

August 2nd , 2012

Salute to NORPAC's 25 years of service

By Rudi Anna
Hometown Weekly Staff

Our local law enforcement has a secret. It's a vital secret, kept hush-hush and under wraps since it originated, and only recently has it allowed glare from the public eye to gain an inkling of an understanding of its workings. Perhaps, for a few readers savvy to the realm of drug enforcement in Norfolk County, and most assuredly for the hundreds of sentenced souls presently serving time in the clink who've dealt with the secret point-blank, they're already hip to the game.

Ready to see what's behind door number one?

Celebrating 25 years of distinguished service behind the shield, a police task force called NORPAC (Norfolk County Anti-Crime Task Force), aka, The best kept secret in law enforcement, continues as it has since day one: to faithfully serve the public by keeping boots on the ground, detectives on the prowl and the criminal element neutralized.

What's no secret is that most crime anywhere tends to revolve around the drug trade. With active members consisting of an interconnected network of detectives assigned to the fifteen cities and towns of Norfolk County, NORPAC is, and has always been a lean and mean, multifaceted drug enforcement task force.

NORPAC began in 1987, functioning under the Byrne Grant program, named to honor Edward Byrne, one of New York City's finest killed while protecting a witness in a drug case. As a reactionary measure to Byrne's death, the federal government's Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) came out with so called 'Byrne' money to give to states for drug enforcement. In the Bay State, this money was doled out into two packages by the Massachusetts Committee on Criminal Justice Agency. The first cash dispersal was through the Target Cities program where funds funneled directly to the Massachusetts big three: Boston, Worcester and Springfield.

The second was for a program requiring local departments to form task forces composed of at least five and no more than fifteen departments. If local departments were willing to commit, they were at liberty to solicit for grants to receive funding. Norwood Chief of Police and NORPAC director, William Brooks III, a detective sergeant at that time, describes the origins, "We have a regional detectives association where every third Thursday of the month we all get together and exchange information, mug shots and that sort of thing. When this federal money became available, I volunteered at the time, saying we have the opportunity to build a drug task force here, and if the departments are willing to commit, I'm willing to write the grant and pull together and kind of organize it. So that's what I did." At that time there were ten departments on board, and it was known, somewhat unofficially, as the Norfolk County Detectives Association.

Eventually, the names changed and more departments began getting involved, but the only mission they had was policing narcotics. Years went by, funding responsibilities shifted to the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS) and the task force stayed effective, using their share of the Byrne cash to purchase equipment and pay the overtime costs stemming from protracted police investigations.

By 1996, when the task force became fifteen communities strong, it was compelled by the EOPSS to diversify its services and restructure to include serial crime, violent crime, crimes committed by traveling criminals and the apprehension of fugitives. Guided by its new and improved identity, member police department chiefs voted to change the name. On top of the titular upgrade came a signed memorandum by the chiefs that expanded the arrest authority for member officers throughout the eastern Norfolk region. With the liberty of flexing full police power, overall efficiency improved considerably.

Then came a stumbling block.

Suddenly, the cash flow started drying up in 2008, with the Byrne money getting peeled back, leaving the state without the necessary bankroll to supply funds for grants. That meant NORPAC had to go through serious cutbacks, although Chief Brooks, still quarterbacking the task force at the time, knew his team had the resources to soldier on. “Fortunately, we were deep into it enough at the time, we were still in pretty good shape. We just continued to march when that money dried up; we just continued on. It really didn't affect us operationally. We continued to do cases every night then, and that's no different today.”

There's basically a NORPAC case going on in the region somewhere every night. One key to its success is the stark contrast from the modus operandi of most task forces: NORPAC is decentralized. In other words, a typical task force has centralized operations which can cripple effectiveness because department leadership loses touch with their assigned officers once they're on front lines in the streets. Brooks highlights the benefits of NORPAC's strategy, “We'd lose contact with local informants and local intelligence if we didn't work this way. We'd miss a lot. If we're operating in Medfield, the Medfield police are in charge of that case. So it's decentralized in that way, and it's a support task force. It doesn't operate independently. NORPAC won't go into somebody's town and run their own investigation. Its always overseen by the law enforcement agency of where the investigation is, by the officers who really know their own turf.”

It's this flexibility that allows the task force to provide such adequate, integrated mutual aid. If three or four detectives are working undercover and looking to set up a purchase of heroin, they would ideally need around four more officers to work surveillance and provide back up. Adds Chief Brooks, There's a state of mutual aid that exists throughout the region and it has for years, and all NORPAC detectives have full police power so there's no red tape.”

