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9-1-1 FARES BEST IN POLL

ALLEN JOHNSON, JR.



Retired New Orleans Police Capt. Stephen J. Gordon frowns suspiciously at the favorable results of a recently released poll on his old unit at the much-maligned New Orleans Police Department.

It is Christmas Eve 2009. In an office window behind him, the parking lot of the Orleans Parish 9-1-1 Communication District empties government workers happily into the

gray holiday chill over the historic cemeteries lining the nearby intersection of City Park Avenue and Canal Street. Gordon remains at his desk. He is the director now of the 9-1-1 District, a state-created administrative agency tasked with assisting city police, firefighters and medics who respond to emergency calls for help. After 33 years as a cop, Gordon retired from the NOPD in February 2008, as the low-key, highly respected commander of the 9-1-1 Emergency Communications Division.

This night, however, he peruses a pro-police group's "Citizen Satisfaction Survey" of the NOPD at the request of a reporter seeking encouraging evidence of progress that a violence-prone city can build on in 2010.

Neither search is as easy at it sounds.

Overall, the results were pretty grim, but hardly alarming. There were even a few bright spots; for example, 68 percent of residents surveyed said they felt safe in their own neighborhoods. Obviously frustrated, no one from City Hall, the NOPD brass or the Crime Coalition emphasized the encouraging signs in the survey that might offer hope to residents who want to continue fighting for the city – as well as the tens of thousands of relocated New Orleanians who are yet to return.

Funded by the New Orleans Crime Coalition, a consortium of 24 business and civic groups formed after Hurricane Katrina, the poll was released at NOPD headquarters on Dec. 7. Despite tens of millions of dollars in new government funding to help rebuild the NOPD post-Katrina – including record-high police salaries and bonuses for education and training championed by Mayor Ray Nagin and Police Chief Warren Riley, the poll

showed that residents expressed deep discontent with the department. The findings were also a blow to NOPD's \$265,000 community policing strategy first unveiled by Chief Riley on Jan. 11, 2007 – the same day thousands of crime-weary citizens marched on City Hall.

The telephone survey of 600 Orleans Parish residents (Aug. 23-24) by the Oklahoma-based research firm Wilson Research Strategies Inc. excluded admitted felons – a protocol for police satisfaction polls in other cities.

Unlike recent surveys of Nashville and St. Louis, however, the poll's survey of New Orleans went further, excluding members of the news media, police officers, employees of public relations companies – and members of their respective immediate families.

The unique survey found public satisfaction ratings of only 33 percent each for the NOPD "overall" and for the department's efforts to stop violent crime. Moreover, only 19 percent of locals polled had confidence in NOPD efforts to get drugs off the street – a dubious benchmark for a July 2008 initiative that re-assigned narcotics detectives to five of the city's eight police districts.

Some individual police districts fared better than others, but overall the NOPD also received low citizen satisfaction rates for: "the general attitude and behavior of officers toward citizens" (50 percent); competence (43 percent); "cooperating with the public" (41 percent); "honesty and integrity" (40 percent); and professionalism (49 percent). The NOPD's highest grade was for traffic enforcement (55 percent), a duty whose dangers can include high-risk drug stops.

Bob Young, commander of NOPD's public affairs division, said a separate survey for the department found similar inauspicious results. Riley blamed NOPD's poor image on "negative publicity." "He realized we are not where we should be, but all the good stuff has not been reported," NOPD spokesman Young says. Riley later attacked the poll itself, arguing, among other things, that the survey didn't reflect violent crime declines from August through December 2009. However, by year's end, the coroner's office reported 190 homicides in 2009; an increase from 187 the previous year.

Meanwhile, the Crime Coalition issued a rare statement of impatience with NOPD. The department's community policing strategy – successfully implemented in other cities – "has only been sporadically and unevenly" introduced in New Orleans, according to the Coalition statement.

Jay Lapeyre Jr., president of the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region, says the next satisfaction poll will be conducted later this year, during the new city administration.

But what about the few encouraging signs of citizen satisfaction with NOPD overlooked in the Coalition poll?

Lapeyre says neighborhood groups can use any auspicious examples to work with cops in the eight police districts.

Frankly, it's hard to imagine police commanders enthusiastically working with neighborhood groups to improve their "grades," after their police chief panned the poll. Moreover, the community policing strategy plan Houston expert Lee Brown crafted for the NOPD says feedback on police performance should be provided "regularly

and effectively.”

And with persistence.

Back to Christmas Eve and Stephen Gordon’s examination of two high citizen ratings in the Coalition poll for the all-civilian staff of 9-1-1 operators he once supervised. Gordon candidly dismissed the higher poll ranking concerning the speed at which 9-1-1 emergency operators answered calls for help. “The public doesn’t make a distinction between the 9-1-1 call and the police response [time] – but it’s separate,” Gordon said, after a detailed description of the emergency system.

He turned to the surviving citizen grade for the 9-1-1 operators – with marvel. Sixty-eight percent described the NOPD operators as “pleasant.” Only 9 percent replied “unpleasant;” 16 percent said “neither” and the rest gave no opinion.

Operators can receive 50 to 70 calls for help during a single shift. “Pretty good,” Gordon said, quietly. “It’s hard to ask operators to be sympathetic when [they] may get so many calls a shift. The Police Department asks them to be professional. ‘Pleasant’ is almost a higher standard.”

Nationally certified by the American Public Safety Communication Officers after one week of training, the mostly female staff of 9-1-1 operators is also called “call-takers.” “I still call them ‘my ladies’,” Gordon said with polite respect, obviated by recollections of Katrina.

As the storm roared through the city, he confirmed, many of the 9-1-1 operators wept, powerless to send rescuers to hundreds of callers – men, women and children – trapped by rising floodwaters. “Of the 1,900 people who died, some of those people were talking to my ladies,” Gordon said, of the storm’s Gulf Coast death toll.

Gordon looked at the citizen approval rating for the 9-1-1 operator, who he called NOPD’s – “true first-responders.” “You don’t get a second chance to make a first impression,” he smiled, beaming with a supervisor’s obvious pride.

To see the survey’s results for yourself, visit: www.crimecoalitionnola.org/images/Survey11pg.pdf .