



METROPOLITAN POLICE DEPARTMENT

CITY OF ST. LOUIS • 1200 CLARK AVENUE • ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI 63103

In April of 1992, I attended a meeting with neighborhood residents and business leaders to discuss the problems that were affecting their community. At the first meeting there were approximately 20 persons in attendance. During the course of the meeting the residents complained of the high amount of crime that was occurring in their neighborhood. They also complained about the lack of city services, believing that the city had written off their community and was only providing services to the more affluent neighborhoods.

The residents were assured that this was not the case and under the St. Laths Police departments Community Oriented Problem Solving concept, we intended to try and help alleviate some of their more pressing concerns. The residents were then requested to make a detailed list of the major problems affecting their community.

Several weeks later a second neighborhood meeting was held. At this meeting the residents advised us of the problems most affecting the quality of life in their community. Their first and foremost concern was a local tavern and liquor store, the Shang-ra-la lounge. Residents complained that this establishment had been a source of constant problems in the neighborhood. Drug sales were routinely conducted inside the tavern and lounge. Prostitutes frequented the tavern and also conducted business around the premises. Neighborhood residents advised that it was dangerous to wait for the bus or to walk in the area for fear of being assaulted by the drug users. Women especially feared to walk in the area for fear of being approached by subjects who believed they were one of the many prostitutes working the area. The area was a haven for drunks and derelicts that would openly drink and urinate on the public streets. A local park could no longer be used by the neighborhood children as same had been taken over by the drug addicts and drunks. Several neighborhood children had brought home drug paraphernalia that they had found in the park. A local business directly across the street from the park was considering closing down due to the constant threats from the drug users in the area.

Residents also complained about a barber shop directly across the street from the Shang-ra-la lounge that was being used for illegal gambling purposes. The residents stated that the subjects gambling in the barber shop would use the drunks and drug addicts to run over to the liquor store and purchase alcohol for the subjects gambling.

There were also complaints about the numerous vacant buildings and lots. These complaints stated that these vacant properties were in total decay, with high grass and weeds covering the properties. Several residents complained that their children played on these vacant properties and several had been seriously injured. Also, several homicide victims were found on these vacant

properties. Prostitutes and drug addicts used these places to conduct their illegal activities, and street persons would sleep in them.

Along with the complaints about the vacant buildings and lots, the residents complained about rental property in the area being used for illegal activities. They advised that most of the rental property was owned or managed by persons who took no interest in maintaining the property or ensuring that the tenants did not engage in criminal activities.

Complaints were received about the poor lighting in the area. Residents were afraid to remain outside after dark since the street lights were either broken or inadequate. Due to the poor lighting in the area, residents felt that persons from other neighborhoods would come to their community during the late hours and illegally dump trash and garbage in their alleys thus making the area residents seemed unconcerned about their community with this leading to an increase in crime.

Several minor complaints were received concerning neighborhood youths congregating and causing disturbances during the late evening hours.

After hearing most of the community's concerns, we conducted foot patrols in the area to ensure that these complaints were legitimate. These patrols were conducted throughout the day and evening shifts to determine whether there was a time pattern. After approximately 2 weeks investigating the complaints it was determined that an overwhelming majority of the complaints were valid.

After verifying the complaints of the area residents it was necessary to formulate a plan to help alleviate some of the problems. One of the first things observed at the community meetings was the resident's skepticism. The leader of the community group advised that many of the residents thought the C.O.P.S. concept was another fly by night program that would not last more than a few months. Many had been complaining for years about the problems their neighborhood had been experiencing and felt that C.O.P.S. was nothing more than a new form of "lip service". According to the community leader, most of the residents did not expect much from the police. Based on this we felt it was necessary to tackle some of the more visible problems affecting the community.

The first item we addressed was the problem concerning the vacant buildings and lots. We contacted our Asset Forfeiture unit which has a computer link-up with the city hall computers. Asset Forfeiture was able to supply us with information as to who owned the vacant properties in our project area. Through them we learned that the vast majority of the properties were owned by a city agency called the Land Reutilization Authority.(L.R.A.) These properties had been taken over by the city for a variety of reasons. Usually when the owners failed to pay the taxes on the property, or the previous owner had died and there were no relatives to claim said property. Several of the properties were owned by private individuals who for a variety of reasons either failed or refused to maintain the property.

