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Keller gets 'unintended, positive' results with social media campaign

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KELLER — -- Since police began posting on social media where traffic cops will be working, officials have not seen a significant decrease in traffic violations or wrecks.

But the increase in social media activity has produced "unintended, positive results," said Capt. Tommy Simmons, Keller's patrol commander.

"When we started, this, I honestly never thought about people contacting us back through social media, just that we were giving them information to be safer," Simmons said. "But they feel much more informed about what we're doing, and some people are just more comfortable using those outlets to communicate back and forth."

In March, the Keller Police Department began posting daily updates on Twitter and Facebook with the locations of traffic patrol officers. With a steady increase of residents in the area, both in north Fort Worth and Keller, Simmons had noticed the number of wrecks were growing as well, and he wanted a new way to remind drivers to be safer.

"Once you're in that mindset of knowing where the police are looking, you're probably driving safer," Simmons said.

Rachel Reynolds, the city's public information officer, and Simmons compared it to when drivers see a police car, they typically slow down and check their driving.

"This is a digital version of that," Reynolds said.

What the numbers say

Before the program was launched March 10, Keller police had 1,153 Facebook followers and 2,888 followers on Twitter, Reynolds said. Now, 5,604 people follow the department on Facebook and 6,375 follow it on Twitter.

Those numbers are good, Simmons said, but not good enough to influence the number of citations and wrecks in Keller and Westlake, which contracts with the department to provide police protection.

According to recorded traffic enforcement statistics Simmons provided, in the seven months before the program began in March, Keller police had 20,856 traffic stops that resulted in 12,145 verbal warnings and 6,994 traffic citations. In seven months since, the numbers are similar: 20,378 traffic stops with 12,150 warnings and 6,693 citations.

During the first quarter of 2014, Keller police responded to 82 vehicle wrecks in Keller and Westlake, according to a traffic statistics analysis memo from Simmons to Police Chief Mark Hafner. In the second quarter, the total number of crashes was 84.

"While the program got bigger based on followers, we're still limited by the number it's getting out to," Simmons said, adding that most of city's residents don't follow the department, "and I don't have a way to reach them."

Keller has 42,000 residents, but much of the traffic in the city comes from the west, where north Fort Worth has grown dramatically in recent years.

'It's worked really well'

Simmons said that as the department's social media following continues to grow he hopes it will eventually reach most of the city's residents.

"I'm hoping it's not just a novelty item that catches a little drive early on for people to get on board," Simmons said. "We're committed for the long haul."

Reynolds, who handles the department's and city's social media accounts, said she immediately noticed more interaction with followers.

"We've gotten tips on everything from drug sales to issues with noise to certain traffic areas," Reynolds said. "It's worked really well from that perspective."

Followers have also voiced concerns, asked questions and even joked around with the police social media accounts, Reynolds said.

The Keller Fire Department doesn't have its own Twitter and Facebook pages, so fire news and updates in Keller are posted on the police pages. Reynolds said the city will soon change the pages to be "Keller Public Safety" so it more clearly incorporates fire and police updates.

In addition to the traffic enforcement locations, Reynolds posts notices about road closures, fires, accidents, crime trends and other police news, as well as human interest pieces and other information that helps give the department transparency and build trust and interest with the public, she said.

"It's definitely a new way of doing business," Reynolds said, "but our officers are interested in continuing to adapt."

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