
Customer Service or Officer Safety

by Justin Edson, CCEA, COSS

“Officers should knock on front doors when taking enforcement action!”

~ An Elected Official



If you have worked in Code Enforcement or the Public Safety field for more than 5 minutes, you most likely heard an elected official or “upper management” request or demand that you knock on the front door of any property that you see a violation. Typically, these may also be the same jurisdictions that do not support additional self defense tools or training. Is knocking on the front door to have a face to face conversation good customer service? Yes.

While having a personal interaction with a violator may help build trust and support versus a letter with “NOTICE” written on it, it comes at a great risk for personal safety. And sadly when you bring this up, it is often ignored. This is where the CEOSF Risk Management Letter and international statistics should be shared from the CEOSF website.

Why is this a major safety concern - to approach the front door to deliver news of a violation, fine, condemnation, or impound? Think about the impact it has on the resident. You are informing them that something is wrong with their property, you might be impounding their beloved Spike - the family dog, or issuing a fine. In this day and age, emotions are high and the cost of living is through the roof. A \$30 parking ticket can make an impact on a persons day or life. The emotional connection with the family dog is like that of a child. Now you want to put an Officer or Inspector at their door, on their property, and deliver this news? Typically without any body armor, equipment, officer safety training, or even a partner.

An Animal Control Officer in California was shot through the door and killed because the owner thought the ACO was going to take his dog and arrest him. Code Enforcement Officer Charles Case in Georgia was shot multiple times with a shotgun and killed after posting a red tag condemnation on the front door. Police Officers have body armor, firearms, and other equipment and they are still attacked and shot. But agencies want to send unarmed and unprotected inspectors or public officers to front doors to deliver bad news? No verbal judo or “walk away” strategy is going to save you from a dedicated threat.

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I think we all can agree that speaking to someone is a better customer service strategy than mailing a notice. However, we typically deal with the small percentage of the population that have trouble with following ordinances and the rule of law. Often times these are sovereign citizens or individuals with mental illness. I have seen violators on their lawn cutting the grass with small scissors instead of gardening equipment. I have seen an aerospace engineer use a garden hose as a temporary water main line to his house until he figured out how to do it himself. He then filed a complaint on his neighbor for allowing ants on his fence.

Don't get me wrong, as a profession we should always continue our training in communication and de-escalation, but common sense would tell you this is not 100% full-proof for every interaction over the course of your career.

Recommendation

Trust me I have tried to make the points above and was unsuccessful. How do you navigate this discussion to promote your safety, but also show that you excel in customer service? The best first step is to build support. Start with whoever is directly above you. Once they support you, then work your way up the chain. Share the many resources on the CEOSF website including the Risk Management Letter and data. Show them the data on threats, assaults, and murders. Many of these were for "routine" cases that we handle on a regular basis. Look up California Senate Bill 296 - the State deemed Code Officials are at risk.

A successful strategy that I and many other agencies have done is to do an annual study session on your division in front of the elected body. This allows you to highlight successes, programs, and start to introduce changes to your operations with the data to back it up.

Do not simply tell the elected official or upper management, "no," when they tell you to knock on doors of violators. Let them know you understand where they are coming from, but times have changed and there is data to show that there is a higher risk with knocking on doors. A great example is neighbor disputes. Point out how often times the complaints involve neighbor disputes and you could be walking into a hostile environment.

Be safe, your job is not worth risking your life. I know we sometimes feel stuck in saying yes because the job is our livelihood, but you can approach these concerns in a professional and methodical way. Otherwise, look for a new agency that takes care of its people. They are out there!

About the Author

Justin Edson is a Public Safety Manager in California and previously served as a Building, Neighborhood Services, and Code Enforcement Manager across several cities. He is an ICC Certified Code Enforcement Administrator and a POST Field Training Officer. Prior to his 8+ years in Code Enforcement, he was with a Police Department for nearly 10 years. Justin is currently the President of the Code Enforcement Officer Safety Foundation.