it was a short walk down Court Street, with its tidy brownstones and Italian bakeries, to the waterfront and the heart of Red Hook.

There, a visitor could find one of the busiest ports in the country. Cargo from all over the world arrived in Red Hook and was transferred onto trucks, bound for destinations across the United States.

The community that surrounded the port was a thriving, working-class neighborhood. Irish and Italian-American longshoremen and their families lived in single-family row houses whose greatest asset was their spectacular views of the Statue of Liberty and downtown Manhattan. It could be a rough place — Red Hook was, after all, the inspiration for dark, violent tales like "On the Waterfront" and "Last Exit to Brooklyn" — but it was also vibrant, full of stores, restaurants and hope.

Things started to change in the 1930s, when Red Hook was selected as the site for one of New York's first public housing developments. This was soon followed by the construction of a massive, elevated highway, which cut off Court Street with slabs of concrete. The Gowanus Expressway rose into the air, rumbling with traffic, effectively slicing Red Hook away from the rest of Brooklyn.

After the expressway arrived, Red Hook began a slide from working class to barely working. The jobs moved to New Jersey and other ports when the shipping industry switched from crates to container shipping, which moved by train rather than truck. The population dropped from 25,000 to about 11,000. Then came the heroin epidemic in the 1960s, and crack in the 1980s. According to *Life*, Red Hook had become one of the most drug-infested communities in the country.

By the 1990s, the signs of decay were unmistakable: shattered windows, graffiti, used crack vials in the streets, broken intercoms, smashed lights and elevators that reeked of urine. Today, nearly 70 percent of Red Hook's residents live in public housing. The median household income is $9,500 and the unemployment rate is 22 percent. The neighborhood's bookends are a methadone clinic and a waste transfer station — misery industries that have flourished as the neighborhood has suffered.

Red Hook's reputation as a symbol of urban blight was cemented in 1992, when Patrick Daly, an elementary school principal, was accidentally killed by local drug dealers as he searched for a missing student. The tragedy earned Red Hook the front pages of the New York papers and motivated a handful of disgruntled residents to lead a quixotic campaign to change the name of the neighborhood from "Red Hook" to the less menacing "Liberty Heights."

A Neighborhood in Transition

The Liberty Heights campaign never built much momentum, but the death of Patrick Daly helped focus the attention of local public policy makers on the neighborhood.

Much has changed since Red Hook reached its nadir in 1992. The local community board led an ambitious urban planning effort that painted a new vision for the neighborhood and recommended zoning changes to stimulate development along the waterfront. An intrepid real estate developer began buying up abandoned warehouses and transforming them into workshops and offices. Local artists discovered the neighborhood's cheap rents, abundant light and waterfront access. Seemingly overnight, row houses were renovated and a smattering of tiny studios and galleries popped up.

Despite these signs of progress, problems remained. The graffiti and crack vials hadn't gone anywhere. Neither had the litter-strewn park or the vacant lots being used as illegal dumping sites. "Red Hook is lawless," said one resident who participated in neighborhood focus groups in 1994. "People do what they want to." Another resident summed up Red Hook's main issues as a "lack of knowledge of the law, lack of respect for the law, and lack of respect for neighbors."

Clearly, economic development efforts could only go so far while serious public safety concerns remained.

Community Court

In the aftermath of Patrick Daly's death, Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J Hynes, New York State Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye and the City of New York joined together to explore new ideas for Red Hook. Because of the neighbor-

hood's isolation and history of crime, they thought Red Hook would be the perfect site for an experiment in community justice. The idea was to create a neighborhood-based court that would target low-level crime in Red Hook, sentencing offenders to restore the community through visible restitution projects — cleaning local parks and sweeping local streets. Offenders would also receive on-site social services, including drug treatment, health care and job training.

The genesis of this idea came from the nation's first "community court," which had recently opened across the water in Midtown Manhattan. Working together, planners from the Center for Court Innovation (the organization responsible for developing the Midtown Court) and attorneys from the D.A.'s office began studying the feasibility of a similar court in Red Hook. Scores of meetings followed: interviews with civic leaders, town hall forums with residents, and focus groups with neighborhood youth, service providers and single moms.

It soon became clear that a court in a neighborhood like Red Hook would have to do more than just respond to crime after it occurred. Residents were looking for a court that would be an active problem-solver, that would focus as much attention on crime prevention as it did on sanctions. According to Wally Bazemore, a community activist and resident of the Red Hook Houses, "Once I learned that a community court was in the works, I tried to encourage the court to take a holistic approach, to really be a one-stop center for people's problems." This view was echoed by many of the participants in early focus groups. One resident suggested that the court look at "the total picture — spousal abuse, victim services, teenagers, mentor programs, mock court, parenting skills."

