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NATIONAL NIGHT OUT EVENT IN BELMONT SIGNALS SHIFT TO APPROACHABLE, COMMUNITY-ORIENTED

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POLICE FORCE

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BELMONT – About 150 people, most of them children, gathered at Sargent Park last night for this town's second annual National Night Out – a nation wide community outing to bond local police departments with their citizenry.

For Police Chief Mark Lewandoski, Belmont's event was a way to make the Belmont Police more approachable.

"We've definitely moved into a mode where we want to be more community friendly," Lewandoski said as he looked around at all of the children playing and talking to his police officers. "We want our officers to be integrated into the community."

Lewandoski said he wants people to be comfortable reaching out to members of the police department and calling them when they need them.

One woman named Katie had five children with her who were all enjoying the bouncy house, the ice cream and the hotdogs.

"I want my kids to know the police and to learn a little bit about them," she said. She added that all of her children were looking forward to the K-9 demonstration – this time featuring two K-9s from the N.H. State Police – a drug dog and a patrol dog.

"Next year," said Lewandoski, "we'll have a dog of our own."

Last month, selectmen voted unanimously to purchase and train a K-9 and make Master Patrol Officer Evan Boulanger the department's K-9 handler.

For Boulanger, who was the primary organizer of last night's party, the event was about getting to know the people in the community and for the people in the community to get to know him.

He said about 18 months ago, Lewandoski told his department that it was going to be more focused on the community and the people who live in it.

Boulanger said people by nature are reluctant to change and he

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and the rest of the department "dug in their heels a little bit" but within six months, he said the entire department was 100-percent community focused.

He said now when he stops into a store or a business on a shift or goes to a park and visits with the people there, they all know his name.

"Guess what, some of them actually like me," he said.

National Night Out for him is like "cop therapy."

"This shows us why we really do this job," he said. "There's a time to kick down doors and a time to be a member of this community."

Last night in Belmont, it was all about the community.

Helping with National Night Out were the Belmont Rotary, the [Belmont Fire Department](#), the Belmont Selectmen, the N.H. Dairy Association that helped the department provide ice cream for everyone, and the Driving Toward Zero organization that aims to reduce the number of motor vehicle accidents to zero.

National Night Out is an event begun 31 years ago by the National Town Watch Association. Now held in communities throughout the country, National Night Out is designed to foster stronger relationships between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.

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