



## **SPD SPECIAL REPORT**

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# **Living Room Conversations: An Assessment**

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In the spring of 2011, the Seattle Police Department launched a series of new community outreach events. Dubbed “Living Room Conversations,” these events were designed to bring community members and police officers together in informal settings to discuss public safety issues of concern to neighborhood residents and to get to know each other better. In September 2012 hosts of previously-held Living Room Conversations came together to discuss these events in focus groups and provide feedback on how they might be improved. This Report summarizes their assessment.

Some Key Findings from this Assessment are, as follows:

- People who hosted Living Room Conversations were unanimous in their opinion that the Department should continue this form of community outreach.
- Hosts of Living Room Conversations rated them highly as a way of letting people know more about the SPD, its officers and its services.
- Hosts of Living Room Conversations rated them highly for connecting community members with their neighbors and with the officers who serve them.
- Better pre-event preparation for Living Room Conversation hosts would improve these events.
- Community members want assistance from the Department in sustaining the excitement and momentum generated at the Living Room Conversations.

### **Background**

In early 2011 the Community Outreach Section of the Seattle Police Department (“SPD” or “Department”) sought to expand both the number and nature of the opportunities for interaction

between police officers and community members. Outreach events typically take the form of structured public meetings focused on a specific topic or in response to a single or series of crime incidents; or, alternatively, are regularly scheduled meetings of Department advisory groups and councils. While community members may have requested such meetings, and may even have helped plan them, the public's role is generally that of listener/reactor to what Department representatives have to say. Such events play a vital role in keeping community members informed and disseminating important public safety updates and information, but they do not afford opportunities – articulated by many – for person-to-person connections among community members and between community members and the police officers who patrol their neighborhoods.

Seeking to provide a new type of interaction with the public, the Community Outreach Section designed informal gatherings of community members and officers to take place in community members' homes. Some of the ground rules of these gatherings were the following: they were to be hosted by residents who invited their neighbors (no specified list of attendees or sign-in sheets); there would be no formal agenda, but rather informal conversations that would be resident-driven; to the extent that staffing and calls would permit, officers in attendance would be from among those who serve the neighborhood (no Department brass); and light refreshments would be provided by the Department. To convey the location and tenor of these gatherings, they were called "Living Room Conversations," since they were intended to have the feel and comfort level that one might associate with informal discussions in one's home.

After the first few Living Room Conversations took place in the spring of 2011, it was clear that the design produced the type of outreach event that was desired. In addition, the informal feedback of those participating – both officers and community members – was not only positive, but enthusiastic. Based on this initial experience, the SPD Community Outreach Section has continued to recruit hosts and facilitate Living Room Conversations on an ongoing basis. Through August 2012, a total of 45 Living Room Conversations, each involving between six and thirty community members, had been held across the City.

For the most part the ongoing Living Room Conversations have adhered to the original design, but there have been some departures along the way. In the case of multi-family residences, for example, the events have been hosted by facility managers and taken place in the community rooms of those facilities rather than in the home of a resident. In another case the setting was an office complex where the commercial property manager was the host and used a facility conference room where tenants/clients gathered. Primarily, however, the sites for the events have been literally living rooms in private residences, and most have taken place in the early evening on weekdays. With respect to the participation of officers, Community Outreach has been fairly successful in arranging attendance by neighborhood officers, though on occasion, excused absences or workload demands have required Community Police Team officers to pinch hit.

Discussions during the Living Room Conversations have been wide-ranging and varied, dictated largely by the interests and questions of community members in attendance. They have covered such topics as recent neighborhood crime incidents, longer term crime trends, questions about SPD procedures, curiosity about how officers got interested in law enforcement and how long they have worked in the Department and how neighbors and SPD can work together to improve safety.

## Assessment Design and Implementation

As was noted above, participants have provided informal, anecdotal reactions at each of the Living Room Conversations, but there was no formal, systematic attempt to solicit feedback on these events. After having facilitated about one year's worth of Living Room Conversations, the SPD Community Outreach Section sought a formal appraisal of these gatherings from the public's point of view. In particular, Community Outreach wanted to determine whether to continue sponsoring the Living Room Conversations, and if so, what mid-course corrections or improvements might be warranted. The Department retained a consultant to design and conduct this assessment.

