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After the first 20 minutes, the officers staffing the “pop-up” Badges for Basics table might have begun to wonder if the whole thing was a mistake. Although the event gave community members a chance to obtain much-needed toiletries for free, it appeared that the officers couldn’t give the products away.

Finally, a few skeptical people stopped to find out what the event was all about. They took the products, passed the time of day, and went home and called their friends. In a few minutes, the rush was on.

Badges for Basics, a program of the Kansas City (Mo.) Police Department, stems from a partnership developed with Giving the Basics, a nonprofit organization based in Kansas City with a nationwide outreach. Giving the Basics has 511 distribution sites in the greater Kansas City area, working with schools, food pantries, other charitable organizations and now several police departments, including KCPD, in an effort to provide much-needed and hard-to-afford hygiene items to those in need.



“It’s a grassroots effort to help the police departments make a direct community relations impact,” says Giving the Basics Executive Director Teresa Hamilton. “Interested departments need to register with us, and Kansas City has offered to mentor other departments that want to join the effort.” To that end, the

two organizations have teamed up on a videoconference to explain the project.

Officer Vito Mazzara, who leads the Badges for Basics effort, says the partnership started when Hamilton cold-called the agency, and because of his work in community policing, he was soon drawn into the effort.

“A lot of people living in apartment complexes are on state-provided income and also get food stamps. Those programs do not cover the purchase of hygiene products. I realized it would be an amazing thing to provide people with products they normally don’t have because they have no money to buy them,” Mazzara says.

One of the apartment complexes in his area offered to host a chili cook-off to coincide with Badges for Basics first “pop-up” giveaway event, and within 45 minutes, all the items were gone. But rather than become angry that the giveaway had run out, residents still lingered, talking with the officers and building up a rapport. Officers asked them which products they liked, which ones they did not need, and used that information to develop a baseline of what items were needed.

“We found out that the two most demanded products were, and still remain, deodorant and paper towels,” Mazzara says. “I didn’t realize it, but deodorant is a luxury item for many people, and many people go without it.”

Obtaining that baseline helped KCPD create an inventory of items that people both want and use. Giving the Basics provides individual items to KCPD and other partners, not prepackaged hygiene kits that may contain useless items. “People don’t need a new toothbrush every month, but they do need shampoo,” Hamilton says.

All items come directly from manufacturers to maintain consistency of product, and are funded either by donations from the companies themselves or by monetary donations. Giving the Basics uses this approach rather than holding drives to collect toiletries, which again, often result in items that do not meet community needs, Hamilton says.

“We hold these pop-up events where we just appear at an intersection and set up tables with the products. This gives officers a chance to explain what we have, give them what they need and start building a rapport,” Mazzara says. “We’ve had people who were skeptical at first, and a week later they walk into a station and ask if they can have more. At some point in the future, building that rapport might help de-escalate a situation.”

KCPD doesn’t use Badges for Basics as an end to collecting tips, Mazzara says, although they have received some unsolicited information. Rather, the project’s goal is to promote and encourage community safety and help improve the general well-being of an area. He says he uses the time to talk to them and find out about their families, making sure every family member

has his or her own toothbrush, that mothers with large families get plenty of soap and so on.

“We used our heat maps to identify the areas with the highest incidence of violent crime and used that to select the intersections for our pop-up events. We don’t advertise ahead of time, we just show up,” he says. “I also carry a case of water in my car and just hand it out to people on the street. They will start talking to me while they drink it, and as we talk, they come to realize that I’m just there to speak with them, nothing more. It’s a new approach and sometimes the community residents don’t know what to expect either.”

Mazzara also was not sure what to expect from within his own agency either, but when his superiors realized he was using his own personal time to organize and administer the program, they made sure he had plenty of work hours allocated for the tracking tasks. He gets additional support in the form of captains and commanders showing up to do their turn at the pop-up events, which somewhat startles residents and also indicates the agency’s commitment to the effort. It’s just one way that the agency presents itself as caring about the community — by caring about how the community is able to present itself.

“It’s all about how you present yourself. Being clean gives your confidence when you’re trying to get a job or volunteering to answer questions in school. We’re here to help people get stronger and cleaner so they can really soar,” says Hamilton. ‘It

creates an amazing change and we're hoping we'll also be watching crime go down in these areas.”

For more information on how an agency can start its own project, contact Giving the Basics at www.givingthebasics.org.

Article photo: Kansas City (Mo.) Police Department

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