

LIGHTS ON!

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MINNESOTA Police Chief

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Fixing Police-Community Relations, One Broken Taillight Stop at a Time

Lights On!

BY SCOTT SEROKA, MINNEAPOLIS POLICE DEPARTMENT

There is no longer a 'routine' traffic stop. The cop walks up to the car and he or she has no idea what they're going to encounter. Often, the driver of the vehicle is also sitting there wondering what they're facing. They might have no idea why they've been

penalized'; we're just talking about a light bulb here," said Microgrants facilitator Mike McCloskey.

It happens dozens of times a day, all across the state. Officers pull over a driver for having a taillight out. Maybe

"You might not be able to fix that light. Or, what do you have to sacrifice to fix that light? Poor people are making decisions like that every day," said Don Samuels, who founded the Lights On! program after the Philando Castile incident. "Do I pay the rent or

“ We can start changing people's thinking about 'you screwed up, you're wrong and you're going to get penalized.’ ”

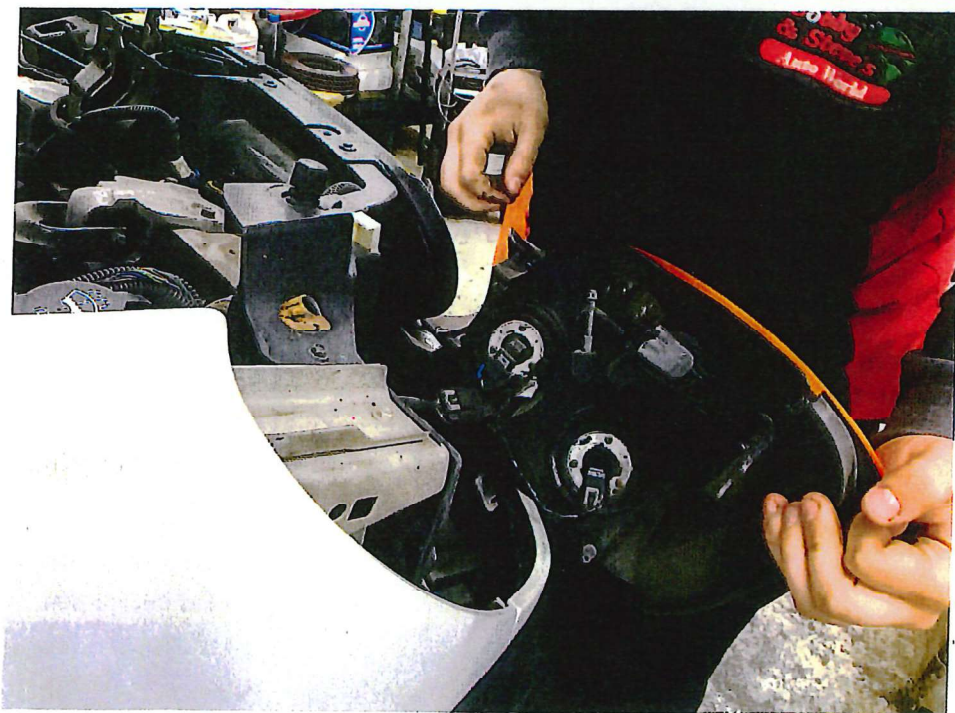
pulled over in the first place. There is a fear of the unknown, and it's a two-way street.

"If we can start changing people's thinking about 'you screwed up, you're wrong and you're going to get

it's a headlight. While it might not seem like a big deal to police, it's a different story for the driver that probably doesn't have a happy ending. Sometimes a new bulb can cost \$40. Sometimes the cost to rewire a light could approach \$300.

do I buy food? This kind of expense -unexpected, one that's not been budgeted for - it could be critical for someone."

Right now, more than 20 Minnesota law enforcement agencies are armed



with a powerful tool. Officers are handing out vouchers instead of tickets. Drivers take those vouchers to a Bobby & Steve's auto body center in the metro area and they get their headlight or taillight fixed for free. Microgrants pays

for the bulb and Bobby and Steve's chips in free labor. It's a partnership built by communities, for community members.

