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Probation goes on patrol

Neighborhood stations allow more monitoring

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OVER-THE-RHINE - Brian Urban, clad in a T-shirt, shorts and bullet-resistant vest, stomped on his brakes and backed up, motioning a young man in a T-shirt and cornrows to his unmarked county car.

"What's up Ronnie?," asked Urban, associate chief probation officer for Hamilton County. "What are you doing over here?"

"Here" was on Back Street in Over-the-Rhine. Ronnie Dodds had been walking through a known drug area. For Dodds, who is on probation for a drug conviction, this was someplace he did not want to be spotted by his probation officer.

Urban patted down Dodds, searching his pockets for money, drugs or weapons. He found nothing and after talking to him for a couple minutes, sent him on his way.

"Stay out of hot areas, man," Urban reminded. "See ya Ronnie."

It was one of several stops Urban would make that day during his shift at the Over-the-Rhine Probation Substation. He's one of four Hamilton County probation officers who work at the substation, overseeing more than 100 probationers.

Four such substations have opened in Cincinnati neighborhoods since 1999. Soon, the city will get two more.

There are plans to open a substation that will serve Avondale and North Avondale, where two weeks ago a man was shot to death at a youth football game meant to promote peace. The other substation will be in College Hill and will also serve North College Hill and Northside.

Opening substations in neighborhoods puts probation officers closer to the people they're supposed to be keeping an eye on. Like having a teacher in a grade-school classroom, the constant presence of the officers is incentive for most probationers to behave, Urban said.

The impact of the county's first probation substation in East Walnut Hills is evident, said Joe Balbo, a longtime resident and president of its community council, the East Walnut Hills Assembly. That office opened as a police substation. Then probation officers were added in 1999, creating the "magic" that cleaned up the streets, said Balbo.

"Eight or nine years ago we had a bunch of people hanging out on Woodburn (Avenue), doing (drug) transactions on the street. That (substation) has been the turning point for the whole neighborhood," he said. "Once probation started sharing the substation, we found the people doing bad behavior really did disappear to the point that you can just walk up and down the street now with no problems."

The key is that the probation officers can question and search a probationer at will, whereas police officers can't.

"Unfortunately when people get out of jail, most of them go back to bad behavior," Balbo said. "If they know the probation officer can stop them just to see what they're up to, I think it's incentive for them to live a little cleaner. I'd argue if we added 20 more probation officers in neighborhoods, it would do more to fight crime than 100 police officers would."

The success of the offices for Over-the-Rhine, Madisonville and Walnut Hills/Evanston prompted the opening of a new one in Price Hill this month.

Exact locations for the two newest ones will be solidified in the next few months.

"We just know they work," said County Commissioner David Pepper, who fought for the substations while on City Council. He is meeting Sept. 17 with several court officials and judges to discuss details of the new locations.

"I've been very eager for a long time to get (substations) out to more communities than they're in so far," Pepper said. "We know it helps clear the streets of negative activity and gives a whole lot of incentive for people to be on their best behavior."

Community groups have been clamoring for the new substations for years.

Back in April 2006 Avondale community council member Ozie Davis said the council was "pretty devastated" at hearing Over-the-Rhine would get a substation before his community, which had been seeking one for years.

A company called Model Management, which owns several properties in Over-the-Rhine, donated the office space, catapulting plans for that substation. Typically the communities provide the office space and the probation department provides the equipment and officers.

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