Two factors influenced the consultant's design of the assessment. The first factor was a limiting one, involving one of the ground rules associated with the Living Room Conversations. As noted earlier, these events had no set invitation lists or sign-in sheets. This was in keeping with the intended informality of the gatherings and also to ensure that participants would not feel as though "names were being taken." Without rosters of attendees, however, it was possible neither to survey all participants nor to select a suitable sample for survey purposes. As a result, the decision was made to solicit the opinions of those who had served as the Living Room Conversation hosts, since they could be readily identified.

The second factor that influenced the design of the assessment was the nature of the information being sought by the Community Outreach Section. The value that community participants placed on the Living Room Conversations was clearly of interest, but staff members felt they had a good sense of this from the consistently positive anecdotal feedback they had already received. What the Community Outreach Section really needed to know was how to shape, improve and sustain these events going forward. As a means of getting ideas about strengths and weaknesses and for soliciting ideas for making changes, focus groups are preferable to straight evaluation tools as an appraisal mechanism. The ultimate decision was to combine the two assessment techniques, soliciting the opinions of Living Room Conversation hosts using both a short, written evaluation survey as well as focus groups.

The assessment design was implemented as follows: persons who had hosted Living Room Conversations were contacted and invited to participate in a focus group session to discuss their experience and make recommendations about this and other forms of SPD community outreach. The plan was to hold two focus group sessions, with 8-10 participants each, assuming enough hosts could be recruited. In light of the relatively small number of Living Room Conversations that had been held, there was concern about getting enough participants to hold two focus group sessions. This concern proved unwarranted. Instead previous Living Room Conversation hosts were quite interested and enthusiastic about coming to the focus groups so that two separate groups were possible.

The focus group sessions were held in a downtown location and the invited hosts had their parking taken care of and received a small honorarium for their participation. As they arrived, the hosts were each given a brief, written questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire solicited their personal opinions about the Living Room Conversations in which they had been involved. When all the invited hosts were assembled, the Department's consultant facilitated their discussion of the Living Room Conversations, based on a pre-designed discussion guide. Hosts were informed that the focus group sessions were being observed via a one-way screen and that the sessions were being recorded so that no comments or suggestions would be missed. Some staff members from the SPD Community Outreach Section attended each focus group session as observers but did not participate or have

any interaction with the Living Room Conversation hosts. The results reported here reflect the opinions of the 15 hosts who both responded to the written questionnaire and participated in the focus groups.

