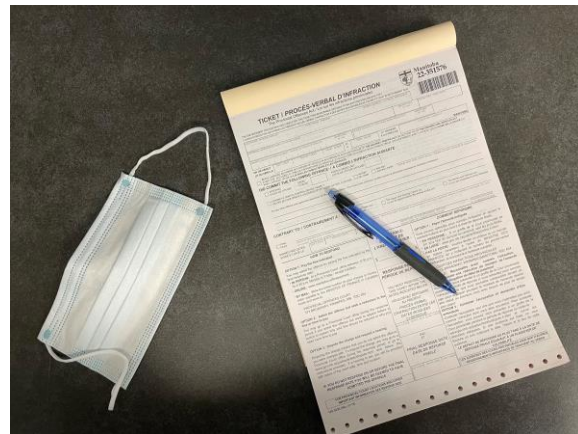


MANITOBA ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE

Leadership Bulletin

FEBRUARY 2022

POLICING THROUGH A PANDEMIC IN A COMMUNITY WITH LOW VACCINE UPTAKE AND LOW RATE OF HEALTH ORDER COMPLIANCE



Thinking back to early 2020 in the early stages of this pandemic when we thought we would get through this in a couple of weeks. It seems like such a long time ago yet in some ways I wonder where the last two years have gone. Even after reality sunk in, and we realized it was going to last longer than anticipated, we still didn't entirely grasp the magnitude of what was yet come. The first wave didn't turn out to be much of a concern, at least not here in Manitoba and especially so here in Winkler. I think that probably gave us some false hope. Not only is this dragging on longer than we ever expected but we have faced many more challenges than we ever could have imagined. I think by

summer or maybe fall of 2020 I had already commented; “Politicians and Police will not come out of this unscathed”. Of course, we now know that nobody will make it through this unscathed. Every aspect of society and every part of our communities has faced struggles in one way or another. However, there certainly are varying degrees to how much each person is affected but I think the damage to politicians and police will take a while to heal.

The city of Winkler currently has an estimated population of around 14,000 and has been one of the fastest-growing communities in the province for many years. Growth has been driven in large part by immigration, which in itself has been driven by the need for skilled labor. The people that live in this area are extremely hard-working, generous, and entrepreneurial. Winkler has become the shopping, industrial and manufacturing hub of southern Manitoba with the population increasing substantially during the day. The Rural Municipality of Stanley surrounds the city of Winkler and is home to roughly 9,000 people, many of whom work, shop or attend school within Winkler. Many fine people are living in this area who have either immigrated here themselves or their ancestors did years ago. Many have left countries ruled by governments they did not trust. I have had countless conversations with people that have very strong arguments about why they shouldn't be following the health orders. They have lived experiences that many of us have never had to face.

It was during the fall of 2020 when we encountered the first sign that enforcement was going to be a problem. We became aware of an event, through social media, of a group of people who intended to gather and sing hymns at a park. We did not want to just let this event happen without taking some action, but being a small police service with four officers scheduled for each shift and often reduced to only two, we were not sure how we could. We put together a plan to obtain photographic evidence and issue tickets after the fact. A large number of people showed up for the event and although we were able to get some pictures, it proved to be much more difficult to identify the attendees than we thought it would be. We did issue a couple of tickets during the following week but we felt like we should have done more.

The next weekend, the same group planned to gather again but this time we thought we had a better idea. We decided to stop vehicles leaving the event and issue tickets at the time. Although trying to identify attendees was no longer an issue, this plan created a new set of problems. Our officers were met with outrage from not only the persons in the vehicles which they had just stopped but also from people in other vehicles leaving the event. Fortunately, one of the organizers of the event received a ticket on both weekends and this group did not return a third time.

However, the criticism we received on social media and from a far-right national media organization was huge. We received unpleasant phone calls and emails from as far away as Toronto, Minneapolis, and Vancouver. We were called Nazis and people told us we were going to “Hell”. We started to wonder if policing could even work in such an atmosphere. Being still in the infancy of this pandemic we didn’t know what to expect. At the time, we looked to Robert Peele’s #2 principle of policing which states; “The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions”. We were starting to think that if most of the community felt this way then there was no way we could police through this. Of course, with most crimes, we have upwards of 99% approval from the public, but if enforcing the Public Health order was down to let’s say, 50% approval, then we were in big trouble.

