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BY GRACE TOOHEY | GTOOHEY@THEADVOCATE.COM SEP 12, 2017 - 8:20 PM

Grace Toohey

The proposed community police ambassador program aimed at decreasing the divide between Baton Rouge Police and the people they protect came closer to fruition Tuesday at the city's latest police policy meeting where members finalized the application, requirements, description and training for the ambassadors.

"Community Police Ambassadors ... provide access to and a voice for community involvement, promote equal growth and development opportunities, and proactively address pressing issues," the mission statement reads.

The details of the program, which have been debated for months in police policy meetings led by Metro Council members Tara Wicker and Trae Welch, will be presented Wednesday at the Metro Council meeting and then brought into communities to share and recruit in the coming weeks.

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BRPD leaders show support for program to 'increase dialogue' with community, but questions remain

"If there's any overriding thought (for the ambassadors), it is we don't want crime in our communities," Welch said.

The community police ambassador application will ask for contact information, residency, references and confirmation the applicants are 18 years or older and willing to serve at least two years as an ambassador.

It then asks for applicants to list qualities that would be helpful in the role and for them to share how they are working to make the community a better place.

The ambassadors will be expected to attend training sessions and program meetings, and remain active in their communities.

The logistics for the training are to be decided — like how many sessions ambassadors will have to attend and how long each session will last — but East Baton Rouge Parish Assistant District Attorney Will Jorden along with Baton Rouge police have volunteered to run the sessions. The training sessions will focus on giving the ambassadors more knowledge about the criminal justice process, de-escalation techniques, and insight into the job of a police officer.

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Most of the information given in training is expected to be transferred onto a public website, so when ambassadors get questions, they can direct their neighbors to the online information, Jorden said.

"It's little things ... that help with the transparency," Jorden said.

On Tuesday, meeting attendees discussed the stigma that could come with becoming a police ambassador, like being seen as a "snitch" or a police agent, but ultimately, they decided the point of the program is to connect people more closely to the Police Department.

"The person who chooses to take this position, that person has to be able to wear that burden," community activist Michael A.V. Mitchell said. "There's no way you can get around that."

At the meeting, Baton Rouge police along with representatives from a local Boy Scouts council also introduced another way to connect officers to the community: a career mentorship program with youth.

The program, called Exploring and run under the same umbrella as the Boy Scouts, would offer the opportunity to both young women and men, ages 14 to 20, to explore career options in law enforcement through an ongoing partnership with Baton Rouge police officers.

"I think it's a great program," interim police Chief Jonny Dunnam said. "I think it would be a good recruiting tool as well."

Exploring already offers options for teenagers to get involved in emergency response and the medical field by teaming with East Baton Rouge Emergency Medical Services. The program also is active with both the Gonzales and the Zachary police departments.

Baton Rouge police have previously been a part of the Exploring program, but it hadn't been active in 26 years, Lt. Herbert "Tweety" Anny said.

"It just fell by the wayside," Anny said. "To my knowledge and understanding, it was very beneficial."

Dunnam said the program is already moving forward, and they are waiting to identify officers interested in taking on the volunteer mentor role, with the hopes they will be able to support about 24 young adults in the first group.

Wicker said such a program is exactly what the community police policy group has been talking about since its 2016 inception, and she was excited to see its emphasis on community service and life skills.

"(It's another way to) mend that relationship and make it more productive," Wicker said.