

The Lowdown

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In early June 2021, the Asheville Police Department, citing a staffing shortage, notified their community that officers would no longer respond to some calls for service, including thefts or vandalism with no suspect information, scams, funeral escorts, and certain harassing phone call complaints. I believe their decision came as a shock to many. Regardless, they communicated the change clearly to the Asheville community.

Shortly after, members of my command staff attended a webinar entitled “What Your Community Wants from the Police – Clarifying the Rules of Engagement” offered by the Dolan Consulting Group. The training started by recognizing the mixed messages directed to law enforcement. For example, we are called to respond to (and solve) a host of societal problems such as noise complaints, intoxicated people, break-ins, property disputes, and undisciplined children. These calls are time consuming, and they can make it difficult to provide the rapid response people expect when they call 911 with a dire emergency. Similarly, we are expected to keep roadways safe and crime rates low, but people only want us to enforce the traffic or criminal violations of people other than themselves!

The webinar encouraged agencies to clarify the rules of engagement, make decisions regarding service priorities, and communicate both to the community. I decided to approach this task by commissioning a poll through Public Policy Polling (PPP), an agency nationally acclaimed for their accurate results. They surveyed a representative sample of Orange County voters about their thoughts and opinions regarding how they wished to be policed. Many law enforcement professionals I spoke to about this poll essentially asked me, “Why would you want to do that?” In return, I asked them, “Why wouldn’t you?” Some of them have Citizens’ Advisory Boards, an idea I am not comfortable with because I am unable to delegate my constitutional authority to anyone. Moreover, as an official elected by the entire county, I must endeavor to serve everyone, and it is difficult to think a dozen or so people could be a fair proxy for the opinions of a population of 145,000. The sample size is simply too small.

PPP surveyed 740 Orange County voters and employed weighting to the data to ensure the demographic breakdown of those polled closely approximated the population of Orange County. The respondent pool was 75% white, 12% African-American, 8% other, and 5% Hispanic or Latino. Fifty-five percent of the respondents were Democrat, 16% were Republican, and 29% were Independent

or a member of another party. A deeper dive into the gender, age, education, and residential area (urban, suburban, or rural) of respondents is beyond the scope of this article, but all generally tracked the composition of voters in our county. The opportunity to have insight into the opinions of a truly cross-sectional sampling of the county in a poll with a margin of error of only +/- 3.6 is invaluable.

The poll queried the priority people felt my office should give to 15 law enforcement practices. We are now studying the resulting data and determining how to best adapt our service to the preferences of Orange County residents. I should note that nothing in the poll will affect how we respond to violent crime and carry out our constitutionally prescribed duties. Rather, the poll examined how our residents want us to police on matters allowing for more discretion, such as traffic enforcement, property crimes, quality of life calls, and requests for service that do not involve an imminent threat to people. We will repeat the poll at regular intervals, allowing us to adjust to the changing desires of those we serve. The poll will help us be accountable to our residents and elected officials, and it will help us have a framework to respond to calls for service in accordance with the wishes of the community as a whole, not just to the loudest voices at any particular moment.

The data we now have are rich with possibility. Some clear themes emerged; residents want us to help protect their property and their ability to live in peace. They value protecting children in schools, and overall, they are not very concerned about expired tags or personal use of marijuana. We look forward to the opportunity to review policy and tailor service delivery to the desires of the community, and to communicating any changes to Orange County residents.