"Because everyone can relate to it, that really fired up our crowd funding,"

Samuels said. "To date, just about all of our vouchers have been funded by "crowd funding" and we have raised about twice that much again! So we have money for another year or two," Samuels would like to see more Minnesota departments join the program.

In 2017, Microgrants kicked off Lights On! where it all began, in Columbia Heights. 16 agencies, including St. Paul, Minneapolis and Brooklyn Park were represented. Between April and December of 2017, Twin Cities cops handed out more than 400 vouchers. The Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) has just requested 500 more vouchers for its patrol officers.

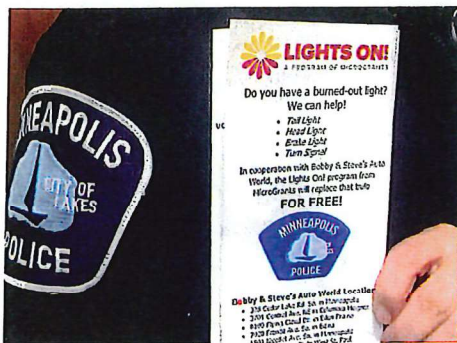
In the month of September of 2018, MPD officers assigned to the Dogwatch shift in the Second Precinct handed out 14 vouchers to thankful drivers.

"You pull somebody over and say 'yeah, I'm pulling you over because you have a headlight out' and you might hear 'I don't have the money to get that fixed,'" said Commander Charlie Adams, who oversees the MPD's Community & Collaborative Advancement Division. "The officer replies 'That's cool. I'm going to give you a voucher and you can get it fixed for free.' Everybody's reaction is just 'Wow, thank you.' The whole communication between the officer and the citizen is positive."

As for Microgrants, a large donation is helping the organization keep up with the increasing demand. In the Twin Cities, if it costs Bobby & Steve's more than \$50 for the fix, the technicians call the folks at Microgrants who approve and fund the extra costs of the repairs. Samuels and McCloskey say local law enforcement agencies can work with their own community philanthropists

Bring this Program to your Community

“We can all relate to being pulled over. Each voucher has the potential to turn a lose-lose situation – the traffic stop – into a win-win where we’re helping low income drivers and changing how officers are viewed.”



to set up a funding stream to help low-income drivers out.

Two agencies in Ohio have rolled out Lights On! and Iowa City, Iowa, is also participating. Right now, the calls are coming in from all over the country. Samuels is also engaged in talks to bring a nationwide auto repair chain on board, which may have a stake in the auto body repair store or stores in your community.

“We have the potential to become a national program. Not just on the supply side, but on the demand side,” he said. “We get calls from all over the country, from cities that want to

replicate it and most of the calls are from police departments. But some are from non-profits like us, that want to manage it and lead it and some are from the auto repair business community.”

Commander Adams recently took a call from North Carolina. The officers asked if the MPD has a policy in place for Lights On!

“There is no set policy. This is community engagement. It’s not difficult. You partner with an autobody shop or store, whoever does repairs in your city, and then you find funding,” he said. “We have to be more compassionate when we think about the people we’re pulling over and their financial situations. I issue them this coupon and the person may not get involved in the cycle that leads to driving after revocation or suspension.”

Adams is working on building a tracking mechanism within the Minneapolis Police Department’s

records management system to get a better handle on when and where officers are providing the free vouchers. While it will be nice to put some numbers to the program, it is hard to put a dollar value on how these positive interactions will influence police-community relations overall.

“The beauty of this program is everyone, from police officers to drivers to community leaders, can get behind this effort in your community,” said Lights On! Program Director Sherman Patterson. “We can all relate to being pulled over. Each voucher has the potential to turn a lose-lose situation – the traffic stop – into a win-win where we’re helping low income drivers and changing how officers are viewed.”

The folks at Microgrants don’t like the term “fix-it ticket” but they’re not afraid to point out how the program really helps repair community relationships, one traffic stop at a time.

CHIEFS RESOURCES

Some municipalities already participating in the program include Maplewood, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Columbia Heights, Crystal, Edina, Mounds View, Richfield, Robbinsdale, Roseville, Spring Lake Park, St. Louis Park, West St. Paul and Corcoran.

