To Spur Ties, Officers Move In Next Door

Illinois city's program offers free housing to police who live in the areas that they patrol.

BY SHRIBANI MAHTANI

ROCKFORD, Ill.—Officer Patrice Turner starts her weekdays by getting on her bike and riding to West Middle School, greeting children and getting stragglers into the doors before they close.

On a recent day, she broke up a crowd gathered around a quivering palm-size baby bunny and before that, intervened before a quibble between some girls escalated.

free in these so-called ROCK Houses for anywhere between two and five years, the officers will get to know the problems of the people they protect by living among them.

"Their goal is to find problems in that neighborhood and solve it," said Dan O'Shea, chief of the Rockford police department. "Instead of going to one problem house three times a shift, the idea is that you go there once but that you try to solve the root cause of the issue—and you want to solve it, because you are two houses down."

The department, like many others across the country, is putting in place other community-policing initiatives. That

Officer Patrice Turner talks to sixth graders Demel Brown and Jai'lyn Dawson before they enter West Middle School for the day.
"You get to know the signs—that was about to be a fight," she says.

Officer Turner knows these students well. She doesn't just police here, but lives right down the street on Rockford's west side, a blighted neighborhood in a city with a murder rate that is three times that of Los Angeles and rivals the rates in Milwaukee and Chicago.

She is one of two officers to sign up to a new policing program here where officers live in the areas they patrol, rather than farther-flung, safer suburban enclaves. Living rent includes ice cream socials to bring children together with officers and creating what are known as "Strong Neighborhood Houses," where police and social-service agencies staff a house in a troubled neighborhood to give residents a place to report crimes and voice other concerns, and also host community events. The resident officer program is described by criminologists as the most extreme form of community policing. It is in contrast to practices in many cities including Seattle, Fort Worth, Texas, and others that have dropped requirements for police to live within city limits. In Milwaukee, strict residency laws were dropped in 2013 but officers are required to stay within 15 miles of the city, a rule that the union has pushed back against.

In nearby Chicago, police are required to live within city limits, but many live clustered in neighborhoods with other officers and firefighters. In May, the city created a $3 million program to help police officers purchase homes in high-crime neighborhoods like Woodlawn and Little Village, hoping that it will help stabilize and revive those areas.

Rockford's community policing efforts, which began last year, appear to have had some initial success. In 2015, 18% of open murder cases were solved. Of the 12 murders so far this year, six have been cleared, and police say they are close to solving a few more. The number of murders, too, is down slightly from 14 at this time last year.

The resident officer program gets back to "the view that the police were the people, and that people had to be the police," said Wesley Skenan, a professor at Northwestern University who has studied community policing.

Still, "police officers are individuals and have a lot of reason to be nervous about it," he said, adding that officers who step forward will often be "special officers or officers doing this under special circumstances."

Introducing the program took some negotiation to get the police union on board, says those in the Rockford department.

The primary concern was the safety of the officers and what the department is doing to protect the homes, which are outfitted with cameras and alarm systems.

Chief O'Shea admits that the ROCK Houses program takes a special kind of officer, but believes there are more like Officer Turner. He plans to introduce at least six more houses over the next year.

"Three hundred cops are not going to solve our violent crime problem," he said. "Three hundred cops plus a hundred thousand residents, that is what will help."