

# STEERING TOGETHER: HOW COLLABORATIVE POLICING AMPLIFIES THE BENEFITS OF TRAFFIC SAFETY

Roads do not stop at city limits. Traffic problems flow in and out of communities as easily as people and commerce. That creates a challenge for law enforcement, but also an opportunity. When law enforcement agencies reach across borders in the same way that roads do, they can scale both their efforts and their impact in ways that benefit not just individual communities, but entire regions.

To make collaborative policing happen state and local law enforcement agencies should work together to seek and leverage opportunities for joint traffic safety programming and initiatives, and to identify and overcome barriers that prevent them from doing so.

## Collaborative Policing Barriers

There are myriad challenges that stand in the way of working collaboratively on traffic safety. A few of the most common are:

- **Funding:** Collaborative policing efforts often are funded by state and federal grants. Such grants are an unstable funding source and often come with built-in restrictions that limit recipients' ability to work in high-priority zones or jurisdictions. For those and other fiscal reasons, law enforcement agencies may decline to participate in otherwise valuable joint policing activities.
- **Politics:** Politics may deter law enforcement agencies from prioritizing traffic safety, which, in some communities, might put officers in the uncomfortable position.
- **Staffing:** Small agencies may lack sufficient personnel to contribute to collaborative policing efforts. Additionally, some agencies may not have a dedicated traffic unit from which to draw resources.
- **Generational buy-in:** Because traffic enforcement in some jurisdictions may be perceived as a low priority; generational differences and recruitment for patrol officers to participate in traffic safety initiatives can be difficult.
- **Leadership:** Traffic enforcement is a mentality that must spread through an agency's culture to be successful. That begins at the top. Without leaders who value traffic safety and establish it as a strategic priority, getting agencies to endorse and participate in collaborative traffic safety initiatives is an uphill battle.

## Collaborative Policing Success Stories

Despite the challenges, many law enforcement agencies have established successful interagency partnerships to move the needle on traffic safety in their local and regional communities.



**Washington State Patrol:** The Washington State Patrol (WSP) has a close working relationship with local police departments across the state of Washington, with whom it regularly collaborates on traffic safety education and enforcement. A particularly effective campaign was the Night of a Thousand Stars, wherein the agency partnered with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to coordinate a statewide DUI enforcement effort, the goal of which was having 1,000 officers patrolling Washington roads on a single evening. WSP also conducts miscellaneous joint patrols with local agencies to focus on issues such as seatbelt enforcement and electronic device laws. Although law enforcement agencies may be reluctant to share authority, WSP often eases



tensions by establishing written agreements ahead of time regarding jurisdictional issues like civil unrest and traffic.



**Tennessee Highway Patrol:** The Tennessee Highway Patrol (THP) has found success in collaborative efforts by focusing on issues of import to the public, such as distracted driving and speeding. For example, in support of *Drive to Zero*, a multi-agency collaboration to decrease traffic fatalities across

Tennessee, THP has conducted several cross-state distracted-driving-enforcement “bus tours.” During the tours, THP provided large, painted buses and/or unmarked passenger vehicles to transport local law enforcement partners as they observed motorists on the road. When they observed traffic violations, officers communicated to patrol vehicles that could then execute enforcement actions. THP also has had success cooperating with local police departments to enforce unrestrained drivers.



**Houston, TX, Police Department:** The Houston Police Department (HPD) takes a top-down approach to collaborative policing within and around the city of Houston, which leads the nation in fatal crashes due to impaired driving. For example, when HPD organizes monthly joint enforcement efforts

with other agencies—Houston’s chief of police works directly with other chiefs to do planning and outreach. Lieutenants and captains also play significant roles, which helps create buy-in at the line level. Two traffic safety issues that HPD has been successful at organizing are aggressive driving and street racing. To address them, HPD has formed a task force comprising of numerous state and local partners, encompassing approximately 50 officers from HPD and 50 officers from other law enforcement agencies, all of whom team up to plan and execute targeted enforcement efforts in and around Houston. Having staffing from other agencies—such as sheriffs’ offices and highway patrol—helps HPD tackle an important problem without having to rely on overtime or removal of officers from other assignments.



**Old Dominion University Police Department:** The Old Dominion University Police Department in Norfolk, Virginia, collaborates several times per year with the Norfolk, VA, Police Department, with whom it conducts various trainings in radar and lidar speed

measurement devices, motorcycle training to new motor officers, traffic safety checkpoints, and various other traffic initiatives.

### Collaborating with Communities

When law enforcement agencies collaborate with each other, they sow the benefits of traffic safety farther and wider than they otherwise could by themselves. They can enhance their impact even further, however, by adding a third partner to their collaborative ecosystem: community members.

Even the largest police forces have only so many resources and only so much reach. By treating community members as if they are not only beneficiaries of traffic safety initiatives, but also instruments of them, law enforcement agencies can optimize their efforts and maximize their positive outcomes.

While there are numerous ways to recruit and engage community members in traffic safety initiatives, a few of the most effective are:

- **Traffic tip lines:** Having a dedicated web page or hotline where community members can submit traffic-related complaints and concerns is a good first step toward community engagement.
- **Mascots:** In Tennessee, mascot Ollie the Otter promotes traffic safety by providing education and awareness around the use of seat belts and booster seats. Sponsored by the Tennessee Highway Safety Office, he helps children and parents develop a positive opinion about occupant safety through interactive programs at elementary schools.
- **Social media:** Because it is designed for information and community building, social media can be an effective means through which to share news, distribute education, and organize people.

## Learn More ...

For more ideas and inspiration around collaborative policing and community engagement, explore the following programs from the Washington State Patrol and the Houston Police Department:

### ■ **EI Protector**

WSP's EI Protector program provides traffic safety education through bilingual and bicultural dialogue with the Hispanic/Latino community, rather than focusing on specific enforcement measures.

<https://www.wsp.wa.gov/el-protector>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdGOOaPPNss>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHorMpCBuA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67glUCEmRJY>

### ■ **Night of a Thousand Stars**

WSP's Night of a Thousand Stars is a partnership with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) wherein it coordinates a statewide DUI enforcement effort, the goal of which is having 1,000 officers patrolling Washington roads on a single evening.

<https://wspinsideout.wordpress.com/2016/12/01/preparing-for-night-of-1000-stars>

### ■ **TX2K**

TX2K is an annual event at Houston Raceway Park where streetcar owners and enthusiasts can engage in legal, sanctioned street racing. In conjunction with it, HPD and a coalition of state and local law enforcement partners perform a joint enforcement effort in and around Houston. In 2020, the four-day enforcement effort led to 23 street racing arrests and 287 DWI arrests.

<https://youtu.be/n-rymRPzb6s>

<https://youtu.be/CViBDmjeQOI>

<https://youtu.be/gPEGfCfsyJE>

<https://youtu.be/Fbn7Rqw81BQ>

<https://youtu.be/-Y7iApUMBJ4>

<https://youtu.be/CJ9NrkgmzoO>

<https://youtu.be/AvGtWat0SZQ>

<https://youtu.be/t0CP6a9UvZO>

<https://youtu.be/7tjX7JE1p-g>