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Arundel police on the rebound [Editorial]

Our view: Law enforcement in Anne Arundel County demonstrates it is more on the ball than the scandals of the past might suggest

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These have been a tough few years for police officers in Anne Arundel County, from the scandalous to a revolving door of leadership. Under the circumstances, one wouldn't expect county police or sheriff's deputies to be on the cutting edge of most anything — just not having to tear down yard signs on behalf of the county executive would seem to be improvement enough. advertisement

But lo and behold, Anne Arundel law enforcement have turned out to be innovators, and police in Baltimore and elsewhere ought to be paying attention. Turns out they have some good ideas about fighting crime in Annapolis.

Top of the list is the decision by Anne Arundel Police Chief Kevin Davis to equip his officers with naloxone or Narcan, a drug that can reverse an overdose of heroin or morphine. It's remarkably effective. Administered as a nasal spray, it can halt the worst effects of an overdose — a life threatening depression of the nervous system — in a matter of minutes.

The drug can have unpleasant side effects like nausea and headaches but nothing along the lines of the harm caused by an unchecked heroin overdose. Narcan was already available to the county's paramedics (they use the more fast-acting type that's given by injection) as do other paramedics in other jurisdictions. But equipping police officers makes sense because the sooner the drug is administered, the more likely a life can be saved.

Given that the Baltimore region is plagued by its share of heroin use, the most recent trend being the invasion of heroin laced with fentanyl to amplify the drug's effect, Chief Davis was right to try something new. Between 2010 and 2012, heroin deaths in Maryland have risen from 238 to 378, a 59 percent increase.

Not to be outdone, Anne Arundel County Sheriff Ron Bateman has been trying out some new law enforcement techniques as well. He's been administering a program that withholds tax refunds from people with outstanding arrest warrants.

That may sound too good to be true (after all, how many criminals turn themselves in because the police are sitting on a tax refund of a few hundred dollars), but it turns out to be quite effective. Sheriff Bateman got 346 people to voluntarily submit themselves on all kinds (but mostly petty) charges including assault and prostitution. How often did it work? Three out of four people responded to letters he mailed to them last year.

Given how difficult it can be (and sometimes dangerous) for sheriff's deputies to serve warrants, that's quite a trick. No wonder other jurisdictions, including Baltimore, are asking the Maryland General Assembly to give them permission to do the same thing.

Like Narcan, this isn't costing taxpayers a thing. But it's helping law enforcement — allowing them to catch scofflaws in a much safer manner. Interestingly, the program has revealed that the benefits of marriage extend to criminal behavior, too. Refund checks can't be withheld on warrants for individuals who had the good fortune of filing taxes jointly as the law protects spouses from losing the refunds they're due as well.

Arundel law enforcement officials of all types are likely pleased to see such success in action. Bad enough that former County Executive John Leopold used officers in his executive protection service like henchmen, compiling dossiers on political rivals and keeping his love interests apart, but the road was rocky after his departure, too. One police chief was tied to the Leopold scandal while another was found to have used an anti-gay slur while objecting to steady complaints about his leadership. In all, the county saw four chiefs in a 12-month period.

Chief Davis, a longtime Prince George's County police officer who was appointed chief last year, appears to have better staying power. Allies describe him as collaborative, which is vital in a county where political lines are divided not just by party affiliation but by north-south geography, too. Sheriff Bateman, a former chief deputy in his department and an Annapolis native, is regarded as an experienced professional that observers expect to see reelected again this year.

That two programs have something else in common besides coming out of Anne Arundel County: They demonstrate leadership that was not afraid to try something new, to look outside the everyday bureaucracy or what even their peers within Maryland are doing and think creatively about how to do the job better.

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