Another clear neighborhood priority was jobs. Talk of public safety inevitably led to a discussion of local unemployment and the need to engage idle residents in meaningful work. Could the community court play a role in linking people to jobs? What kinds of training opportunities might it provide?

The challenge for the community court planners was clear: how could a court possibly fulfill such broad expectations?

Americorps

Timing worked both for and against the community court team. Even as plans for the Red Hook court were delayed by fundraising difficulties, an unexpected opportunity presented itself.

1993saw the launch of a national service program known as Americorps. Hailed as a "domestic Peace Corps," Americorps provides a living allowance and an educational grant to those willing to dedicate a year of their lives to community service. The federal government issued a request-for-proposals, aggressively seeking applicants who were willing to recruit, train and put Americorps participants to work. "Americorps was a lucky break in some respects," said Adam Mansky, the coordinator of the Red Hook community court. "It really gave us a chance to address two neighborhood concerns at the same time — both preventing crime and providing job skills to residents."

In addition to crime prevention, the community court planners thought that community service workers might perform victim assistance activities. As a result, two new partners were added to the team — Safe Horizon and the National Organization for Victim Assistance. Together, the coalition submitted a proposal and was selected to be one of the first recipients of Americorps funding. The Red Hook Public Safety Corps was born.

Recruitment

The first challenge for the program was logistical. With construction of the community court delayed, the Public Safety Corps needed an interim home. The logical answer was to go where the action was, which meant the Red Hook Houses. The New York City Housing Authority agreed to donate a ground-floor apartment in a high-rise building, which guaranteed that the program would be a visible, day-to-day presence in the lives of neighborhood residents.

The next challenge was finding participants. There was funding to support 50 Corps members. While other Americorps programs cast a wide net, recruiting members from colleges across the nation, the planners of the Public Safety Corps were determined to enlist Red Hook residents in the effort to improve neighborhood public safety. Finding them wasn't easy. Given Red Hook's history, residents were understandably skeptical of any new government initiative. "You've heard of Missouri being the Show Me State? Well, Red Hook is a 'show me' community," said Robert Feldstein, a planner at the Center for Court Innovation.

Recruitment resembled an old-fashioned get-out-the-vote effort. Planners spoke at community meetings, passed out flyers at the local subway stop and participated in every available street fair. The result? More than 125 applications for 50 positions.

Among the applicants were some surprises. The president of the local PTA applied, as did the vice president and the secretary of the tenants association. A thirty-something mother applied, as did her teenage daughter. Unlike many other Americorps programs, the Public Safety Corps had attracted applicants of all ages, from 18 to 68. The reasons for this were not complicated. In a neighborhood like Red Hook, where the median income hovered at the poverty line, the Americorps stipend of $7,950 per year looked less like a living allowance and more like a salary.

A panel of representatives from the Center for Court Innovation, the Brooklyn D.A.'s office, Safe Horizon and the National Organization for Victim Assistance was established to review applications. The process, which unfolded over the course of several weeks, was rigorous. A series of group interviews tested the applicants' willingness to work as a team. Essays revealed the extent of their commitment to community service. Background checks eliminated applicants with violent criminal histories. Others dropped out on their own, unwilling to submit to such a demanding selection process. In the end, the applicants were winnowed down to 50 participants — three-quarters of them from Red Hook, the others from surrounding neighborhoods.

Open Doors and Red Shirts

In November of 1995, the Red Hook Public Safety Corps formally opened its doors, staffed by a team of four: one project coordinator and three team leaders. The cramped offices in the Red Hook Houses may not have been very cheery, but Corps members were quick to brighten their surroundings, filling the apartment with posters and inspirational messages ("Good Morning Red Hook Public Safety Corps! Today's Phrase Is: Life Is Good!").

The Public Safety Corps office quickly became ground zero for neighborhood activity in Red Hook. If the program's open-door policy invited theft (several computers mysteriously "walked away"), it also encouraged a sense of community. Neighbors in the building stopped by to offer refreshments, suggest ideas or exchange gossip. Individuals in need — seniors, victims of domestic violence and others — walked in seeking help on a regular basis, attracted by the convenience.

