

Sep/Oct 2007

On Patrol: He's Earned His Bragging Rights

Nearly two decades ago, Spring ISD's Chief Alan Bragg created the school district's police department with support from the superintendent, school board and community. Proper planning, budgeting, site assessments and officer recruitment laid the groundwork for the agency's success today.

- by Robin Hattersley Gray

It's not everyday that a school, university or hospital police chief or security director is tasked with starting an agency from scratch. Indeed, most new chiefs join departments that have procedures, policies and plans — good, bad or otherwise — created by their predecessors. If the department is healthy, the chief's job might not be that difficult. If the agency has personnel issues or outdated policies, the new department head could be in for a world of hurt.

Imagine, then, the incredible opportunity and challenge that faced Spring (Texas) Independent School District (ISD) Police Department Chief Alan Bragg in 1991 when he was hired to create a brand new law enforcement agency for the school system. Bragg had the experience, skills and foresight to create an agency that has lasted for 17 years and continues going strong. Spring ISD PD has successfully navigated the district's tremendous expansion, demographic changes and population growth that have occurred through the years.

In fact, Bragg's agency has been so successful that the chief and his department were recognized by the School Safety Advocacy Council this summer for their hard work in keeping Spring ISD's students safe. Here's how it all began.

How did Spring ISD determine it needed its own police department?

Bragg: In 1990, the school board and superintendent knew our area was becoming less suburban, less rural. They knew that some of the inner-city problems you'd normally experience were trickling out this way. So they put a team of administrators together and visited with some other districts that already had police departments.

In 1991 when you became chief, how did you develop the department?

Bragg: We actually spent about the first six months writing a policy manual, writing job descriptions, going to each campus and doing assessments to see what we had, what we needed, how many officers we needed — just trying to put a plan together. That took us quite a while, doing all the legal work with the state and our attorneys to make sure that what we were putting together was done properly and legally.

By the end of July 1991 we had everything in place and advertised for our first applicants. We had about 35 or 40 applicants for eight positions, so we hired the best eight. Since then we've added two to three officers a year through growth.

What are some of the critical steps a police chief must take when creating a new school district police department?

Bragg: I think that number one, he or she needs the support of the superintendent and the school board. Ours was a unanimous decision by our board to start the department, so that makes it a whole lot easier for the person coming in.

You also need to get the community involved and probably, to some degree, sell the parents and those community members who might be opposed to it. There is always some opposition to starting your own police department because some people say, "Why should we use the school district's tax dollars to start our own department when we already reside in a jurisdiction that has law enforcement to respond to this stuff anyway?"

There are always some taxpayers who might say we're sort of paying for these services twice. But I think parents probably don't see it the way they did when we started. Now the safety of their children is on the tips of their tongues.

What about planning and funding for the new agency?

Bragg: You have to really think far enough ahead to properly plan the budget and make sure you've thought of everything. Make sure you have the funds — and we did — but I know of some others that didn't. They tried to start their police department and underestimated the start-up costs significantly. It either put them really far behind, or it just really wasn't as successful as it could have been.

It's also important to hire the right officers. Get the officers who have that little spark about them, who you know are there for the right reasons. It does take a different kind of officer to work in a school or educational law enforcement setting.

Students are juveniles, so there is a different perspective and way that officers have to work, act and think when they are dealing with the kids.

You've got to get those officers who make good first impressions and give kids a positive experience. Even though it may be a bad situation, you've



