

Great Falls police tackle crime by saying hello

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Great Falls Police Officer Michael Draper spots two men sitting on a low fence separating a parking lot from the sidewalk lining the 600 block of 2nd Alley North.

“I’m going to make contact,” the officer says before calling his location in to dispatch.

“Are we breaking the law?” one of the men calls to Draper as he exits his patrol car.

“No,” Draper responds, “I’m just coming to say ‘hello.’”

Whether it’s called “saying hello” or “making contact,” the idea is the same — officer presence deters crime. It’s the boiled-down philosophy behind DDACTS, or Data-Driven Approach to Crime and Traffic Safety, the new patrol model put in place by the Great Falls Police Department about eight weeks ago.

Here’s how it works: The participating department maps crime calls on a city map, traffic calls on a second map, and then blend the two maps together. The area where the two overlap becomes the DDACTS area. The area in Great Falls spans from Park Drive to 15th Street and 6th Avenue North to 6th Avenue South.

The philosophy behind DDACTS is that an increase in officer presence and interactions with people within the DDACTS area will lead to a decrease in criminal activity and traffic incidents over the long run.

GFPD data shows officers responded to roughly 900 more calls this May than May 2015. Officer Katie Cunningham, who is overseeing the program for the GFPD, briefed officers coming on to the afternoon shift on June 10 with this information.

There is no “typical” DDACTS shift, just as there is no “typical” shift for an officer patrolling any of the other areas of Great Falls.

Patrol Capt. Rob Moccasin likes to ditch his desk and get behind the wheel of a patrol car. He frequently parks his rig in a parking lot on the 600 block of 1st Avenue North, across from the Zip Trip gas station.

Moccasin parks in that spot so frequently that people stop and say “hello” to him. “People wave at me who wouldn’t normally because they see me here,” he said.

He parks there to spot people violating the city’s cellphone ordinance.

“If you have it in your hand and we see you on the phone, you’re going to get stopped and you’re going to get a ticket,” he said, saying that warnings are hard to come by in the DDACTS zone.

Moccasin is sympathetic but firm with people who think they deserve warnings. “I tell them, ‘I understand your plight, but you’ve got to not do this.’”

He emphasizes that the highly visible traffic enforcement tied to the DDACTS program is not about handing out tickets to be mean, but rather to prevent crashes.

“It’s a traffic violation for a reason,” he says before rattling off a list of common offenses, such as “wide turns,” failure to use a turn signal and distracted driving, with cellphone use being the main culprit.

Moccasin said bicyclists using their phones while riding are causing dangerous problems, too. He noted that offense carries a \$100 penalty.

Perhaps his parking lot presence is sending a message. Moccasin doesn’t spot a single cellphone violation during the half hour he spent parked in his favorite spot June 10.

“Perhaps word is getting out,” he says.

Despite the sunny skies that Friday afternoon, the calls were sparse. Spotty showers hit the city throughout the late afternoon and evening as longtime officer Bill Brooks patrolled the DDACTS area.

“It’s definitely had an impact,” Brooks says of the program, noting that popular “hangout” spots for transient folks had mostly cleared after a month of increased police presence. “Why not try something different?”

That increased presence comes with an increased interactions and, in turn, more citations for violations such as open alcohol containers and disorderly conduct. However, citations and trips to jail aren’t the point of the DDACTS model. The goal, as explained by DDACTS literature published by the GFPD, is to make Great Falls a better place to live, work and play, especially in the DDACTS zone.

Extra coverage in the DDACTS area does not mean other areas of Great Falls are left without officer coverage. During the Friday shift, Brooks is called to back up other officers in other areas of the city. He assisted with a domestic violence call on the west side, then transported a man to jail on a warrant for an officer who was investigating a hit and run incident.

In between those assists a report of a man sleeping in a parking lot is called in to dispatch. On the way to the parking lot, a message from the dispatcher pops into the notes section on Brooks’ in-car computer: “He’s using the parking barrier as a pillow.”

He sure was.

There, in the same lot Moccasin parked hours earlier to look for cellphone violations, a man slept in parking spot 61. A tall can of Steel Reserve malt liquor sat beside him.

Brooks nudges the man with his foot. He doesn’t move.

The officer continues, calling to the man to wake up.

“Leave me alone,” he grumbles, and turns over as if he’d just hit the snooze button on an alarm clock.

“You can’t sleep in the parking lot,” Brooks replies.

A second officer arrives to back up Brooks. Both officers indicate they’ve dealt with this man before.

The man finally sits up and agrees to go home. Progress is slow.

The officers ask the man how much he’s had to drink. He indicates he had some hard liquor before buying the can.

“They’re not supposed to sell to you if you’re intoxicated,” Brooks says.

“But they do,” the man answers, swaying as he stands.

“Can you walk?” the other officer asks.

The man grumbled and walked toward the alley as the sky darkened and the wind increased. He wore a T-shirt and no jacket.

The second officer pours out the can as the man walks away and throws away the can. It's labeled 8 percent alcohol by volume.

The calls were stacked heavier during Draper's day shift Monday. He responded to six calls between 8 a.m. and noon, initiated contact with several residents and took his lunch break. He responded to several theft calls; a woman believed someone took some of the parts from the air conditioning unit in her R.V., another is a landlord-tenant dispute over the removal of the tenant's front door, and the third is the reported theft of lawn equipment from a shed.

“Every time I go out of town I get robbed,” the woman tells Draper. “It's more frustrating than anything.”

The officer provides backup to an officer making two warrant arrests in the DDACTS area, then assists another on a tip that a reported runaway was spotted at a downtown hotel.

In addition to the calls, Draper visits a spot that's become a popular “makeshift campsite” for a group of transient people. It's an unoccupied house with tall vegetation, a retaining wall and a porch with ample crawl space underneath.

That space was lined with cardboard. It is obvious people sleep there, but they've moved on. The lawn was littered with alcohol containers and food wrappers. The shed, door half ajar, looks like scene of a horror film with clothes lining the dirt floor.

Draper says he's focused on citing cellphone violations, too.

“It's dangerous when you're driving and not looking in front of you,” he said, and increased pedestrian traffic downtown makes distracted driving even more dangerous.

Draper has his own spot to park and watch for traffic violations — a parking lot at the intersection of 1st Avenue North and 9th Street North. He boils his reason for parking there to a simple equation: right turns on red + wide turns = crashes.

“There is a lot happening at this intersection,” he said.

But, like Moccasin, Draper has no tickets to write for the moment.

Instead, he finds the gentlemen sitting in the parking lot who ask if they're breaking the law.

"We're just sitting around," one of them says. "We move around."

A GFPD sergeant arrives as backup. One of the men says he went to jail over the weekend to take care of a warrant, as instructed by another officer the week prior. The other man says he might have an outstanding open container warrant. He does.

"I'm going to take him to City Court to see the judge," Draper calls in on the radio.

Draper handcuffs the man and helps him into the back of his patrol car.

"If you see me around, say 'hello!'" the other man says to the officers in a friendly tone before leaving the lot.

They probably will, sooner or later.

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