The location of the office was not the only reason the program attracted attention. The 50 members were each outfitted with bright red t-shirts emblazoned with the Red Hook Public Safety Corps logo. This was no idle fashion statement. The t-shirts were a visible announcement of the program's presence in the community. If many residents didn't know what to make of the troops in red at first — some wondered aloud if the "red shirts" were a group of snitches sent by local law enforcement — at least they were noticed. "We're seen," said Cynthia Holley, a 1998 member. "People come to us with everything."

Operation Data

Before Corps members hit the streets, they spent two weeks in training, building teamwork, learning about community service and honing skills like active listening, effective communication and tolerance. After training, the first item of business was a door-to-door survey of the Red Hook community. The survey, which came to be known as "Operation Data," served two principal purposes: measuring community perceptions of neighborhood safety and spreading the word about the new program in town. Corps members canvassed the neighborhood in pairs, interviewing hundreds of residents, merchants and visitors in both English and Spanish. They asked basic questions: How do you feel about the quality of life in Red Hook? What are your impressions of police, prosecutors and courts? What are the biggest problems in the neighborhood? Where would you like to see us focus our efforts?

The surveys were designed to last 10 minutes, but often they took much longer. "I think it shows that when you reach out, people are willing to talk with you," said James Brodick, who helps oversee the Corps. "We had Corps members who spent an hour chatting with elderly residents. They couldn't believe that we were interested in hearing what they had to say."

Despite Red Hook's Wild West reputation as a place where drugs and gun violence rule the streets, the residents who participated in Operation Data returned again and again to quality-of-life conditions. More than 70 percent cited garbage, littering, poor street lighting and run-down parks as major neighborhood problems.

'It's About How You Live'

One of the most distressing facts that emerged from Operation Data was the level of fear that pervaded the neighborhood. While residents reported feeling safe in their apartments, the moment they stepped outside their doors, their feelings changed dramatically. One out of three felt unsafe in their elevator and their building lobby.

The participants in the survey were responding to real problems that they faced every day: urine in their elevators, graffiti in their stairwells, lights broken by drug dealers eager to work in darkness. Left unaddressed, these conditions created an atmosphere where more serious crime could flourish. In response, the Public Safety Corps dedicated a team of Corps members to making physical improvements in and around the Red Hook Houses. Working with the New York City Housing Authority, team members repaired broken locks and hallway lights, conducted safety inspections and organized graffiti clean-up projects.

"It's not about where you live, it's how you live," said Shona Bowers, the 28-year-old project coordinator who was originally a Corps member herself. "I live in the housing project. I know you don't want to have people over if the elevator isn't working, or the light fixtures have been taken out by dealers. Broken lights and tiles feed into a sense of disorder." And in an area that has been repeatedly ravaged by drug dealing — one public housing unit is colloquially known as "the Pharmacy" — basic maintenance was a way of regaining control of public space.

A Hidden Problem

While much of the Public Safety Corps' work focused on visible problems that affected the entire Red Hook neighborhood, it also targeted problems that were hidden from public view.

"Many men come home from work, their boss has been on their case all day, and they take it out on their wives," said Alice Tapia, a staff member. "They say, 'What's wrong with that?' I've lived here all my life. I know. I've seen it."

To highlight the problem, the Corps created a special team devoted to addressing domestic violence and other family issues. The "Family Team" performed outreach throughout the neighborhood, putting together workshops that explained domestic violence and what to do about it. "Most people don't even know what domestic violence is," Tapia said. "The workshops educate people and raise public awareness. It's an important first step."

The team also responded when domestic violence occurred. Working with Safe Horizon and police, the Corps reached out to residents who had reported domestic disturbances, linking them to counseling and shelter. Corps members were stationed in the local police precinct, doing the paperwork on domestic violence reports and freeing up officers to spend more time in the field. They assisted Safe Horizon counselors at the precincts, making follow-up phone calls to victims. They also escorted victims to the courts to obtain orders of protection. "The courts can be really intimidating," said police officer Carol Fields, the precinct's domestic violence officer. "It can be an all-day process, and it's not

unusual to spend hours in the wrong lines or end up in the wrong rooms. The Corps helps to expedite the process and make the victims feel comfortable."

Bridging the Gap

Placing Corps members at the local precinct also helped bridge the gap that has traditionally separated police from local residents. Operation Data confirmed a fact that most policymakers take for granted: there has been an enormous erosion of public trust in government, particularly in minority neighborhoods like Red Hook. Only 14 percent of those who participated in the initial survey rated the police favorably. And, this approval rating was actually *higher* than that of prosecutors or courts.