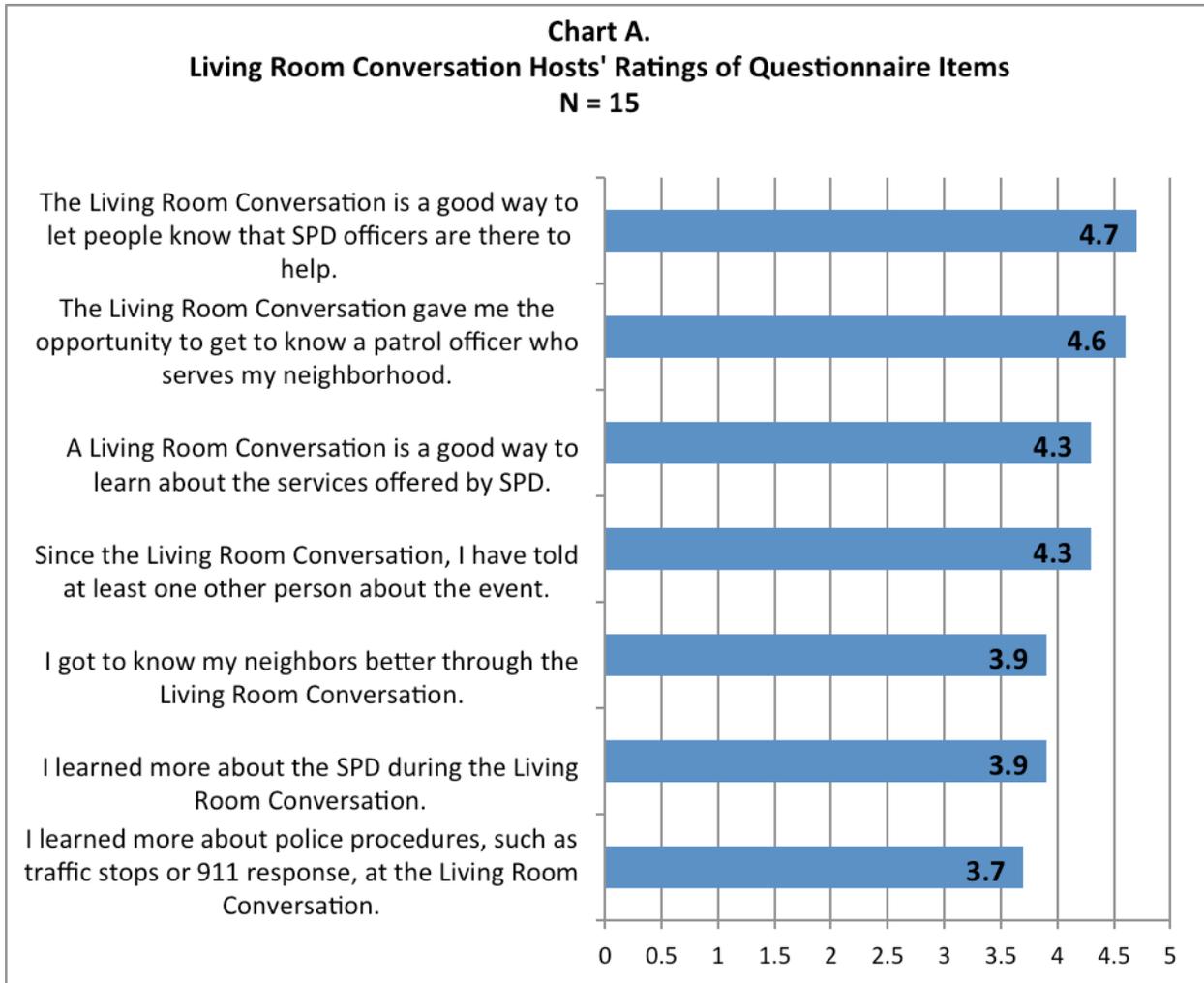
## Assessment Results

As noted, the assessment design called for Living Room Conversation hosts both to complete written surveys and participate in facilitated group discussions. The results of each are described below.

### Responses to Survey Questionnaire

The written surveys that Living Room Conversation hosts were asked to complete solicited information about the events themselves, about how the events affected opinions about the Department, about what information/insights were gained during the events and about whether such events should be continued.

- 1. Information about the Living Room Conversation events** – on average about 17 community members attended each of the Living Room Conversations, which were more likely to be held in private residences (just over half of those surveyed so indicated) than in public facilities. Two Conversations had 30 community participants and another three had about 20 people in attendance. Most of those surveyed (nine out of fifteen) indicated they had hosted the events by themselves. They represented neighborhoods from across the City.
- 2. Opinions about the Department** – when asked how the Living Room Conversation had affected their opinions about SPD officers and the Department in general, the overwhelming responses suggested a positive shift. Fourteen of the fifteen respondents indicated that their opinions of SPD officers became slightly or much more positive as a result of the event, with a rating of 4.5 on a five-point scale, where 5.0 is “much more positive”. Twelve of the fifteen respondents indicated their opinions of the Department became slightly or much more positive, giving a rating of 4.2 on a five-point scale.
- 3. What was gained from the Living Room Conversations** – respondents were also queried about some potential benefits they might have gained from the Living Room Conversations. Chart A provides the response ratings on each of these items. Each potential benefit was rated on a five-point scale where the 5.0 rating was “strongly agree.” As can be seen in Chart A, Living Room Conversations were rated the highest as mechanisms for letting people know that officers are there to help and for allowing residents to get to know the officers that patrol their neighborhoods. Respondents also felt they learned more about the Department and its services, and were afforded the opportunity to get to know their neighbors better, through the Living Room Conversations. Obtaining more information on police procedures such as traffic stops was the lowest ranked benefit on the list, but this still garnered a rating of 3.7 on a five-point scale.
- 4. Future of Living Room Conversations** – when asked if they would host another Living Room Conversation, thirteen of the fifteen hosts surveyed replied “yes, definitely.” And when queried about whether SPD should continue to hold these events, all those surveyed gave a resounding, positive reply.



**Key Points in Focus Group Discussions**

The Department’s consultant facilitated the focus groups of Living Room Conversations hosts, using a discussion guide developed in advance. To begin, participants were asked the first thing that came into their minds when they thought about their experience of hosting a Living Room Conversation. Terms such as “networking,” “rewarding,” “excitement,” “neighborhood,” and “positive communication” were most frequently used by participants. These were tempered, however, by mentions of the “apprehension” and “anxiety” some hosts felt not knowing how the events would turn out. For one host the concern was that not enough people would come; for another, the worry was there would not be enough room should too many people come. All in all the hosts were impressed most by the small group dynamic and the opportunity to get to know each other and police officers better. In the words of one, “it felt like a family social.”

