Mayor Emanuel beefs up beat patrols
Emanuel announces the reassignment of more than 400 Chicago police officers to beat-cop positions
By Jeremy Gorner, John Byrne and Hal Dardick,
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Mayor Rahm Emanuel's decision to put hundreds more officers on the beat this summer represents a significant shift away from the Chicago Police Department's strategy of fighting crime with specialized units.

Under former Superintendent Jody Weis, units such as the Mobile Strike Force were beefed up. The idea was that pulling officers from the districts would allow more flexibility to move them to neighborhoods experiencing spikes in gang and gun violence.

The new mayor's strategy, first reported in the Tribune, puts an emphasis on the department's interaction with residents, officials said. The officers will stop parachuting into hot spots and focus on crime within their district boundaries.

"It's the beat officers and the district commanders who are going to be connected with the community, where if a task force is roaming around the city they really can't connect," said acting police Superintendent Garry McCarthy, the mayor's choice to run the department.

For Emanuel, it's a way to test McCarthy's theory without immediately getting into a debate about realigning the districts permanently. The mayor, in only his second week on the job, also gets to flood violence-prone neighborhoods with officers ahead of warm-weather months that typically lead to an uptick in shootings.

McCarthy also said the changes represent a "shift in managerial philosophy," holding district commanders accountable for reducing crimes with their newly-acquired resources. That management style resembles the CompStat system he oversaw during his time with the New York Police Department; it's a methodology that held supervisors there accountable for crime rates in the neighborhoods they were in charge of.

On Tuesday, Emanuel billed it as a "down payment" on his campaign pledge to add 1,000 police officers to the streets by shifting experienced personnel from desk jobs and hiring officers with money now earmarked for economic development in special taxing districts.

"I laid out specifically that we were going to redeploy officers to put 1,000 officers on the street," Emanuel said. "Now, I can wait to find the resources, or I can basically say, 'Are we most efficient in applying our officers to where a crime is?''"

But the bulk of the 500 officers--primarily from the Mobile Strike Force and Targeted Response Unit--Emanuel is shifting to high-risk neighborhoods are already on the street. That wasn't lost on Ald. Latasha Thomas, 17th, who said the Emanuel administration should add 1,000 officers to the increase announced Tuesday.
The police union said the additional district officers won't resolve the staffing problem within the department, which has more than 1,100 vacancies on a force of 13,500 officers because of a hiring slowdown and early retirements.

"They have hundreds of highly skilled street officers and overnight made them highly skilled patrol officers. What's the difference?" said Michael Shields, president of the Fraternal Order of Police, which represents rank-and-file cops. "It doesn't add to the staffing of the Police Department."

For at least a 90-day period beginning Sunday, 400 officers will be transferred to some of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods: the Grand Crossing, South Chicago, Calumet, Gresham, Englewood and Chicago Lawn districts on the South Side and the Harrison and Austin districts on the West Side.

MSF and TRU already had been working in some, if not all, of those districts with an emphasis on reducing violent criminal activity, like gang and gun violence. During the 90-day detail most officers from the two units will reappear in those same districts, working as beat cops.

The other 100 will be assigned to deputy chiefs in different parts of the city and respond to crime hot spots. They will fill the void for MSF and TRU, which both would be all but left empty as part of the plan, officials said.

Although specialized units like MSF and TRU are trained to respond immediately to escalating and impending crime, they move on from one hot spot to the next and don't get to know the neighborhoods like beat cops who patrol them every day, said Arthur Lurigio, professor of criminal justice and psychology at Loyola University Chicago.

Beat officers know their patrol areas better than other officers because they're working with area residents on a long-term basis to ensure safety, he said.

Chicago aldermen who are getting more police officers in their wards generally like Emanuel's plan, while those who aren't are less warm to it.

Ald. Howard Brookins Jr., 21st, who has long argued that police should be reassigned from low-crime districts to high-crime districts, said he's willing to give Emanuel's strategy a chance. Ald. Willie Cochran, 20th, a former Chicago police sergeant with 26 years of experience, praised the moves, which will put more cops consistently on the streets in his ward, including its high-crime areas.

Ald. Scott Waguespack, 32nd, pointed out that Emanuel's strategy gets more officers where they're needed without taking them away from areas such as his ward that have lower crime rates.

"If they had done that up here, the people up here would not appreciate it," he said.