Chicago police look to revamp CAPS

By Lolly Bowean
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It was the shootings, break-ins and wild behavior of squatters who occupied a vacant house on her block that drove Delores Stokes to start attending her district's Community Alternative Policing Strategy meetings.

But after sitting through an hour of talking, lecturing and complaining, the West Garfield Park woman left the gathering feeling frustrated, and decided not to attend again.

"Do you know what connects me to the police? The alarm system on my house," said Stokes, 55, adding that she doesn't know any of her local officers personally. "I don't know them. I don't know why crime isn't being addressed. I don't how crime is being addressed.

"Maybe it's that the community doesn't know what their plan is ... if they have a plan."

Shootings and slayings continue to plague Chicago, even after Mayor Rahm Emanuel and police Superintendent Garry McCarthy said they would restructure the city's long-standing CAPS program to better combat violence.

January started off violently, with 42 homicides -- the highest number for that month since 2002, police statistics show. But violence has waned some, with 54 homicides for 2013 as of Feb. 20, compared with 52 by that date last year.

The effort to remake CAPS may sound familiar to Chicagoans -- police and city officials have for years pushed and pulled back on the program, which some experts say has never proven to be effective at fighting crime.

When it was conceived, the CAPS program was to fight crime by partnering police officers with concerned residents. The idea was that residents would get to know their local beat facilitators and feel more comfortable reporting crime and working with police to secure vacant buildings, punish irresponsible landlords and push troublemakers off corners.

But in the nearly 20 years that it's been around, the project has proven a mixed bag, both praised and harshly criticized. Some have said CAPS helped bridge a gap between police officers and residents in some Chicago communities. Others say the program is ineffective and provides a forum for complaining, but little else.

"Nobody has been able to determine (CAPS') effectiveness," said Robert Lombardo, an associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Loyola University who studied the program. "The research has been sketchy."
"The broad question is ‘Can CAPS reduce crime?’ The school is still out on that," he said.

Throughout the tenure of CAPS, Chicago officials have touted it as a valuable part of crime-fighting strategy. But at times, while saying the program was of value, officials have shifted the focus away from the program and redirected funding.

In 2008, a time when homicides in Chicago were outpacing those in bigger cities like New York and Los Angeles, former Mayor Richard Daley slashed $1.5 million from the CAPS implementation office's $5 million budget. And in 2010, then police Superintendent Jody Weis took heat for reassigning some CAPS officers from administrative positions to street duty.

Most recently, McCarthy announced he is changing the way his office will run the program. Now police district commanders will be in charge of tailoring CAPS to fit their communities, McCarthy said. Until this year, the program was run from police headquarters.

"We realized over the years, the community engagement has waned," said police Chief of Patrol Joe Patterson, who helps oversee the program. "There has been a decrease in participation at beat meetings ... we're trying to reinvigorate CAPS and get more residents on board with us. With the community's help, we can reduce crime."

Along with allowing commanders to revamp the programs to their needs, authorities plan to change how they will evaluate whether the program is working. But just how those evaluations will work is still being developed, officials said.

"I wouldn't say accountability was lacking in the past," Patterson said. "It was managed in a different way."

Determining the program's effectiveness is "an interesting challenge," Patterson said. "There is no barometer to measure community engagement. We can't base it solely on an increase of beat meeting attendance. ... The independent stories from the citizens of the community being better ... that is our overall measure of success."

Although Emanuel has said the CAPS program was "bogged down by bureaucracy," there is reason to continue to use it, experts say. In some communities, the CAPS program has helped change how residents relate to police and resulted in good public relations.

"People felt they got access to the police," Lombardo said. "It also helped police by reminding them that they need to be integrated with the community. Community policing raised the idea that not only are you crime fighters, but you are a part of the community and you need to communicate with them."

One major problem with CAPS was that it was administered differently in various neighborhoods, studies of the program show. In some communities, there were meetings where police would primarily make announcements, a report by the Chicago Community Policing
Evaluation Consortium showed. In other meetings, however, the officers were able to bond with residents and develop strategies to stamp out crime.

In Ukrainian Village, for example, residents banded together with their CAPS facilitator after a spate of attempted break-ins and robberies last year.

Steve Niketopoulos, 35, used social media to build a network of neighbors who watch each other's houses, call the police when they see something suspicious and gather for meetings where they learn what to do when they see something wrong in their community. Not all of the residents can make the monthly beat meetings, but about 1,250 of them stay in touch using a private Facebook page.

"There still is a lot of crime, but we all know what's going on," Niketopoulos said. "People have been learning ... how to barricade their door, burglar-proof their windows. When people talk about, 'The back of my building was broken into,' it will go into a discussion about lighting in the back."

But in Steve Casey's Englewood community, the CAPS officers were not as engaged, he said, even when residents wanted to be a part of the solution.

"I know what CAPS is supposed to do, and I know places where the system has worked," said Casey, 46. "But in Englewood, something just went awry. We never could turn the corner."

Casey, who has lived in Englewood for 12 years, said he went to CAPS meetings for at least six or seven years. There were times at the public meeting where residents stood and told officers specifically where they saw gang activity and open-air drug markets, Casey said. When he noticed the officers weren't taking notes or recording the information, he felt the issues weren't being taken seriously. And like many others, he stopped going to the monthly gatherings.

"It seemed like a dog and pony show," he said. "I go to a meeting. I'm giving you data. When they don't take notes, don't ask questions, it gives me less and less confidence that (police) are going to address the problem."

In Corey Howard's Woodlawn neighborhood, residents pack the monthly CAPS meeting. But even in the safety of the police precinct, there is fear, Howard said.

"I can't speak about the whole city," Howard said. "But in our district, people in the community don't get to talk. We sit and (an officer) tells us the numbers of arrests and adjourns the meeting."

Last summer, dozens of Howard's neighbors attended the monthly meeting and interrupted the agenda to beg police officials to help put an end to neighborhood shooting. Even as they spoke out, however, many said they were afraid to return home because of possible retaliation.

"We're constantly complaining about the same addresses," said Howard, 39. "I've been going for five years, and we say the same thing over and over."
Valerie Leonard, 49, went to a few CAPS meetings in her North Lawndale neighborhood but complains they are more like venting sessions.

"I've been disappointed with the program, although I think it's well-intentioned," she said.

She applauded announced changes to reinvigorate CAPS.

"There needs to be a real focus in CAPS," she said. "I envision them setting goals and strategies and checking in with the neighborhood to tell us how they're progressing. The younger people, many of them feel it's older people and the police against us. We have to bridge that gap."

But more than anything, Leonard said, residents need to see how CAPS can reduce the number of crimes in their neighborhoods before they'll respect the program.

"It's easy for me to say, I admit, because I'm not in the trenches" like police are, she said. But "I know what it's like to live in a high-crime area and have your house broken into."