Focus group participants were next asked how the Living Room Conversation had affected their views of SPD officers. For the most part, hosts commented that officers seemed more friendly and approachable in these informal, unstructured settings than they anticipated. One host noted particularly how articulate, friendly and open the younger officers were who attended the Living Room Conversations and suggested that SPD was doing a good job in its recruitment program.

Participants especially valued the opportunity of getting to know officers as “real people,” hearing officers share their apprehensions when making a traffic stop or responding to a call, for example, or learning what motivated them to become police officers in the first place. Focus group participants also noted how engaged the officers were with neighborhood residents, making one host wonder if the officers had been “hand-picked.” For others, it was very reassuring to see how invested officers were in keeping their neighborhoods safe and to know that officers were well-aware of the situations in neighborhoods that were of concern to residents as well. Hosts also appreciated that officers were able to explain when they can and can’t take action and why they follow the procedures they do in various circumstances. For one host the event helped broaden the view of the services officers provide beyond merely making arrests; another saw real value in letting kids see the person behind the uniform and badge.

Focus group participants were next asked how the Living Room Conversation had affected their views of the SPD as a whole. Here the responses were somewhat more varied. Hosts were clear-eyed about the likely motivation behind the Living Room Conversations, that is, the Department’s need to change and improve its image. Participants saw the Living Room Conversations as one part of that effort. For some the step was a positive one, designed to break down barriers; and they expressed pride in the Department for being interested in making a difference and trying something new. For one, the events felt a bit opportunistic and “political” going in, although participants generally felt that the Department’s willingness to invest in the Living Room Conversations demonstrated a positive motivation. For a few, the events did not improve their views of the Department, with some explaining that their views were already positive. For others the Living Room Conversation seemed a good start in changing perceptions, but represented only a first step.

The focus group discussions turned next to what actions Living Room Conversation hosts had taken as a result of these events, in particular things they would not have done except for their experience at the event. Many of the hosts indicated that their interaction/communication with neighbors had increased and was more intentional, in that they were more inclined to check on the welfare of others in their neighborhoods. Others found that the Living Room Conversation had served as a catalyst to start a neighborhood blockwatch or to re-energize an existing blockwatch. In a few cases the events led to better coordination among neighbors in addressing public safety concerns. In one neighborhood, for example, it stimulated the establishment of a community listserve for neighbors to keep in touch. In some cases hosts said they attended other public safety events, such as the annual Night Out Against Crime, which they had not done previously. At least one host has organized a series of social events with neighbors since the Living Room Conversation.

Hosts reported that the Living Room Conversations not only improved relationships among neighbors, but also changed their relationships with officers. Some hosts indicated they were more apt to call 9-1-1 for non-emergent situations, once officers let them know that such calls help build a fuller picture of what’s going on in an area. Hosts also indicated they invited officers to neighborhood barbecues and other events, now that they felt they knew the officers better. Some officers had provided contact numbers where they could be reached if people had questions or concerns and hosts reported a greater willingness to take them up on the offer. As one host put it, the Living Room Conversations promote positive contacts between community members and officers and SPD should do a lot more publicity about this. In their telling, the hosts themselves have taken on the role of publicists for the Living Room Conversations. Many indicated that they have told neighbors who did not attend the events, as well as their friends and co-workers about the events and encouraged them to host or participate in such an event if afforded the opportunity.

The final portion of the focus groups involved discussion of how Living Room Conversations could be improved and of what other forms of community outreach the Department might consider. The small groups involved, the informality and the settings in private homes, were aspects of the events that many hosts felt should be retained. Others mentioned that officers' personal stories and personal backgrounds were of particular interest to participants and officers should be encouraged to continue to share such information. A number of hosts also noted that they liked seeing the officers in uniform with all their gear and that should also continue. Several hosts liked learning more about calling 911 and about what to expect in response and felt that such information could be expanded and elaborated. Having local neighborhood officers in attendance at the events was a definite aspect to keep for all hosts. Where this had not occurred because of staffing issues or unexpected absences, having local officers there was cited as a needed change.

Among the most frequent suggestions for improvement in the Living Room Conversations was the need for some kind of follow-up. There was some difference of opinion about where responsibility for follow-up should lie, but not about the need for these conversations to continue. Hosts agreed that for any lasting impact, the Living Room Conversations could not be just a one-shot event.

