

POLICE CHIEF



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From a **VISION** to **SUCCESS**

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*Fostering Youth-Police Relationships
at Camp POSTCARD*



THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA, POLICE DEPARTMENT IS “PARTNERING WITH THE COMMUNITY TO SERVE, PROTECT, AND PROMOTE QUALITY OF LIFE.”

The department consistently takes intentional actions to creatively engage with its community, particularly its youth. Whether through events like Cast with a Cop (where officers take youth fishing), Stickers and Snickers (where officers pass out candy during Halloween), or other youth outreach programs, the Sioux Falls Police Department seeks various ways to engage and build relationships with young community members.

In 2019, former Sioux Falls Police Department Chief Matt Burns tasked then-Sergeant Andrew Siebenborn (now a lieutenant) and School Resource Officer (SRO) Adam Healy with learning more about a police and youth camp hosted in western South Dakota by the Volunteers of America Northern Rockies, called Camp POSTCARD (Peace Officers Striving to Create and Reinforce Dreams). After attending this camp, both SRO Healy and Lt. Siebenborn agreed that the youth in the Sioux Falls area would benefit from a similar camp on their side of the state.

As described by Volunteers of America, Dakotas,

Camp POSTCARD (Peace Officers Striving to Create and Reinforce Dreams) is a free, weeklong summer camp that brings together law enforcement officials and middle school students from the Sioux Falls area that it is being hosted in. This unique and powerful experience gives youth and law enforcement the opportunity to connect in an environment that pushes them out of their comfort zone. Students and law enforcement officials will be encouraged to learn from one another and see each other from different perspectives.

SROs play a critical role in the camp model, serving as both the sole referral source, nominating and selecting students to attend and, along with other police officers, as camp counselors.

Camp POSTCARD is designed for youths who are facing challenging circumstances and could benefit from building positive relationships with adults. The camp includes activities to help youth develop self-esteem, leadership, and decision-making skills while also building and improving youth-police relationships.

In the fall of 2019, SRO Healy and Lt. Siebenborn began discussions with Volunteers of America, Dakotas, president, Dennis Hoffman, about hosting Camp POSTCARD in their part of the state. Volunteers of America, Dakotas, is a well-known and respected nonprofit organization that serves individuals of all ages, faiths, races, and backgrounds in the Sioux Falls area. The original plan was to send a group of Sioux Falls youth, along with Lt. Siebenborn and SRO Healy, to participate in the camp hosted in western South Dakota, with the intention of rolling out the camp in eastern South Dakota in the summer of 2021. All parties supported this vision and were fully committed to bringing the camp to fruition.

The timing couldn't have been worse for such a large-scale vision, as everyone's lives were turned upside down when COVID-19 began to rear its nastiness in early 2020. The dream of hosting this camp began to fade as both the Sioux Falls Police Department and the Volunteers of America, Dakotas, pivoted and adjusted how they did business and provided services during the COVID-19 era.



Photos courtesy of Volunteers of America, Dakotas.



Fortunately, in the fall of 2021, this dream resurfaced. In June 2021, Chief Matt Burns from the Sioux Falls Police Department retired, and then-Lieutenant Jon Thum was promoted to chief of police. Chief Thum, who has always been a huge supporter of community engagement, particularly regarding youth, gave his full support to reinvigorate this dream.

Lt. Siebenborn and SRO Healy—along with Volunteers of America, Dakotas, employees Tracie Phelps and Sarah Hanson—began the arduous process of designing and implementing Camp POSTCARD to serve Sioux Falls area youth for the following summer in 2022. Chief Thum and President Hoffman supported the vision and gave their teams an incredible amount of independence to work together and do what was needed to get this project off the ground.

Finding the right location to host a weeklong summer camp was one of the first important steps. Volunteers of America, Dakotas, identified Camp NeSoDak as the ideal location for the camp, which was scheduled for early June 2022. Camp NeSoDak, located on the banks of Lake Enemy Swim near Waubay, South Dakota, is about a two-hour drive from Sioux Falls.

