

# A police commander in West Philly wants to change how cops interact with residents. Can it work?

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Demonstrators gather last month in the council chamber to protest at Philadelphia City Hall after police confirmed more than 70 officers were placed on desk duty while authorities investigate alleged racist and violent social media posts that were unearthed by the Plain View Project. (Mark Makela/Getty)

Inspector Derrick Wood placed his police cap on the table in the church basement and took a seat. In rows facing him were about 50 people, residents interested in hearing from the cop who oversees most of West and Southwest Philadelphia.

Recent news about the police department was bad, with gun violence surging to begin the summer and dozens of officers benched over a scandal about racist or offensive Facebook posts. Wood called the town-hall meeting at First

Corinthian Baptist Church to reassure residents. “We’re not here to occupy,” he said of police in the neighborhood. “We’re here to be guardians.”

But it didn't take long for some attendees to pipe up. Guy Napper, a 59-year-old who lives in West Philadelphia, told Wood that officers sometimes ignored him when he tried to say hello.

“I'm afraid of the police,” said Napper. “They should be willing to speak with us.”

All things considered, it was a comparatively minor gripe. But it illuminated the currents against which Wood is swimming as he tries something new.

Over the last year or so, the 21-year veteran of the force has been working to turn the area he supervises — one of the city’s most violent — into an incubator for a host of initiatives: engaging with teens at school, connecting adults with a GED program, setting up SAT tutoring for high schoolers, hosting job fairs.

Police have long sought to use community-based programs to build trust. But Wood’s tactic — which Philadelphia police officials say is unique among commanders — has been to flood the area with as many initiatives as possible, taking suggestions from residents, and working with officers at the district level to quickly put the ideas into action.

Several attendees at the meeting, including West Philadelphia resident Flora Vann, said they supported the concept. “It's important that police know who we are,” Vann said.



Philadelphia Inspector Derrick said he believes social-service-style programming is a natural extension of the role of a police officer. “On our patch it says 'service.' ” (Matt Rourke/AP)

Wood said he believes such social-service-style programming is a natural extension of the role of a police officer. “On our patch it says ‘service,’ ” he said. “In the long run, that's a crime-fighting strategy.”

Still, it remains unclear how long it might take for a kinder, more service-oriented approach to make a difference in a city where distrust of police can run deep — and start young.

The students sitting around a classroom table in May at Sayre High School in West Philadelphia had been largely quiet until a teen near the wall mentioned Slim Jim.

It was his way of referring to a police officer who he said had mistreated him during run-ins in Southwest Philadelphia. And the boy's complaint about “Officer Slim Jim” opened the floodgates from other teens, several of whom wanted to share their own bothersome encounters with police.

“I got something, too,” a freshman said, raising his hand.

Wood sat near the back of the classroom as the discussion unfolded. Weeks earlier, back in February, he'd pushed district commanders to find better ways

to regularly interact with young people after several teenagers were fatally shot in Southwest Philadelphia.

This pseudoclass period was one result. Working with teachers and staffers at Sayre, several officers met regularly during the school year with students, some of whom were friends with the victims of the February killings, to “just talk” for about an hour, Wood said. Some students were skeptical at first, but Sayre staffers appreciated the approach and hope it continues next school year.

“I think them coming, over time, is chipping away at that barrier,” said Alia Dickerson, ninth grade assistant principal.

David J. Thomas, a researcher and criminal justice professor at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, said he believes this style of community programming works, having seen positive effects from similar endeavors during his time as a police officer in Gainesville, Florida.

But such programming is often the first thing to be marginalized or eliminated during times of crisis, Thomas said, adding that “policing is crisis-driven.” He also said many officers tend to view stopping violent crime and arresting criminals as the most important part of the job. The notion of community programs, he said, “actually scares that group of police, because they will equate that to being a social worker.”

Chris Burbank, a former Salt Lake City police chief and now a vice president at the Center for Policing Equity at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, said such initiatives must be coupled with other reforms.

In the 1990s, he said, community policing was in vogue, but law enforcement agencies also were arresting and imprisoning people, particularly people of

color, at higher rates due to the war on drugs. How effective could a barbecue be when residents knew the host agency was also locking up their neighbors?

“Don't be arresting communities of color at this outrageous higher rate even though you come in and are nicer on the weekends,” Burbank said.

Wood said his goal is to use new programming to supplement enforcement. The four police districts he oversees have long been among the city's most violent areas, and as of last week 44 people had been killed there this year and 153 people had been shot, according to police statistics.

Wood said those totals were lower than at the same point last year, even as homicides and shootings were up citywide. And he said year-to-date gun arrests in his territory were up 37% compared with the same point in 2018. “We're not going to stop doing our jobs,” Wood said.

State Rep. Movita Johnson-Harrell, a Democrat whose district covers part of West Philadelphia, said it was crucial for police to establish better community relationships.

Johnson-Harrell, formerly the head of victim services for District Attorney Larry Krasner, said she believed that there used to be a higher degree of mutual respect between residents and police and that issues in recent years — such as the Facebook scandal — had exacerbated the divide.

But community programs, Johnson-Harrell said, can be used “to push back against the racism and the discrimination, and against the distrust in the police — and I think that's important.” With more mutual trust, she said, “some of these problems we're experiencing, we can solve.”

Wood said that since April, when the police department began helping to connect residents with a GED program, 41 people received degrees. Since last year, he said, 61 people found jobs through various job fairs and other activities coordinated by the department.

One job fair took place May 30 at Sayre Morris Recreation Center. Jamaal Williams, 30, traveled from Northeast Philadelphia to attend and said he didn't mind that police were behind the event.

"It's good if they do more stuff like that," Williams said.

Wood stopped by the rec center in the afternoon, pleased with the turnout — but already on another mission. An unused pool was outside. He decided to ask the manager what it might take to reopen it for the kids.