The Public Safety Corps sought to improve public confidence in justice by providing police officers and residents with opportunities to work together in pursuit of common goals. After nearly four years, there are signs that this is beginning to pay off. Some of the Corps members placed in the local precinct have expressed interest in pursuing careers in law enforcement. A few have even become auxiliary police officers. "I'd never been in a legal situation before," said one such Corps member, 24-year-old Atiya Williams. "I hadn't been to court. I didn't know what documents you needed. Seeing the legal side of domestic violence gave me another perspective."

On several occasions the police have reached out to the Corps for help convening neighborhood forums about police-community relations. The local precinct has, in turn, been supportive of the Corps, providing meeting space and participating in community-wide service events.

Playing Ball

The Corps' work with the precinct was typical of its approach to improving Red Hook. The goal was not to reinvent the wheel or duplicate efforts, but rather to bolster and enhance the capacity of existing initiatives.

Still, there were occasions when Corps members identified gaps in services that only they could fill. One of the best examples of this was the need for summer recreational activities for young people. Although there have always been baseball diamonds in Red Hook, neighborhood kids rarely used them. Teams of adults and children from other, more affluent communities played there instead, occasionally chasing off Red Hook children who were playing pick-up games. There hadn't been an organized baseball league in Red Hook for 18 years.

In 1996, Darryl Chavis, a Corps member who remembered playing on those diamonds, decided to start a league. "It was great as a kid," he said. "It was more than just baseball. ... You have a lot of single parents in this community. It fills a role for these [kids] to have [another role model] in their lives." Led by Chavis, the new league was an immediate success, with so many children registering that first season that two teams had to be added to the original six at the last minute. Today, 12 teams with 200 boys and girls crack bats and field grounders all summer long. Corps members serve as coaches and umpires every Saturday. They are joined by community residents: each team has at least one community coach.

The baseball league has also proven an effective community organizing tool, galvanizing the interest and participation of local police, businesses and government agencies. Each team is sponsored by a different organization, which helps defray the costs of uniforms and trophies. In addition, the annual all-star game and playoffs attract hundreds of spectators from the community. The Corps has sought to capitalize on this interest, organizing events like graffiti removal projects and park clean-ups that engage both players and fans in community service. One of the unexpected results of these efforts has been an influx of "baseball moms" into the program — local mothers who joined the Corps as members after learning of the program from their baseball-playing children.

Challenges

The baseball league, unfortunately, is one of the few Corps projects that has generated ongoing community involvement. While the Corps has been successful at recruiting members and attracting community residents to one-shot events like a Martin Luther King Day of Service or a celebration of Victims Rights Week, it has not been able to develop a cadre of volunteers to support the work of Corps members. Projects that depend on such volunteers — like an effort to improve tenant patrols — have foundered. Organizers offer a number of reasons why. "The obstacles are not insignificant," James Brodick said. "Lack of money, lack of time, fear of crime, apathy — we need to overcome all of these if we hope to bolster the service ethic in Red Hook."

Motivating volunteers isn't the only problem that the program had to confront. Many of the Corps members had never held jobs before. Most were on public assistance and had been for some time. Basic workplace skills like showing up on time and respecting authority were missing. "You know, some of the people I was with had never worked before," Patricia Henry, a 1998 member, pointed out. "They hadn't thought of the Corps as an opportunity. Some of them just wanted the money. And there was so much cursing. It was really ridiculous, the way some people would carry on. 'F-this' and 'f-that,' anywhere, any time, any place. Many of the worst offenders worked in the schools. What kind of an example were they to the children? That's what I would tell them: If you're trying to make a difference in society, you can't do that."

Before the Corps members could change their neighborhood, organizers had to teach them the skills necessary to change themselves. The program devoted two days each month to intensive training, beginning with the basics: how to dress professionally, how to answer a business phone call, how to communicate with work colleagues. For many, the lessons sunk in immediately; these members quickly advanced to service assignments where they received more specialized training.

For others, the job-readiness training seemed to make little difference. Some were stymied by the challenges of their personal lives — over its first four years, the Public Safety Corps lost members due to addiction, arrest, domestic violence and pregnancy. Those who did not drop out struggled to meet the program's expecta-

tions of professional conduct. As a result, staff ended up spending many hours on individual coaching and disciplinary measures — time and energy that would otherwise have been spent on service.