We next contacted the director of L.R.A. and discussed with him the residents concerns about the vacant building and lots. We were advised that most of these properties were on a demolition list but were not classified as high priority. We were advised that in order for the properties to be listed as high priority we would have to have the Alderman make a special request for the building to be moved up on the list, or we would have to show that the buildings and lots

represented a health and safety hazard to the residents in the area. With this information we contacted the local Alderman and advised him of the situation. The Alderman contacted L.R.A. and had these properties placed on the high priority list for demolition, However it was learned that even though we were moved up on the list, it would be approximately 6 to 8 months before the buildings were torn down.

Not wishing to wait this long we opted to try and have the demolition of these buildings expedited. We obtained a 35mm camera and went out and photographed each of the derelict buildings. We photographed both the interior and exterior of each building. We next contacted the community group and requested that they write letters to L.R.A. detailing the condition of the buildings and their concern for the safety of their children who play around these properties. Armed with the letters and the photographs we returned to L.R.A. and again expressed our desire to have these buildings torn down. A special building commissioners hearing was held and as a result the buildings were torn down immediately.

We next contacted the owners of several properties who were failing to maintain said properties. Letters were written to each owner advising them of the condition of their properties. Each owner was also supplied with a copy of a building code inspection done by the city buildings inspector's office. Each owner was apprised of the numerous building code violations on their respective buildings.

Each owner was instructed that they had 30 days to respond and either repair, or clean up and board up their properties. Every owner contacted responded within the allotted time period and made the necessary repairs or boarded up.

After the building problems were corrected we began to work on the numerous vacant lots in the area. City Refuse was contacted and advised that these lots were strewn with trash. City refuse responded immediately and cleaned up all the trash on the lots. We next contacted City Forestry and advised them of the weeds and grass that was growing out of control on these lots. City Forestry advised that due to budget problems they were unable to come out every month and cut the grass. They advised that they could come out and do it once for the entire summer. City Forestry did respond right away and cut all the vacant lots however we still had to find a solution to the problem as with the summer months approaching, the grass would be growing out of control and as with any un-maintained vacant lot when the grass gets out of control people begin to throw garbage and trash on same.

I re-contacted L.R.A. and advised them of the problem with the vacant lots. L.R.A. advised that they had an Adopt-A-Lot program where city residents could rent vacant lots for the sum of \$1.00 per year. City residents were allowed to turn these lots into community gardens, parks, or playgrounds. Attempting to bring the community into the C.O.P.S. concept even more, I contacted the leader of the community group and asked if his block unit would be interested in joining the city's Adopt-A-Lot program. I also advised him of the problem with City Forestry concerning the vacant lots. I asked him if his block unit would be interested in maintaining the vacant lots if I could get the equipment supplied. He and the rest of the community group were more than willing to assist in this project.

Operation Brightside, which is a branch of city government dealing with keeping the city clean was contacted. I advised them of the problem concerning the lack of funds for City Forestry. I then advised them of the neighborhood residents' desire to maintain these vacant lots themselves.

I requested and received donation of lawn mowers and other lawn care equipment to be given to the community group so they could maintain the vacant lots. Along with keeping the grass cut on these lots, two of the larger lots on the block were turned into a small community park, two were turned into community gardens, and one was used by a local business for its customers.

After the problems with the vacant buildings were taken care of, we began to work on the refuse problem in the alleys. The community group was organized and they spent the day collecting garbage from these areas. The city refuse department then responded and collected all the trash.

Along with picking up all the trash in the alleys, the community group acquired some paint from a local business and painted over the gang graffiti that was on some of the businesses and residences in the neighborhood.

City lighting was contacted and a work crew was dispatched to repair broken street and alley lights. At our suggestion, several of the area residents and businesses installed exterior lighting on their property.

We next began to work on the barber shop that was being used for illegal gambling. We conducted surveillance on the property and as a result were able to make several gambling arrests. While affecting these arrests, we observed that the interior of the barber shop was in total disarray. There were leaking pipes, exposed wires, etc. I contacted a Cosmetologist and asked her if the health code standards for barber shops and beauty salons are very stringent. She stated that in Missouri they are extremely stringent. She advised that very explicit rules must be observed to be licensed by the State of Missouri and that said license could be revoked for unsanitary conditions.

With this information I contacted the City of St. Louis Health department and advised them of the condition of the barber shop. An inspector responded and conducted an inspection of the property. Based on his report the barber shop was ordered to cease operations for violation of health codes. The Electrical inspector was then contacted and he responded to conduct an inspection. His inspection resulted in over 20 electrical code violations. As a result he not only ordered the business closed, but also ordered the subjects to vacate the premises as the building was unsafe.

