COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DURING TIMES OF CRISIS
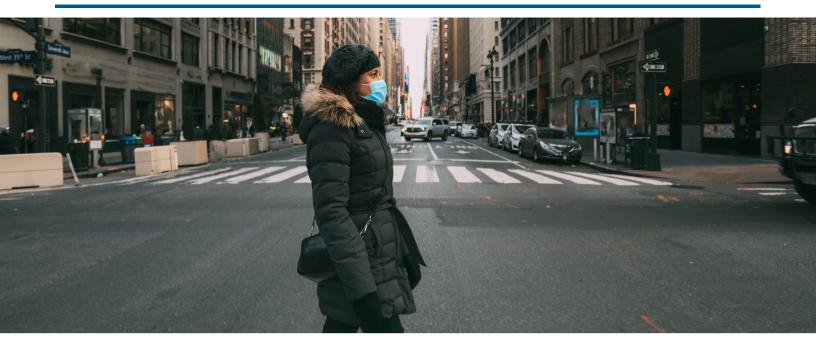
COVID-19 AND BEYOND

Police are tasked with ensuring public safety during extreme events and emergencies. But during unprecedented times—like we're seeing now with the novel COVID-19 pandemic—many tried and tested methods for community engagement and outreach are breaking down. How must policing agencies adapt to meet the needs of vulnerable populations?

This document, vetted with community organizers, academic experts, and law enforcement officials, offers guidance for policing agencies to modify their existing community engagement processes in response to extreme events and ongoing public safety emergencies.

Police are tasked with ensuring public safety during extreme events and emergencies, many of which are unprecedented in the way they unfold-as we're seeing now with the novel COVID-19 pandemic and its broad effects on daily life.

During such times, community engagement becomes more important than ever. Public outreach allows police officers to connect with those affected by dire situations. This helps policing agencies understand the risks communities face, and helps communities understand the public safety response and how to access help. Together, this two-way conversation aids both police and communities in preparing for emerging challenges.

Although many policing agencies have tried and tested methods for community engagement, they're likely to find these normal approaches break down during emergency situations, making it critically important that agencies know how to respond and adapt.

How is community outreach different during a crisis?

Officers who typically are focused on community policing and engagement may be re-assigned to emergency response and enforcement. Policing agencies also may not be able to host their regular in-person engagement events.

Further, many community members are likely to have their daily routines disrupted. Depending on the nature of the emergency, some may be forced into or out of their homes for long periods of time and cut off from transportation and essential services. They may be without utilities or internet access, unable to work, or unable to secure childcare or stable housing. Even community members who regularly attend meetings or events with their police agencies may now find it impossible to do so.

But beyond this, public health and safety emergencies have a lasting impact on police and the communities they serve. As we're seeing with COVID-19, policing agencies are experiencing significant challenges, from staffing shortages to loss of life. Concurrently, many members of the community likely are experiencing grief from losing a loved one, fears about their own health, significant shocks to their income, or other trauma. It also is likely that any public safety challenges that were present before the crisis—from homelessness to domestic violence—continue and could be worsened.

All these circumstances can make it harder for police and communities to connect. But while this may seem overwhelming, it needn't be.

Community engagement provides police and communities an opportunity to get through these shared challenges collaboratively, so that their relationships and trust in one another emerge stronger after the crisis has passed.

Although each emergency situation is unique—from a pandemic like COVID-19 to natural disasters like hurricanes or wildfires—there are some foundational principles that can guide policing agencies in modifying their engagement strategies and responding to community needs:

Key Points for Engagement During Times of Crisis

Hear community concerns and ensure two-way communication: It's even more important in times of crisis that agencies engage in two-way information sharing. This may seem counterintuitive when circumstances are dire and a quick response is needed, but people need to be heard in order to build a basis for trust. Don't just talk at the community—make sure there is a pathway for them to ask questions, present their concerns, and receive a response. After all, the community's input helps ensure you are responding to their *actual* needs, rather than their *presumed* needs—making your response more efficient and productive. If the circumstances of the emergency prohibit in-person meetings, the agency may consider utilizing a designated phone line or social media accounts for this purpose, or host a virtual town hall.

Share information on the public safety response: Many crises require rapid and frequent changes in police responses. It is critical that communities are kept abreast of changes in relevant approaches or policies, such as shifting to online reporting for minor crimes. And as local regulations evolve—such as the stay-at-home orders issued in response to COVID-19 —police must work with municipal leadership to communicate expectations clearly and describe how ordinances will be enforced. They also must do so in a way that meets with public approval, especially in those communities most policed. Agencies should be aware of the risk of discriminatory enforcement, especially around evolving or unclear ordinances (we offer some additional guidelines on this point **here**).