NEXT STEPS

If you’d like to get your community and your department involved, contact Mike McCloskey or Sherman Patterson at info@microgrants.net or call 612-200-8174.

Home

Posted on: August 10, 2023

Roseville Police Institutes Innovative Ticket Program



Roseville police officers observed more than 1,500 vehicles with burnt-out headlights, expired tabs, and other equipment violations already this year.

Rather than initiate traffic stops, the Roseville Police Department mailed letters to the vehicle owners as part of a new pilot program designed to bolster both public safety and community trust.

Since the program launched in January, the city has mailed out 1,569 letters in lieu of traffic stops. The letters notify vehicle owners of equipment violations. The letters

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also share resources to help drivers remedy issues including information on financial assistance to renew license plate tabs and a voucher to fix burnt-out lights courtesy of the Lights On Program.



Roseville Police Chief Erika Scheider said the pilot program is off to a promising start and is part of the department's ongoing effort to ensure an appropriate and equitable law enforcement response.

"Ultimately, we decided to try a different approach with addressing minor equipment violations," explains Scheider. "We recognize that most vehicle owners are either unaware of minor equipment violations or perhaps they are unable to afford the repair."

The new program was launched after the Roseville Police Department conducted a review of all policies and procedures and determined that traffic stops based solely on equipment violations disproportionately impacted communities of color, which undermined law enforcement's legitimacy.

It also reflects the evolving community sentiment around policing priorities. Roseville Police began prioritizing moving violations after a series of community listening sessions in 2017, Scheider said.

It takes officers 30 second to log an equipment violation in their computer system compared to a traffic stop, which takes several minutes and may pull officers away from more urgent police work.

The pilot program was created with input and direction from the Roseville Police Department's Multicultural Advisory Committee, a group of citizens who meet regularly to advise police leaders.

Letters in lieu of traffic stops are reserved for vehicles with minor equipment violations, expired registrations, or other non-moving violations that do not create a public safety concern or a dangerous condition.



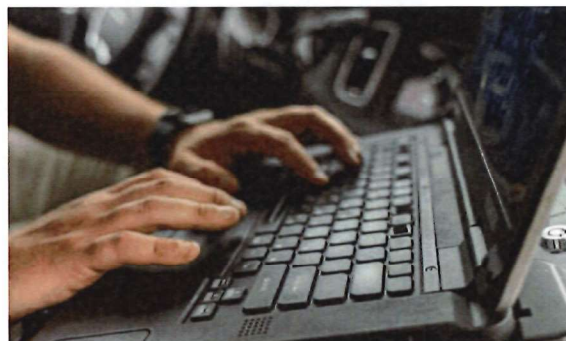
The letters sent to vehicle owners include information on financial assistance to renew license plate tabs. When the violation is a burnt-out light, the letter includes a voucher to fix it courtesy of a separate Lights On program.

Roseville is a welcoming regional crossroads where Twin Cities residents and visitors come to work, shop and play and traffic patterns illustrate that. About 87 percent of the letters sent have gone to addresses outside of Roseville.

Several drivers have contacted the police department thanking them for the opportunity to address the issue without the stress of a traffic stop. One resident explained that he was driving around his 86-year-old mother on errands when officers spotted his burnt-out light.

"I want to thank the officer for not stopping me even though he or she had a right to. We had an extremely busy morning and a traffic stop would have made my mother quite anxious," he wrote. "I will take care of this brake light immediately. I thank the officer and Roseville Police Department for their discretion in this matter."

The program is possible through



support from the Ramsey County Attorney's Office, Lights On, Diversion Solutions, and the Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation. One of the biggest expenses has been the postage. A group of

volunteers and summer interns are helping prepare the letters for mailing.

Scheider stressed that Roseville officers will continue traffic enforcement efforts that improve roadway safety, with an emphasis on curbing distracted driving, excessive speeding, street racing/exhibition driving, and impaired driving.

"These changes allow our officers to focus their time on driving conduct that impacts the safety of our roadways," Scheider said. "It allows us to prioritize violent crime over minor equipment violations."

[Click here to learn more about the Roseville Police Department.](#)

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