Other groups would hold outdoor events from time to time and we decided to keep our uniformed officers away from those events as much as possible. We knew we would never be able to stop the event from going forward but we also did not want the public to think we were allowing these events to take place. We wanted to be able to tell the public that we had taken some action so we would have an officer attend in plain clothes and attempt to at least photograph the organizers. We would then work on identifying them and issuing tickets throughout the following week. We resigned ourselves to the fact that, even if we only issued a couple of tickets, at least we were doing something.

Eventually, the use of masks in public places became mandatory and that quickly became the next problem. This issue was somewhat exacerbated by the fact that two of the large retailers in our city had required masks before the province made it mandatory, however, they took little or no action to enforce it. I think that made things worse when masks did become mandatory since the public was already accustomed to not wearing them in those stores. We started issuing tickets but again the backlash was swift and brutal. Social media erupted with pictures and videos of our officers issuing tickets. Nasty emails and phone calls to our office were a common occurrence. Policing in a small community can be difficult with the public knowing our officers by name. It got to the point where even the children of some of our officers were receiving rude comments from classmates at school.

We heard from many people who immigrated to this area that were convinced this perceived control by the government is the early stages that led to the same problems they left behind in their home country. We heard from small business owners that said they just can’t enforce masks in their stores because they have too many customers telling them they will take their business elsewhere. One business owner risked losing a very large contract if he enforced health orders in his store. “I still need to be in business when this pandemic is over” was a

common theme. We heard from large retail store managers concerned because their staff, who were trying to enforce mask use, were subject to extremely rude behavior.

We would issue tickets when we could, however, as with any police service we did not have officers sitting around looking for things to do. Any time we would issue tickets we were faced with angry emails and phone calls from people saying we were doing too much enforcement and then just as angry messages from people saying we weren't doing enough enforcement. Our local Public Health officer would come to our community with a team of enforcement personnel every week and sometimes twice a week to focus on mask enforcement. This worked well and it was having a positive effect on the rate of compliance, however, they started to encounter some aggressive individuals which prompted them to stop coming to Winkler.

There were many complaints to the Government Inquiry line reporting people not wearing masks and it wasn't long before this grabbed the attention of the media - which fueled more complaints. I think it got to the point where people would walk into a store already anticipating that compliance would be low and that's what they would be focused on – essentially missing all the people who were wearing masks. I would do walkthroughs off duty and find the compliance rate to be about 90 – 95%. Admittedly, there would be times when it was lower and yet, there would be times when it was higher. We were well aware that compliance here was low, however, it was never as bad as the media portrayed.

The last really large media attention we received came after someone sent pictures of unmasked shoppers to the media. We knew the pictures were a small sampling size but what many of the consumers of the media took from the story was nobody is wearing masks in Winkler and the Police weren't doing anything about it. Unfortunately, this was about the same time the test positivity rate in Southern Health was creeping quite high and so this story started a whole new round of angry emails and phone calls to our office and to the City administrative office – most of which were from people outside the community. To add to the problem, this was also about the same time Public Health stopped coming to Winkler.

We decided to bolster enforcement by doing walkthroughs of the large retail stores twice on dayshift and once on nightshift. We issued many warnings and tickets. We kept track of the rate of compliance for each of these walkthroughs and what we found confirmed what we already suspected – the rate of compliance wasn't as low as what the number of complaints suggested nor what the media illustrated. Furthermore, it became evident that most people receiving tickets weren't from Winkler. Store managers and staff thanked us for being there and the rate of compliance definitely increased.

For one reason or another, Winkler has always been under a microscope so we were an easy target. The low vaccine uptake rate in our area was certainly a contributing factor to the negative attention. It has certainly been a struggle to police in a community with the lowest vaccine uptake rate and the lowest rate of compliance in the province. As a police service, we have always had a very high approval rating here in Winkler and therefore, the negative comments towards our officers and our police service were hard to swallow.

Aside from all the struggles, I think we have done a reasonable job navigating through this pandemic. Not unlike business owners who said they still need to be in business when this pandemic is over, we still need to be able to police in this community when it's over. Although there are some who oppose enforcement, we still have to or we would be doing a disservice to the rest of the community that expects it. Enforcement can't stop just because a large group of people wants it to stop, but on the other end of the spectrum, we also can't increase enforcement just because the media or angry emailers want us to. Enforcement always has to make sense and be right for the community we serve.

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