

“Operation StopWatch” Strategic Plan 2008-2009 School Year

StopWatch is a collaborative program under the leadership of MBTA Transit Police Chief Paul S. MacMillan, who supports the Department’s commitment to working with youth. This is accomplished by using “skillful, respectful interventions into situations of potential disorder, by officers in a manner that will maintain the confidence of the community and the respect of youth.” The program is designed to “Stop” and “Watch” the behavior of students on their way to and from school or to school-related functions while they wait for trains and buses. The mission of *StopWatch* is to build a collaborative of caring adults in the law enforcement and youth worker communities. This is done by positively interacting with the 40,000+ students who use public transportation daily to attend school.

Partners of the *StopWatch* collaborative consist of, but are not limited to, youth advocates from several different agencies and organizations. The program is most effective at promoting respect, reducing peer-on-peer confrontations, preventing harassment of other T-riders, and perceived disruptive behavior while students await transportation. There is a carry-over effect of *StopWatch* due to the consistency of the program; even when partners are not present, their effects are felt.

StopWatch depends on several premises, which support the philosophy of its mission. The arrest of an adolescent should be the last resort in resolving youth disorder and other status offenses. The efforts and talent of local youth workers as well as advocates gathering at a specified time and location to “Stop” and “Watch” youth behavior both before and after school has proven to reduce the anonymous offender.

The presence of youth advocates has a direct effect but more importantly a residual impact in preventing disruptive, intimidating and rowdy youthful behavior. An area that is monitored and regularly patrolled or used as a scheduled *StopWatch* location, in police terms, has been “target hardened.” We have found through experience an adolescent is more inclined to “act out” in an intimidating manner if he or she remains anonymous rather than if he or she is known or at a minimum recognized in the environment of opportunity.

The dynamics of the program are designed to gather several adolescent advocates including police officers, probation officers, DYS agents, DSS agents, clergy, street workers, and school administrators in a non-traditional locale. The task is to assess what is being observed and to determine acceptable levels of adolescent behavior in public places and if necessary skillfully perform an intervention to achieve acceptable levels of public

order and reduce anonymity. The objective is to informally identify students whose behavior could potentially be intimidating or harmful if left unnoticed.

- Teenagers are in a dynamic process of change and are always testing limits and boundaries, especially with figures of authority such as the police: they live in transition between being adults and children;
- Youth unknown to the adults in their community are more likely to act disruptively and in an intimidating fashion;
- The arrest of a teen should be an action of last resort for resolving youth disorder and other youth status offenses: educate when possible, enforce when necessary;
- Positive interaction through skillful interventions based on understanding adolescent behavior and the context of their environment, reduces conflict, increases opportunities for respectful relationships between youth and police, and supports the public's confidence in the police;
- Police with advocates communicating in a meaningful way with youth reduce disorder and rowdiness with positive residual effects.

StopWatch is most effective when students are going from a structured school environment to unstructured public spaces. *StopWatch* evolved over the years as an informal, but highly effective series of casual contacts and problem solving techniques between disconnected agencies. These independent agencies were looking for identification or information on students who were suspected of committing various offenses. Without looking at the root causes for youth disorder, all involved agreed the treadmill effect would continue and worsen.

The Plan

On September 20, 2007, former Deputy Chief of the Investigative Services Division, Paul S. MacMillan became the Acting MBTA Transit Police Chief. Chief MacMillan has been a consistent supporter and advocate of the *StopWatch* program. He has made *StopWatch* a priority and has expanded the program to ensure the long-term viability of this successful initiative.

A full-time police supervisor has been added to the *StopWatch* program in an effort to work consistently with youth and advocates on the transit system. This enabled an ongoing effort focused on capturing information to provide an appropriate response to youth occurrences. An accurate analysis of behavioral trends was facilitated with the addition of newly devoted staff. This year, Chief MacMillan will assign two full-time juvenile officers to the Investigative Services Division. These officers will be dedicated to the reduction of juvenile crime and disorder, and will assist in coordinating responses and referrals between Boston School Police and the Boston Police Department.

Goals

The First Goal: The reduction of the anonymous offender by convening local law enforcement, youth service providers and advocates, and school administrators.