So, if the Walpole department is leading a case on its own turf and looking to make the buy, they can make a call to detectives in Norwood or Medfield who can move in to provide support on very short notice. Walpole's Deputy Chief and present NORPAC member John Carmichael finds flexibility to be one of the task force's biggest strengths, “You might need four or five guys one day, and a week later you need eight for a particular aspect of the case. Maybe when it's time to raid the place, you might need as many as twelve, and it can all work and work quickly. It's all very flexible.”

It's flexible indeed, but operations are also carefully orchestrated to the finest detail. Everything's done with a written operations plan and everything is very tactically thought out before hand. “That's the great thing about it,” says Deputy Carmichael, “You've got six detectives assigned to our entire department, so obviously with that limited resource, we couldn't possibly function without NORPAC's additional resources and an ability to be able to make some phone calls or even texts and have a number of officers show up in no time to help out with an investigation.”

This need for speed is always a factor. A few weeks ago, a months long NORPAC investigation which began in Norwood culminated in the arrest of a Dorchester man at his drug supply house in Randolph. Leading up to the arrest, undercover officers managed to complete several controlled buys from the dealer as well as compiling the intelligence that he was a serious drug supplier in the area. At the time of the arrest, police, pursuant to an obtained search warrant, reportedly seized 343 grams of cocaine, 45 grams of heroin and 46 Oxycodone pills, totaling in street value in excess of \$40,000.

Without an ability to maneuver quickly in drug enforcement, any police program would be quickly drained of its potency. It's a different animal than the standard beat because it's pro-active. Most investigations start with the commission of a crime and police work to try and figure out who committed it, find them and charge them with the crime.

“But drug enforcement is backwards,” explains Chief Brooks, “Usually, it starts with a tip. Someone informs us that Joe Bag-of-doughnuts is selling heroin. The question is how do you catch them in the act. You've got to get them in the car with the drugs; you've got to get them to sell the drugs to an undercover, so the prosecution and defense is really at the end of the investigation. You start by knowing who your target is, and at the end of the case, that's when the crimes committed that you'll ultimately prosecute. Because it's so backwards, the process must rely heavily on its well-positioned surveillance and informant assets.

Once the case sees its day in court, if the investigation isn't meticulously executed by the book, the whole effort tumbles like a house of cards. That's why attorneys who represent drug clients typically put all their efforts into pre-trial motions because if they lose the motion, they won't have much of a defense. “It's hard to defend a client if drugs are found in their bedroom. So, all the effort is really upfront in the motions to suppress. There's a lot less of that in most traditional court cases, and you have to be prepared for it,” attests Brooks, remarking that their structure is what's kept them together for the 25 years and calling it, “Quite a milestone.”

It certainly does seem to be an exemplar in longevity, boldly outlasting its original four year life expectancy, and it's done it by staying well-trained, cutting edge and persistent. “We do a lot of training,” Deputy Carmichael says, “All of the officers involved are specifically trained in certain areas of drug work. It's an ongoing process.”

When officers first get assigned to NORPAC, they are sent to a two-week, hands-on training drug school. The course is essential in laying the groundwork for systematic improvements in the collection of evidence. In addition to this initial training, detectives hold quarterly informational meetings for the entire task force. Assistant district attorneys from the Norfolk District Attorney's Office attend and provide training on case law, criminal procedure and courtroom presentation.

Detectives also train under Special Agents from the Department of Housing and Urban Development on HUD resources for investigations in subsidized housing. They study how to optimize use of confidential informants. Training is provided on how to specifically investigate overdose deaths, and they learn DEA developed tactics on how to stop and arrest a dealer if they're inside a motor vehicle. Tech seminars on new surveillance equipment are mandatory. Even use of K-9 service training is conducted.

Recently, the training has demonstrated its merit. Earlier this month, joint efforts by NORPAC detectives from Walpole, Norwood and Canton used their skills to pull off the arrest of Reinaldo Ortiz

of Hyde Park on charges of selling heroin and cocaine near a school. Detectives effectively utilized a citizen's tip, which reported a drug transaction in their neighborhood. Then NORPAC quickly mobilized. An undercover officer was already working in the area, met with Ortiz and reportedly arranged to purchase drugs from him. A few weeks followed, and a trap was carefully planted.

In Walpole, Ortiz reportedly sold the undercover cocaine on one occasion, heroin the next. The task force finally had what they needed to charge, with a couple of school zone violations to boot, and they came through with doors swinging to make the arrest.

