Fact Sheet

No. 3 December, 2000

A series of guides for neighborhood leaders working to improve the quality of life in Michigan

Neighborhood Associations of Michigan

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This project was supported by cooperative agreement 99-CK-WX-0087 awarded by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of theU.S. Department of Justice.

What Is S.A.R.A. Problem Solving?

People who are experienced at addressing neighborhood or community-based problems know that such issues often require more than a "quick fix" or rudimentary solution. In order to establish an effective long-term solution, the cause(s) of a problem and the underlying factor(s) must be accurately identified. This is the basis of a problem solving framework known as the S.A.R.A. Problem Solving Model.

Although several problem solving models exist, S.A.R.A. is one of the most popular in the field of community policing. In using this approach, a problem is defined as: ***A group of incidents occurring in a community that are similar in one or more ways, and are of concern to the police and the public***.

By systematically applying the steps of S.A.R.A., communities and police can combine resources to effectively reduce or eliminate problems. The four critical components that make up the acronym of S.A.R.A. are:

- **Scanning** – Identifying the problem.
- **Analysis** – Learning the problem's causes, scope, and effects.
- **Response** – Acting to alleviate the problem.
- **Assessment** – Determining whether the response worked.

Once the decision to implement the S.A.R.A. process has been made, the first step is to form a task force or work group of key stakeholders. This group will be responsible for implementing the S.A.R.A. model. The group should be representative of all parties with a vested interest in the problem. Identifying key stakeholders and involving them in the process sends a strong message that in community policing, anyone can be a problem solver, not just the police. Such involvement also minimizes traditional bias and overly narrow assessment, so group members are free to develop original and innovative responses.

In the **Scanning** phase work group members describe the symptoms of the problem and review pertinent information. The group works through these steps and questions:

- Describe the problem, with specifics.
- How did the problem come to attention?
- Who is affected by this problem? (Include victims, suspects, and locations)
- How do you know there is a problem?
- Based on what is known, create a hypothesis. What do you think is causing the problem?
- Which setting is causing the most difficulty?

In the **Analysis** phase work group members collect data and information to understand the factors that contribute to the problem. This information is reviewed to identify trends or patterns involving incidents, locations, and persons. S.A.R.A. Problem Solvers typically direct the process of data collection and analyses with questions outlined in "A Guide for the Analysis of Problem Information". The following questions are applied to the problem:

- Who is involved?
- What happens before the problem occurs?
- Where is the problem occurring?
- What else is happening or not happening while the problem occurs?
- What are the consequences after the problem has occurred?
- How often does the problem occur?
- Who is harmed and to what extent by the problem?
- Who should be at the table (stakeholders)? Have they been involved in the past? Why or Why not?
- Is the problem clearly stated and do all stakeholders/partners understand the problem, or does the problem need to be further clarified?
- How will you gather and report data (information) concerning the problem?
- Based on what is known, accurately define the problem.
- What resources are available to help solve the problem?

In the **Response** phase work group members have two basic objectives: to select a response and to implement a response. The key to Response stage is to promote a creative and spontaneous free flow of ideas. Developing a response begins with brainstorming, and quantity of ideas is initially stressed over quality. Since innovative ideas may surface through unique viewpoints, it is at this point that having a broad spectrum of personalities in the work group is an asset. Focusing on the underlying causes of the problem may also lead to innovative responses.

Subsequently the group will evaluate these ideas, and those that are unreasonable or unfitting to the situation can be eliminated. Some guidelines to consider while evaluating different response plans are as follows:

- Response should center on attacking the problem at its most vulnerable point.
- What strategies apply to solving the problem?
- What resources are needed for each alternative?
- What obstacles are in the way?
- Who will be responsible for each step, and in what time frame?

The group must then determine the best plan of action for the problem. In developing an implementation plan, it is important to make it simple and straightforward, to implement using the identified resources, and to assign responsibility and timelines.

In the **Assessment** phase work group members evaluate the effectiveness of the response that was implemented. Time and patience are required for this; just as problems do not develop overnight, they take time to reduce or eliminate. In making the assessment, current results are compared to the former problem. The importance of a meticulous scanning stage comes into play here. Data identified during scanning, including frequency, duration, or magnitude of the problem provides an excellent baseline to compare against present outcomes. There are several important questions to review:

- Did it go as planned in response? What was different than planned?
- Was the response effective? How?
- What would you change the next time?
- What worked the most successfully?
- How could it be improved?

The S.A.R.A. model is widely applicable to problems faced by many neighborhoods and has produced excellent results for hundreds of communities across the United States. It establishes a collaborative, systematic process to address issues of community, safety, and quality of life. Because S.A.R.A. includes a broad representation of people in the problem solving process, the problem is viewed as *everyone's* problem and the cooperative effort to solve it is more powerful. It helps to eliminate traditional biases and open communication lines, thereby introducing innovative and long-term solutions.

The S.A.R.A. model is taught to teams of community representatives through the Michigan (RCPI) Regional Community Policing Institute. For more information regarding Problem Solving training opportunities call
1-800-892-9051, visit the RCPI website at,
http://www.cj.msu.edu/~outreach/rcpi/index.html, or
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