After the aforementioned problems were taken care of we began to formulate a plan to deal with the main problems in the area. While a good portion of the problems, drug sales and use, prostitution, public drinking, disturbances... etc., were spread out over a several block area, it appeared that the catalyst for most of these problems was the Shang-ra-la tavern and liquor store. This establishment had been in operation since the early 1950's and had been operated by the same family. This establishment had been under fire from the police and community for the past several years due to several well published incidents. In particular, a female who was being sexual assaulted by several males ran to the tavern requesting assistance, the owners however, not wishing to become involved, closed and locked the door refusing her access and refusing to call the police. The female was subsequently raped by the subjects.

A check in the police department's computer-aided dispatching system revealed that this area was responsible for approximately 300 calls for service in a single year. Most calls being of a violent nature, such as shooting, cuttings, etc... The police department's policy on this particular area was to handle the calls for service, make arrests and write reports. Any liquor law violations

would be handled by the Vice division or State Liquor Control, two agencies that were both understaffed.

We decided to first talk with the owners of the tavern so we could possibly work together to help alleviate some of the problems. We went to the tavern to talk with the owners believing they would want to work with the police and community. We were wrong. The owners were extremely hostile, and they told us that they had no control over what their patrons did once they left the tavern. They further stated that they had no intention of joining or assisting the police and community group in trying to make the neighborhood a safer place to live. Finally they stated that they had been in the neighborhood a long time and had no intention of changing their business practices.

After the meeting with the owners of the tavern it was quite clear we would get no cooperation from them. We therefore decided to adopt a zero tolerance policy on any law violations we observed in the area. The first thing we did was start arresting all the subjects who were drinking on a public Street.

In the past, the police department's policy on these types of city ordinances was to issue the subjects a court summons on the scene and release them. We felt that in this case this would not be beneficial. We opted to take all violators into physical custody. All subjects were arrested, conveyed to prisoner processing where they were required to make a bond. We had almost immediate results with this policy. Most of the subjects were shocked that they were being booked. Many argued that we did not know our jobs as we were supposed to give them a summons and release them. When they realized that they would be conveyed downtown and booked, they became upset, knowing they would have to walk back from downtown. In the span of about three weeks the word was out that if you drank on the street in this area, you would go to jail. The vast majority of this type of violation ceased.

Next we worked on the problem of the neighborhood park. This park had been taken over by the drug dealers, addicts, and drunks. Under city ordinance it is illegal to be in a city park without a permit after 10pm. It is also illegal to consume an alcoholic beverage in a public park without a permit. We contacted the Parks department and requested that they post signs in and around the park advising everyone of these ordinances. We then began a zero tolerance policy regarding these ordinances and other city ordinance violations.

Anyone caught drinking or in the park after curfew was arrested and booked. We conducted surveillance on the park to identify the drug users and dealers. Numerous drug-arrests were made in the park. After about a month, the users, dealers and drunks got the message that the park was off limits. The Parks department then came in and cleaned up the park.

Our next problem was the lounge and liquor store. An investigation revealed that attempts had been made to close the tavern and liquor store down before, but with negative results. It seemed that the owners had hired attorneys who would present witnesses at hearings to confirm the owners' contention that they operated a respectable business. This compounded with the fact that many neighborhood residents feared testifying against the tavern for fear of repercussions. We contacted the community group and advised them that we were going to attempt to close down the liquor store and tavern. We further advised them that in order for this to be successful, it would have to be a joint police and community endeavor. We would need witnesses to testify at an Excise Commissioners hearing, and in criminal court. We discussed at length that their

cooperation and support were essential. By this time the community group's membership had grown to about 100 persons. Approximately 35 to 40 agreed to testify at any court proceedings.

Believing we would need documented evidence to make a case against the tavern we decided to conduct video surveillance of the premises. We secured the use of an undercover van and a video camera equipped with a night vision lens. We then contacted the Liquor Control department and requested the assistance of one of their agents. We set up the surveillance directly across the street from the tavern and liquor store. The surveillance was conducted during the late evening and early morning hours over a two day period. As a result of the video-taped surveillance we were able to film patrons leaving the bar with open containers of alcoholic beverages and several subjects were filmed exiting the tavern and urinating on the street in front of the tavern. Several of the local prostitutes were filmed entering and then leaving the tavern with male patrons. These same females were then filmed fondling the male's genitals directly in front of the tavern and liquor store. Several fights were video taped with one incident showing a subject confined to a wheel chair being pushed from his chair and assaulted by several other subjects. Several illegal drug transactions were observed to take place directly in front of the tavern, and then both the dealer and user would re-enter the tavern. Numerous subjects who appeared to be underage were filmed entering and exiting the tavern. By the time we had finished the video surveillance we had approximately 12 hours of video tape depicting numerous law violations directly related to the tavern and liquor store.

