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Oak Park police officers earn high marks for professional conduct

Individuals who have an encounter with an Oak Park police officer are very likely to be satisfied with the way they are treated. That's the early findings of an ongoing, long-term study by the Center for Research in Law and Justice at the University of Illinois Chicago.

The study began here in June when individuals who had an encounter with Oak Park police were asked to participate in a survey as part of the National Police Research Platform, a program designed to collect data that could help improve police procedures and approaches across the country.

Eight out of 10 respondents who rated their encounters with Oak Park police – about a third of them nonresidents – said they were either very satisfied (72.5 percent) or somewhat satisfied (14.2 percent) with the way they were treated by the officer. They reported that the officer listened to them (92.5 percent), was fair and evenhanded (89.1 percent), was polite (95 percent), showed concern for their feelings (79.3 percent) and knew what he or she was doing (95 percent).

"We are extremely pleased with these early results of the survey," said Oak Park Police Chief Rick C. Tanksley. "I was confident that our officers are consummate professionals, but you can never truly know how the public feels until you ask them."

Village Manager Tom Barwin, himself a former police officer, called the findings "a testament to the leadership, training and professionalism of the men and women who have dedicated their lives to protecting and serving our community."

"In all of my years of city management, Chief Tanksley stands out as one of the most forward-thinking of law enforcement professionals," Barwin said. "He not only understands the importance of how police officers conduct themselves when interacting with citizens, but he strives to instill that understanding in the men and women he commands. And he is not afraid to participate in innovative initiatives such as this survey that can help the police department do an even better job for the community."

Barwin also said he believes the survey results underscore the importance of mutual respect among citizens and police in nurturing a strong community policing program that relies on residents' willingness to report crimes, suspicious characters and unusual circumstances because they know the police response will be quick and professional.

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The 327 survey respondents who had an encounter with police between June 13 and Dec. 7 included those involved in a traffic stop, traffic crash or a crime report. Encounters that resulted from violent crimes or involved juveniles are not part of the survey.

Researches say they hope more individuals will participate as the survey continues and individuals better understand the anonymity of their responses. According to Tanksley, none of the survey information is collected by the Oak Park Police Department since all survey responses are managed by the UIC researchers. In fact, the Oak Park Police Department does not even know if any of its officers' encounters resulted in a survey response.

"This effort is not about individual officers or specific respondents," Tanksley said. "It is about gaining a broader understanding of what is happening on the streets so we can create training programs and approaches that will help us improve the services we provide the community."

Oak Park and River Forest were the first communities in the region to agree to participate. Two police districts in Boston also are participating. However, researches say they believe additional police departments will get involved as they learn more about how objective, empirical data can help them fine tune their recruitment and training programs, a position Tanksley supports.

"A police department is a living organization that must change and adapt as challenges and opportunities arise," Tanksley said. "Some departments may fear what studies of this kind could show about how they are perceived by the citizens they serve. But in order to achieve organizational excellence, you have to be willing to hear the bad along with the good. Knowing how the public perceives their experiences with our officers is invaluable to having a better understanding of what we do well and what we need to improve. How else can you learn and grow?"

As the survey continues, officials stress the ease – and anonymity – of participating. When a police report is filed, a letter is sent to each individual asking them to take a survey either by telephone or online. The letters include a special code needed to participate in the survey and ensure that only one survey is completed for each encounter.

For more information on Oak Park's role in the survey project, call 708.386.3800 or e-mail police@oak-park.us.

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