Share essential information from other organizations: Communities will have many needs during times of crisis. In some communities, the police may be positioned best to share updates from other city agencies or neighborhood groups. This may include information on how to access food, medical care, financial assistance, or mental health resources.

Actively respond to false information and rumors: The prevalence of social media as a news source makes it extremely easy for faulty information to spread. Well-intentioned community members may share posts that contain rumors or incorrect information without realizing what they've done. In addition to making sure the communications coming from the agency are clear and widely disseminated, the agency should counteract bad information about the public safety response by addressing rumors directly and stating clearly what information is correct and what information is false. Reinforce correct information by linking to or citing directly from federal, state, and local governments whenever possible, and be courteous when correcting community members—they likely did not know their information was inaccurate.

Tips for Facilitating Engagement

Utilize virtual platforms: If it is unsafe for the community to travel or gather, try scheduling virtual events to take the place of regularly scheduled community meetings. Online platforms such as Zoom, GotoMeeting, Google Hangouts, Skype, and others can help to maintain face-to-face contact and personal connection. In a pinch, conference calls can work as well. The value of maintaining regular engagement, even if from a distance, goes a long way to keeping relationships strong and communities informed—just be sure the public is aware you are moving to a virtual platform. Spread the word about an online public meeting the same way you would for one being held in person: utilize your social media channels and listservs; loop in the media through press releases; reach out to key community figures and institutions; and keep in touch with community members who would normally attend in person.

Think analog: While we believe online engagement is a critical part of community outreach, it's important to remember many in the community are likely to find their normal access to the internet disrupted during emergencies. In fact, for many households, regular access to the internet is a persistent challenge. For this reason, it's critical to reach out across multiple platforms, not just digital ones. Policing agencies may find it helpful to establish a phone tree or utilize radio or TV spots. The more channels you use to disseminate important information and engage with the public, the better.

Maintain personal relationships: Community members should not feel abandoned during times of crisis. Maintaining regular contact with the most vulnerable members of the community, such as seniors or those with disabilities or language barriers, can be achieved through simple actions such as calling individuals or their caretakers and checking in. Officers and civilian volunteers should be proactive about reaching out to vulnerable community members they have an existing relationship with and following up regularly as the emergency situation continues. Be sure to ask these individuals if they have friends, family, or neighbors who are also in vulnerable situations, and reach out to these community members as well.

Leverage networks and go where people are: During a major crisis, officers likely will need to engage with even broader segments of the community than before. One way to expand engagement networks and reach more people is to leverage existing institutional networks and make inroads with new organizations established to respond to the crisis. For example, officers may reach out to schools and churches in their districts and ask these groups to share critical information through their communications channels as well. Officers also should be aware of places in the community where vulnerable groups gather, such as nursing homes, homeless shelters or encampments, hospitals, and public spaces, and make sure there are clear communication pathways to staff and caregivers at these locations.

Offer critical information in multiple languages: Information barriers have a huge impact on public health and safety. For this reason, agencies should endeavor to conduct their outreach in all the major languages of their district. This can be done by translating flyers and leaflets, or through regularly occurring events, such as weekly information panels conducted in the major non-English languages of your jurisdiction. These events may be conducted in person, virtually, or with the help of local radio or TV stations, depending on the situation. Agencies can also utilize their relationships with community organizations active in neighborhoods where non-English languages are spoken and ask them to help get the information out.

It's OK to have some fun: A little bit of levity can go a long way during a stressful time. When appropriate to do so, officers can engage with the community through fun activities, either in person or virtually. This may include hosting a virtual or in-person story-time for kids or distributing coloring books to children at emergency shelters. Officers who play musical instruments may perform for the community or invite others to join in through a virtual meeting platform. There are many ways to connect and provide a bit of fun, even when times are tough.

Set the example: If officers are interacting with the public, it is important they adhere to the same rules they are enforcing. Even if police are exempted from certain orders, modeling pro-social behavior is important. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, officers educating the public about social distancing or mask orders should maintain a six-foot distance and wear a mask. Adherence to these rules not only is crucial for officer and public safety, but to improve police legitimacy and public trust.

Proceed with compassion: During emergency situations, emotions run high. Members of the community, as well as officers themselves, are likely to experience grief, fear, and trauma. The nature of working or just living through an emergency is itself stressful, and fatigue, displacement, and constantly changing information can make these situations ripe for increased misunderstanding and conflict. Prior de-escalation training and clear, level-headed communication are critical during such times, as is maintaining or expanding mental health and other support resources for officers.