After Service

So what has happened to the 150 individuals who have served as Corps members over the program's first three years? For those who struggled to complete their year of service, life after Americorps has not been easy. Many have returned to life on public assistance. For others, the program has served as a stepping stone to education and employment. A recent phone survey with program graduates revealed that three out of four are either in school or employed on a full-time basis. Many are working in the public interest, as AIDS educators, victim advocates and drug treatment providers. Some have found jobs directly through their Public Safety Corps experience. Graduates have been hired by the Center for Court Innovation, the D.A.'s Office, the Board of Education, Safe Horizon and the New York City Housing Authority.

Michael Williams is one such success story. Williams was a teenager when he joined the Corps in 1995. For him, the Public Safety Corps was just something to do. "I was in a rut. I really wasn't thinking about what came next," Williams admitted. Along the way, there were problems; on several occasions, his team leader had to discipline Williams for lateness, and once for getting into a fight while on Corps time. There was also personal growth. "I realized that I could get things done," Williams remembered. "It turned me into a professional." Michael Williams graduated from the Public Safety Corps into a job working with young people as part of a peer court in Red Hook. From there, he has gone on to work for a local employment training program. At night, he is pursuing his bachelor's degree at a local community college.

Williams is not alone in seeking to advance his education. Thanks to Americorps, one of the principal benefits of participating in the Red Hook Public Safety Corps is the $4,750 educational award that is presented to everyone who successfully completes the program. This award can be used to help pay for college, graduate school or vocational training. Many are taking advantage of this opportunity. Given that most members began the program with little education and no intention of pursuing more, this represents a significant achievement. And because the majority of members come from Red Hook, it represents a significant contribution to the health of the neighborhood as well.

Results

As inspiring as the individual stories of Corps members may be, the program's most visible impact is the community service work it performs. It is difficult to spend more than an hour or so in Red Hook without running into a Public Safety Corps member tending a community garden or escorting a resident to the senior center or working at the local health clinic. "They've had such a positive impact," police officer Carol Fields said. "Everyone recognizes the Americorps shirt. The name has spread."

Many of the results are tangible: The Public Safety Corps has contributes over 50,000 hours of service to the neighborhood each year. Corps members have repaired hundreds of locks and painted over thousands of square feet of graffiti. They have provided educational workshops to hundreds of participants. The annual Operation Data survey suggests that these accomplishments have led to some interesting shifts in public opinion. The most recent results indicate that 63 percent of the respondents believe that the quality of life in the neighborhood has improved, a number that has more than doubled since the Corps' arrival.

The Corps hasn't accomplished all of this alone of course. "At our best, we've built networks that didn't previously exist," James Brodick said. Through service, the Corps has linked together institutional players that rarely, if ever, communicate with one another: churches, schools, drug treatment providers, libraries, courts, police and the New York City Housing Authority. Forming these kinds of connections is often the difference between a neighborhood that works and one that doesn't.

As the impact has grown, so too has the respect for the program in the community. Marilyn Robles, a 32-year-old Red Hook resident, remembered when the Public Safety Corps first came to Red Hook. "They were gardening, cleaning, removing graffiti," she said. "They became part of the neighborhood, socializing and speaking with everyone. We saw so many great things happen. I saw the difference, and I knew I had to apply myself." Today, Robles is a member of the Corps and one of the coaches in the youth baseball league. Just as important, she also serves as the vice-president of the local PTA. The Corps not only encourages members like Robles to get involved in the civic life of Red Hook, it gives them the tools and self-confidence to do so. Robles' enthusiasm doesn't stop there. She has also become one of the Corps' chief recruiters. Her sister has joined the program and her daughter helps coach in the baseball league.

"It's amazing," Brodick said. "When we started, finding Corps members was like pulling teeth. Now, people are calling us all the time for applications. I think it shows that Red Hook knows we're for real, we're here and we're going to stay."

Notes

Notes

Center for Court Innovation

The winner of an Innovations in American Government Award from the Ford Foundation and Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, the Center for Court Innovation is a unique public-private partnership that promotes new thinking about how courts can solve difficult problems like addiction, quality-of-life crime, domestic violence and child neglect. The Center functions as the New York State Unified Court System's independent research and development arm, creating demonstration projects that test new approaches to problems that have resisted conventional solutions. The Center's problem-solving courts include the nation's first community court (Midtown Community Court), as well as drug courts, domestic violence courts, youth courts, family treatment courts and others.

Nationally, the Center disseminates the lessons learned from its experiments in New York, helping courts across the country launch their own problem-solving innovations. The Center contributes to the national conversation about justice by convening roundtable conversations that bring together leading academics and practitioners and by contributing to policy and professional journals. The Center also provides hands-on technical assistance, advising court and criminal justice planners throughout the country about program and technology design.

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