

Safe Communities – Working together to help keep Portugal a Safe Country

Our origins

When I retired from the Hong Kong Police in May 2005 having served some 31 years and moved to Portugal, Jane, my wife said to me - “David wouldn’t it be nice to know at least one police officer here? Not doing things by half, now through Safe Communities Portugal I probably know over a hundred or so in the various security forces throughout the country.

Retirement it was not to be and starting 3 weeks later I became a full time consultant with INTERPOL lasting four years commuting between the Algarve and Lyon in France. There after I undertook a short six months project with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on cross boarder policing. This latter job I would have done even without payment, taking me to countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, mostly bumping along unmade roads in a UN vehicle.

Finishing this in 2010, I was thinking of retirement, but then there was the problem with serious crime with overseas gangs targeting foreign nationals living in isolated areas in the Algarve. This was totally uncharacteristic of the Algarve and sent shock waves through the community, as well as politicians!

How we formed

This is when I met with Isilda Gomes who was then the Civil Governor of the Algarve and is now Mayor of Portimão as well as the Commander of the GNR for Faro District (Algarve). They were very positive and with the strong support of the GNR, Safe Communities Algarve, as it was then, was formed. Our founders were Marianne Guerreiro, Dan Birch, Jane and myself with Raoul Rui Martinez chairing our first General Meeting.

The aim of the association was to help the police communicate with the foreign community whom they had little contact with and to engage the foreign community more with the police, by understanding their work and processes, which are often very different to our home countries.

We held many public seminars, always well attended throughout the Algarve and for the first time many members of the public began to know who their GNR Commander was, who engaged with them in English at these events.

This led to a far greater mutual understanding of various policing issues, which is essential in combatting crime and ensuring safe communities - hence our name.

Thankfully those responsible for these crimes were apprehended and brought to justice. The security forces introduced new schemes, like their Safe Residence Program, different police forces began working closer together, there was better communication and crime began to fall, both in the Algarve and throughout the country.

In 2012 there was a major fire in the Eastern Algarve which affected many people in the area. We decided therefore to focus on this important public safety issue and in 2014 we entered into a partnership with the Civil Protect Authority for the Algarve, to help them promote rural fire safety to the foreign community. We were well equipped to do this with new volunteers

such as Chris Stretton who had extensive international security experience and crisis management, plus Ana Silva a municipal vet.

Our team started to grow, with Jim Litchko a cybersecurity expert who has done projects for NASA, but at the same so did the challenges and by 2015 we began expanding in other parts of the country. We changed our name to Safe Communities Portugal and our building blocks were further cemented in the form of protocols at national level with the GNR, PSP, SEF and ANEPC. Through these partnerships we were able to meet regularly, enter into various projects and put forward ideas directly to various ministries and government departments.

To date we have made 50-60 recommendations concerning rural fire prevention and protection. Working closely with the Secretary of State for Tourism, much of this aimed at the safety of tourists. We have completed and/or are undertaking some 30+ projects, and have been involved in working groups shaping government measures. We have travelled to various parts of the country meeting officials, explaining our work and delivering seminars to the various communities.

Although we had prepared well for crisis by applying and gaining approval as a Public utility by the Council of Ministers, with the help of our Board Member Lilia Martins and also becoming Portugal's only official Civil Protection Voluntary Organisation under Portuguese law serving primarily the foreign community, we were about to face the ultimate test brought about by Covid-19.

Covid-19 and our volunteers

It was clear early on that we needed more resources to cope and we decided to advertise for volunteers, perhaps one of the most important decisions we made.

This brought a great response, with a new influx of those who are clearly willing to give up their time to work for SCP to benefit the community.

We now have more people with a greater variety of talents, skill and experience, who have proved their worth over the last four months. This ranges from translation, communication in the form of Elise Slotte from Sweden, technical and research skills to simply putting together the daily reports, a mammoth commitment, SCooP was borne, providing communication in a different way.

Helping the community understand the many laws and plethora of information, which of course is in Portuguese, was a major challenge and we relied much on communication through Facebook followers, which grew 40% during this short period. Our website greatly expanded with more than 50 pages of information including more importantly various Guides in translated by Jenny Byers, FAQs, international travel and of course our Daily Situation Reports, prepared by Chris Stretton, Daniel Fernandes and myself, and the Overseas Report by Louise Birch. On some days there were up to 16,000 visitors to our website and its bandwidth had to be expanded to cope!

Our records show that over a 4 month period on Facebook, emails and phone calls, we received in the order of 40,000 comments enquiries, around 70% of which we responded to. Our new volunteer Eliana Taveras helped answer many of these as well as the translation of various speeches including those of the Prime Minister. At one stage engagements through our Facebook were almost half that of the GNR. Over the period of the pandemic we reached four

million people or in other words 29,000 a day! We gave weekly updates on KissFM radio with audiences both in Portugal and overseas.

This could be expected of a sizable organisation, but in fact we are a small group of 20 dedicated volunteers, that provides full services free of charge to communities in Portugal as well as visitors.

We are a household name, not just here in Portugal, but overseas as well. This was best summed up recently by Vicky from Monmouthshire on our FB page who said: *"This page is fabulous. One of the reasons I am moving to Portugal is because of the information here."* *"Truly, it has made such a difference, sitting in the UK, unable to get to Portugal, and now, we head off to start our new lives in mid- August".* I feel a new volunteer in the making.

Would you like to serve the Community?

We are very pleased to hear from those who are interested in helping keep the community safe which is vital at this time. This can just be simple translation work in different languages, research, assisting at our displays, helping with communication during crisis situations and those with technical knowledge.

Safe Communities is proud to be a voluntary organisation serving the community in Portugal.