However, as times change, so too do drug trends and training must facilitate this as well. Here in Norfolk, there is an increase in Controlled Prescription Drug (CPD) abuse, particularly opiates. In the fall of 2010, police saw a dramatic drop in both demand and price for CPD's because when Purdue Pharma reformulated OxyContin, it became more difficult to crush, hampering an addict's ability to snort it.

Not to be denied, the streets evolved, throwing out a pharmacopeia of branded acetaminophen and oxycodone alternatives like Perc 30's, popular a 30 milligram shot of oxycodone, and the death rate of abusers has steadily risen again. "Since 2005, more Massachusetts residents have died of opiate overdoses than in car crashes," warns Chief Brooks, "This past year, several people died in NORPAC communities as a result of overdose." CPD's are now the most sought after drugs on the street, though heroin continues to be readily available throughout the region and is now typically sold for less than \$100 per gram.

Yet NORPAC remains at the forefront of understanding these trends and without the benefit of any outside funding for the last three years. At present, funding comes from the fellowship of member agencies. When the funding from the state was finally cut, Brooks explains how the shock was cushioned as they had steadily adapted to do more with less. "We actually got about twenty years of federal funding. Now they weren't huge grants, we would get maybe \$50,000 a year, which is not a lot, considering you're supporting 15 police departments for a whole year. What really went away was the overtime pay. The budget would be about \$33,000 to \$35,000 for over time; so, if detectives were going out on overtime, which happens, you're doing a buy or the dealer doesn't show up, or it's happening at an hour when detectives aren't working, then each member agency pays its own detectives. We would use the grant and reimburse those departments fifty percent. So, if one particular department spent \$200 dollars in a night for overtime, NORPAC's grant allowed them to reimburse back at \$100. The rest went to equipment, which they compiled into a regional equipment pool. We just continued to update it. When the money dried out, we were pretty good equipment wise."

Plus, police chiefs simply knew how well the program worked and said without exception that they would continue to find the means to fund it. "With around 140 investigations generated every year, Deputy Carmichael attests, "We couldn't do drug enforcement without NORPAC. There literally isn't a drug case in those fifteen member agencies that doesn't have some NORPAC aspect to it. Winning grant money, no matter how dependent people are of your service, is no easy feat, but it's all about perseverance. After their first grant proposal was denied, a second was finally approved, the first in five years. The money went to radios." Due to the approaching FCC mandate for narrow banding, the task force was pressured to replace three of its older radio repeaters at an estimated value of \$34,000.

And NORPAC still finds a way to keep on trucking. "I mean we've been around for twenty-five years. We've been doing this for a long time," says Brooks. "Back in '87 when they built a lot of these task

forces, a lot of them aren't really around any more.” For Deputy Carmichael, there's no alternative but to keep up the good fight, even when, at times, it seems this war on drugs is an unwinnable battle, “For me, the outcome of the alternative is so much worse. If you just ignore the problem, it's not going to go away. Policing now is community oriented. It's based on going out there and dealing with the root cause of problems. It's not about waiting for things to happen. We see a problem, we go after it, address it and try to fix it. The only way to combat the drug problem in this area is to use the task force to disrupt dealers, dismantle them and take them out of the picture. Somebody will then take their place, and then we'll have to go after them.”

Swift praise for the task force is echoed by Patty Bailey, a Norwood resident since she was two-years old, who recently witnessed a NORPAC raid on her residential block where a long time dealer was arrested and taken to jail, is certainly glad the task force still has strong legs to stand on. “I remember there were a lot of police and drug dogs. I went over after the suspect was taken out in handcuffs; I went over to show my appreciation to the officers, and tell them thank you for working to clean up my neighborhood,” says Bailey, emphasizing how it wasn't the first successful NORPAC arrest she's seen and how impressed she was with the way officers acquitted themselves amidst such delicate residential surroundings. “It was done in a safe manner; it was done professionally and I was assured that they weren't done. It was very reassuring. The word's going to get out that this area is not the place to be selling or doing drugs in.” Bailey took her praise to online too, posting a comment on the NORPAC Facebook page, providing praise for the good work.

At the end of the day, its important to remember that crime has no boundaries and it is imperative that police have the ability and resources to be stealthy and peripatetic around the individuals who deal drugs to the inhabitants of this region. It is part of the job to effectively maintain an assured quality of life for residents, and that is the task force's ultimate aim. The detectives serving in the trenches and working these cases deserve the credit for impacting the drug realities in our communities. No doubt the leaders of each NORPAC community will continue to empower these detectives so that the mission can be fulfilled.

So, the secret's out. With it's rippling network of skilled detectives and vocal citizens underwriting their cause, NORPAC officers continue the good fight to keep the streets they patrol the safe, drug-free places they were intended to be.