Volunteers of America, Dakotas, handled all the logistics, including funding, transportation, and other necessary arrangements to ensure the camp's success. The Sioux Falls Police Department committed to helping by utilizing their SROs to identify students to participate and providing a large number of officers to staff the camp and act as camp counselors. Though compensating the officers for their entire time at camp would not be practical since officers are essentially working 24 hours a day during camp, Chief Thum authorized the week of camp to be counted as the officers' work week with no vacation or compensation time needing to be utilized for those assisting. Additionally, officers would be compensated for limited amounts of overtime while working at camp (generally 8–10 hours per officer).

CAMP POSTCARD KICKOFF

The first Sioux Falls Camp POSTCARD was held from June 5 to June 10, 2022. The camp consisted of various activities and games, much like a traditional summer camp. However, it also included a specific focus on the “Code

of the West” in all activities, which emphasizes the following values:

- Live Each Day With Courage
- Take Pride In Your Work
- Always Finish What You Start
- Do What Has To Be Done
- Be Tough, But Fair
- When You Make A Promise, Keep It
- Ride For The Brand
- Talk Less And Say More
- Remember That Some Things Are Not For Sale
- Know Where To Draw The Line

The 2022 camp included four staff members from Volunteers of America, Dakotas, two Sioux Falls Police Department lieutenants, one sergeant, and nine other officers. Additionally, one deputy from the Minnehaha County Sheriff's Office assisted. (Minnehaha County is one of the counties that Sioux Falls is located in.) Camp NeSoDak provided staff to prepare and serve meals, as well as assist during swim times.

Sioux Falls SROs identified 36 youth and helped their parents complete the necessary paperwork and attend pre-camp meetings. Although camp



started with 36 students, it finished with 34 due to two students being sent home for behavioral problems.

Despite several necessary changes that were identified, the 2022 Camp POSTCARD was deemed a measurable success by all parties involved. Both campers and counselors (police officers) were polled before and after camp, and significant improvements in relationships with and perceptions of police officers were observed.

KEEPING THE CONNECTION ALIVE

What sets Camp POSTCARD apart from other police and youth summer camps is its commitment to fostering lasting relationships between the police and the youth. Unlike other camps where officers and attendees meet for only one week and then part ways, Camp

POSTCARD emphasizes ongoing connections. Volunteers of America, Dakotas, hosts quarterly reunion events for campers, their families, and the officers. These events range from open gym and rock-climbing sessions hosted by a local church to roller skating and pizza parties. The joy on the students' faces when reuniting with friends and officers from camp clearly shows that true bridges are being built.

Additionally, at each of these quarterly reunions, Volunteers of America, Dakotas continues to poll the attendees on various questions, including their outlook on law enforcement post-camp. These surveys consistently show positive results, indicating that attendees have a greater amount of trust and respect for law enforcement

in the community. Campers also show continued growth in personal self-esteem, confidence in leadership, and better overall decision-making skills.

CONTINUAL GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENTS

One of the main goals for both Volunteers of America, Dakotas, and the Sioux Falls Police Department post-camp 2022 was to scale the camp at Camp NeSoDak to accommodate up to 75 campers. There was a specific focus on recruiting more female officers to assist, thereby increasing the number of female youths who could attend. Additionally, they looked to finetune the overall running and efficiency of the camp to create a better overall product.

CAMP OUTCOMES

- In 2023, campers reported an 88 percent better relationship and outlook regarding law enforcement after camp. Three months post-camp that number was still 86 percent, and six months post-camp, 79 percent of campers still reported a better relationship with law enforcement.
- In 2023, parents of campers reported an 80 percent better relationship with law enforcement due to their involvement with the officers on the pre- and post-camp planning of getting their children to camp.
- In 2023, 84 percent of campers reported having increased self-esteem; 80 percent reported feeling more confident in having a broader set of leadership skills; and 88 percent reported that they had better decision-making skills because of attending camp.

Data taken from Volunteers of America Post-Camp Survey Results.

In 2023, the camp hosted 45 students, with 18 officers from the Sioux Falls Police Department assisting during the week. By 2024, the camp had grown to 69 campers, and Chief Thum authorized 21 officers to assist that year. The \$48,000+ in wages paid to officers during that week was seen by Chief Thum as a worthy investment in the area's youth.