The Second Goal: To develop a team approach with through networking. *When any StopWatch partner becomes alerted to a school-related conflict, that partner should contact the StopWatch team through Chief MacMillan's newly established **StopWatch Hotline** at 617-222-1060 and ask for assistance.*

The Third Goal: Relentless referrals and follow-ups. Any StopWatch partner, whether it is during a StopWatch meeting or a Truancy Watch, when a problem is discovered with a student it will be followed up. The StopWatch team will be looking for bullying, domestic issues and physical or mental health issues that may be the root cause of a student acting in a disruptive manner. The members will refer the problem to the appropriate school department and then follow-up even if independent from the local school administration. Thus, other state agencies will be utilized for proper referrals.

The Fourth Goal: To continue the feasibility study of combining the MBTA Student T Pass with the Boston Public School student identification card. *As the number of students using the MBTA to get to and from school each day increased¹, so did the problems and issues related to normal adolescent activity. Adolescents are being privately transported to and from school less now than ever before due to cut backs from school budgets. More adolescents are using public transportation as a primary means of transportation to and from school.*

The Fifth Goal: To expand the law enforcement role to include a new responsibility under the Boston Public School attendance office.

Since its inception, officers from the MBTA Transit Police and the Boston Public School Police have developed a relationship that has proven effective. The Boston Police created a school police unit with specialized officers devoted entirely to youth problems within the Boston Public School System, now a well-integrated and effective part of the team. Subsequently, the contact between the MBTA Transit Police and the Boston School Police Department has grown. These efforts define the commitment of the MBTA Transit Police to youth.

¹ Between 1990 and 2005, the youth population of Boston, aged 10 to 17, increased 15%. Of these youth, an increasing number are recently arrived immigrant youth with significant language and cultural differences.

The directors of the program continually look for new avenues of human resource. Local clergy are regularly present at the designated *StopWatch* meetings. Both juvenile and adult probation officers from the Greater Boston area attend the meetings and provide support for the program. The Boston Center for Youth and Families (BCYF) provide a contingent of street workers who positively interact with youth during the crucial school break times.

School administrators and teachers have been found to be the most effective “tool in the bag.” Students tend to have the greatest respect for school personnel due to their personal knowledge of the students and familiarity with their families.

In the 2005/2006 school year Boston Public School Superintendent Michael Contompasis changed the Boston Public School Code of Discipline to include the Code of Conduct on all MBTA property and vehicles.

Truancy Watch

Truancy has been recognized and is now being targeted as a major factor in students ultimately dropping out from school and becoming a burden on both the community and the local economies. This is exemplified by the recent passage of legislation signed by Governor Deval Patrick on August 14, 2008, which establishes a committee to improve dropout prevention and reporting of graduation rates.

The *StopWatch* partners now converge on a scheduled meeting place where truants are known to frequent. Attendance officers as well as police and other advocates both public and private become scouts looking for students in an area they should not be during regular school hours. When students are spotted they are approached and questioned about their truancy. An intake report is complete for analysis and the truant's name is referred to the school department as a referral for an in depth evaluation. These meetings are referred to as Truancy Watch.

The objective for the Truancy Watches is to gain knowledge as to why students have begun the potential path to becoming a dropout. There are many reasons for truancy, tardiness and dropping out by the students that have been questioned. Some attribute fear or the perception of gang violence, peer pressure, and a failure to catch up after falling behind as reasons for not attending school. Others spoke of fear of being bullied, domestic issues, childcare dilemmas and disconnected teachers. The most troubling reason revealed by the students was not prioritizing or understanding the value of a diploma.

Truancy Watch has proved to be an “ice breaker” used by members of *StopWatch*. When a student is spotted during school hours a conversation between the Truancy Watch member and the student becomes natural. There is little resistance by the student because the common topic is unavoidable. The student should not be where he or she is during the mid morning hours; therefore conversation flows easily.

The efforts of the partners in *StopWatch* have realized success within the concept of inclusion. Together, adolescent advocates accomplish more as a team using all positive resource avenues available. Youths are more willing to respect adult authority if the leadership makes it clear they respect youth and expect the same in return. Adolescents quickly detect a sincere, concerned attitude. Firm partner efforts combined with empathy, education, enforcement and respect for youth open the gateway to mutual understanding.