Another improvement cited by several was the need for interpreters/translators at the Living Room Conversations. Some hosts felt that participation at their events was reduced because there was no guarantee that there would be translation services available. Being able to publicize such services would likely encourage broader attendance in the future, it was suggested.

A number of hosts felt that they should have been better prepared ahead of time for the events. For example, hosts should be briefed on event logistics and on how to handle child care issues. In addition, it was suggested that the job of event facilitator should be assigned, since it was unclear whether the host was expected to perform that role as well. One suggestion was to have some regular "ice breaker" types of questions available to get the conversation going. Others suggested that making local crime information or a roster of local officers available at the events, inviting all first responders (including EMTs and fire fighters) to the meetings, and providing more information on starting blockwatches would be welcome additions to the Living Room Conversations.

With respect to other forms of community outreach, focus group participants suggested that local officers be encouraged to show their support of existing neighborhood groups and structures by attending community events. Another suggestion was an officer/community member shadowing project where each could follow the other for a "day-in-the-life" type of experience. Having officers walking through neighborhoods was also cited as a valuable form of outreach by focus group participants. Finally, hosts felt that the Department should be doing more to help establish neighborhood blockwatches and to promote community outreach events via the Department website and in other ways.

## **Recommendations and Next Steps**

Staff in the SPD Community Outreach Section were able to review the dvd recordings of the focus group sessions the day after they were held in order to hear the feedback from Living Room Conversation hosts. Once the survey responses were tabulated, Community Outreach met with the Department consultant in a debriefing session to discuss the findings and what lessons to take from the assessment. From the review of the assessment materials and debriefing, the following recommendations and next steps emerged:

- 1. Develop pre-meeting preparation for Living Room Conversations.** Community Outreach staff will be developing prep kits with key points to give hosts a better idea of what to expect and how to prepare their guests for Living Room Conversations. These will include identification of the “big issues” in the neighborhood as well as how to consider and handle various logistical issues. Some canned crime statistics and other informational materials will also be available to support these events.
- 2. Provide post-event follow-up for Living Room Conversations.** Hosts were nearly unanimous in the need for follow-up on Living Room Conversations, but there is a limit to the capacity of the Community Outreach Section to support ongoing events. The next step, then, is to develop a “Continuing the Conversation” kit for community members to assist them in follow-through, giving ideas of events and activities that can be used and the resources available from the Department to support their efforts. Ideally the responsibility for continuation of the Living Room Conversation should lie with community members, but Community Outreach recognizes that neighborhoods will need help along the way. Another form of follow-up that Community Outreach will undertake is a formal thank you and check-back with the hosts and officers involved in each Living Room Conversation. This has occurred on an ad hoc basis and where it occurred, it was extremely well-received.
- 3. Local officer attendance should be ensured for Living Room Conversations.** Hosts underscored how much the presence of local officers is valued by community members at Living Room Conversations. It is imperative, then, that to the extent possible, all be done to ensure attendance by neighborhood officers. Community Outreach staff noted that a combination of a beat officer and a CPT officer often resulted in the best pairing, since the CPT officer would always be available if workload issues prevented attendance by the beat officer. While there are unavoidable circumstances when local officers cannot attend, these should be the exception going forward.
- 4. Officer assessment of Living Room Conversations should be undertaken.** Just as it was important to get an assessment of the Living Room Conversations from the point of view of their community hosts, it is also important to solicit the opinions and suggestions of the officers who have been participating in these events. In the coming year, an officer assessment, similar to that used with hosts, will be conducted.
- 5. Consider institutionalizing the Living Room Conversations through the Department’s training programs.** The positive interactions between community members and officers, fostered by the Living Room Conversations, are important to the Department and contribute to the ability of officers to do their jobs effectively. For this reason Community Outreach is recommending that officer participation in these events be incorporated into the Street Skills curriculum and into the Field Training Program for new officers. All officers should see these events as an integral part of their jobs and welcome the opportunity to participate in them.

## Bottom Line

The Living Room Conversations have proved to be a valuable community outreach mechanism for the Department. Well-received by community members, the events have fostered more positive relationships with officers and provided the impetus for neighbors to join with neighbors in promoting public safety. Planned improvements, including better pre-event preparation of hosts and more

systematic follow-up assistance for community members, will only enhance the benefits of the Living Room Conversations for both the public and the Department.