To staff the camp at this level, Volunteers of America, Dakotas, also leveraged other community relationships. In 2023, Volunteers of America, Dakotas, reached out to Sandy Berveen, Founder and CEO of Tre Ministries, to see if her team of young adults would like to assist at camp. Tre Ministries, a respected nonprofit organization in Sioux Falls, had already worked with both Volunteers of America, Dakotas, and the Sioux Falls Police Department. The Tre Ministries team eagerly accepted the opportunity and have been a critical component of Camp POSTCARD's success.

Camp POSTCARD is already in its planning stages for 2025. What once started as a dream of the Sioux Falls Police Department, Volunteers of America, Dakotas, and other community stakeholders has become a lasting reality and a cornerstone of how the Sioux Falls community has partnered with the Sioux Falls Police Department to better its youth. SROs and school staff members who help identify campers to attend have gone from struggling to get enough sign-ups to now having to

turn away campers due to the camp's size limit. Lt. Siebenborn, who is still actively involved, now must turn away officers who want to volunteer because the current crop of officers assisting return year after year.

LESSONS LEARNED

Along the way to a successful camp, the Sioux Falls Police Department learned some valuable lessons that other agencies can benefit from:

- It only takes an idea, and don't be afraid to look at what others are doing and make it unique to your agency. Camp POSTCARD was a program being utilized and proctored by other Volunteers of America subsidiaries and police agencies around the United States. Some of the blueprint for success was already there, but it needed to be customized for Sioux Falls and their youth.
- Identify trusted community stakeholders who share the same core beliefs as the agency and utilize them when needed. If the department does not have those relationships, begin to build them now. Be intentional about building and maintaining these relationships.
- Programs like this require open-minded senior leaders who are willing to empower their teams. This program would not have survived without the complete buy-in of two separate chiefs of police who empowered those in their agency, at all levels, to make the necessary decisions to bring it to fruition.

- Some ideas take money. Have the stories and the data to back up a project's success if possible. The Volunteers of America, Dakotas, raises all the funds needed for Camp POSTCARD, while the Sioux Falls Police Department contributes a significant amount in compensation to fund assisting officers. While heartfelt stories by camp participants and counselors are great, having the empirical data to present and show other stakeholders about the successes of the idea puts an agency or department in an even better position when questioned about the return on this investment for the department and the community.
- Be intentional about telling the community what the police department is doing to impact the youth and why it is a benefit for all parties involved.
- Some ideas are truly priceless and affect those beyond those directly involved (see Parent Testimonial sidebar).

CONCLUSION

It sounds cliché, but youth are the future. Police agencies need to intentionally strive to build great relationships with all, but they need to pay the greatest amount of attention to the youth and build a positive foundation with them from the onset. Camp POSTCARD provides one model of a way to engage and connect with youth and create impactful moments for these young community members and officers. ♡

PARENT TESTIMONIAL

Hi, my name is [mother]. I'm [child's] mom. I did not want to let [child] go to camp because I was scared. I had a good conversation with the middle school resource officer, and he helped me to make this decision ... THANK YOU!! I want to personally thank you for this opportunity!! [Child's] older sister died (X) years ago when [child] was (X) months old. [Sister] was (X) when she passed away. I've had a really hard time letting go and having control of where my kids are, thinking they always need to be near, just in case, so I can be there to save them. This was a big healing moment for me; she's been gone (X) years and this is the first time I've let any of my kids be away from me!!! So, I want to thank you all, including the SFPD for watching over my child, showing her that the police are really there to protect and serve us, they are NOT THE BAD GUYS!! Especially now, when everyone is talking down on police officers!! If you could share this with them too, I would greatly appreciate it!! It's been a long healing journey over (X) years, but these last 5 days showed me I'm stronger than I thought, and there is no price to be put on that!! Thank you. ♥

IACP RESOURCES

- Engaging Youth In Schools: Tips For Law Enforcement Webinar

[theIACP.org](https://www.theIACP.org)

- Lighting the Fire Within
- Spotlight: A Sunny Day to Brighten Lives

[policechiefmagazine.org](https://www.policechiefmagazine.org)