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Caimito program takes cue from Japanese koban' idea

Community policing operates on cutting edge of law by Karl Ross

From their home atop a Caimito community center, policeman Antonio Feliciano and his wife and three children are on what could be the cutting edge of law and order.

The 25-year old officer is part of a new approach to law enforcement here that has been redefined over time in far-off Japan. He wears his blue San Juan municipal uniform from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., just like his colleagues.

Feliciano is the community cop in Caimito, stationed atop the Centro Sor Isolina Ferré, and his mission is to earn goodwill toward local authorities in the town of 20,000 by being a friend, role model and mentor to its young.

"This place used to be *bien caliente* - very hot," said Feliciano, remarking about the town's previously high crime rate. But police statistics show that crimes against people and property have fallen 32 percent since Feliciano moved into the neighborhood.

Feliciano is the third live-in officer to occupy the small house since the "koban" program was set up there two-and-a-half years ago. In the Japanese koban concept, community police are part of a time-honored tradition.

Backers of the program say this approach has "proven to reduce crime, drug abuse, school dropout and unemployment." It appears to have worked in Japan, which enjoys one of the lowest crime rates in the world.

Executives at the Washington-based Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, which funds the program, believe it's worth a try here. President Lynn Curtis said the principles underlying the program are sound and should be incorporated into similar programs across the country.

To accomplish its goal of getting communities to cooperate with law enforcement officials rather than combat them, Curtis said koban focuses on prevention rather than intervention. To avoid conflicts, resident police officers are never called on to make arrests.

Curtis credits much of the Caimito program's early success to the work of Catholic nuns who are running the center. The Ponce-based network of community organizations that established the center in Caimito has been hailed by the Ford Foundation, a prominent national think-tank, as having spurred "the best example of community regeneration anywhere in the U.S."

Curtis argued that policy-makers should devote more funds to non-profit community organizations like the Centro, rather than in trickle-down programs such as so-called enterprise zones aimed at stimulating private-sector investment.

"These businesses aren't going to create jobs for all the Bloods and Crips (street gangs) in Los Angeles," he said.

Foundation officials are so keen on the program they invited a delegation of 60 police officials - including two from Japan - and directors of inner-city youth programs from all over the U.S. to visit the facility.

The group toured the center Thursday. Street-wise youngsters milled around the entrance to the neatly manicured facility, trying not to show too much interest in the visitors.

The two-story koban house stands at the top of the facility like an inconspicuous sentry, while a community recreation center sits at the bottom of the hilly slope.

One of the visiting crime-fighters, Fred Thomas, who directs the Metropolitan Police Boys and Girls Club in Washington D.C., said he thought the koban concept could work in that city in a modified fashion.

"The idea of the Boys and Girls Club is much the same," said Thomas. "By having a uniformed officer working directly with the kids, you're giving them a chance to see police officers as real people, not just the enemy."

Curtis said keeping trouble-prone youth busy is the key to success, and the center is equipped with a basketball and volleyball court, an arts and crafts center, a library, photography dark room and recreation center.

But beyond providing a place to study and play, it also serves as a safe haven for those who just want to hang out worry-free. "There's a lot of mischief out there on the streets," said 16-year-old James Maldonado Bigio, who rotated his baseball cap at 90 degree angles as he talked.

He and his friends, smoking cigarettes under a wooden shelter, said they like to spend time at the center, even if they weren't doing much of anything.