Shortly after conducting the video surveillance and along with agents from Liquor Control, we entered the tavern and liquor store. A search of the premises was conducted. As a result, 10 arrests were made inside the tavern for assorted liquor law and city ordinance violations. In addition, cocaine, marijuana, and several firearms were seized from the tavern. The owners, who were on the premises at the time, were also taken into custody.

With copies of the video tape, and all the police report documentation we felt we had enough evidence to present to the Excise Commissioners office for revocation of the liquor licenses. All of the evidence was presented to the Commissioner and he scheduled a hearing.

Several weeks after being presented with the evidence, we were called to testify before the Commissioner. I contacted the community group leader and requested that he bring as many witnesses as possible to the hearing to testify. We were hoping to get at least 10 persons to respond. On the day of the hearing approximately 50 persons attended to testify against the tavern and liquor store. As everyone present insisted on testifying the first hearing lasted about 8 hours. At the end of the hearing the Excise Commissioner ruled in our favor and revoked the liquor licenses of the tavern and liquor store.

The owners of the liquor establishment appealed to the Circuit Court system and several weeks later, the Circuit Court judge assigned to the case upheld the revocation of the liquor licenses stating that the video taped evidence and the community's overwhelming desire to close the establishment down was evident. On July 7th 1992, the Shang-ra-la lounge and liquor store lost their license and was permanently closed.

When we first undertook this problem, our first impressions of the residents were that they would not be very supportive of this type of policing. Many of them expressed concerns that this was just another program that would fall by the wayside after a few months. Our goal was to not only try to alleviate some of the problems affecting this neighborhood, but also to change the opinion

most of the area residents had concerning the police. Part of our goal was also to show the residents that in order to more effectively deal with crime problems in city neighborhoods it was necessary for the police and community to work on community problems and concerns together.

Numerous city, state, and private agencies were contacted and assisted in bringing this project to a successful conclusion. City Hall agencies such as the Buildings, Electrical, and Health divisions assisted in the problem solving process. Their ability to issue court summons for code violations proved invaluable to us.

Agencies such as Forestry, Lighting, Sanitation and Operation Brightside not only assisted us in the problem-solving effort by cleaning up the refuse in the area, they were also instrumental in showing the neighborhood residents that these types of city agencies are not restricted to working in the more affluent neighborhoods.

State Agencies like State Liquor Control were helpful in providing personnel and administrative assistance.

Private agencies such as St. Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO), which is a nonprofit organization that assists neighborhoods in forming block units and community groups, were very helpful in expediting some of the requests made at city hall. They also provided facilities for conducting the vast majority of the community meetings. They made phone calls to residents ensuring their attendance at meetings. They contacted local politicians when the extra push was needed to gain the assistance of city and state agencies.

The police department itself was the source of an overwhelming amount of information and assistance. We were given complete freedom by our supervisors to conduct investigations and contact necessary personnel to assist in this project. The computer section provided computer logs sheets outlining the types of calls for service for this neighborhood which were used to identify specific problem areas. Our crime scene personnel were made available to us for purposes of taking photographs that were later used to expedite many requests for service by various agencies. The television section assigned personnel to assist us with the video equipment used in the surveillance on the lounge and liquor store. We were given complete access to undercover vehicles which were also used in the surveillance portion of this project. The list of people and agencies within the department that assisted us in this could cover several pages. We were never denied the necessary tools required to complete this task.

To a certain extent even the news media assisted us in this project. They were advised of this communities desire to make a change in their neighborhood. When the hearings on the tavern were being conducted the media was there to record the citizens' views on this particular establishment. Public support for the closing of the tavern grew. People who at first were skeptical changed their attitudes when they saw the news and how the police and community working together could make a difference.

The results in this neighborhood were remarkable. Prostitution in the area decreased significantly as did the illegal drug trade. The neighborhood park which had been overrun by the criminal element now has two baseball fields which are used by several little league baseball and softball teams. The community group has hosted several neighborhood cook outs and parties in this park. The city has installed large water sprinklers in the park for the area children to play in during the summer months.

Residents in the area no longer sit by when they observe suspicious activity. They contact the police immediately. They have kept their community group intact and have monthly meetings to insure major problems do not re-surface.

Residents are no longer afraid to walk or wait for the bus in the area where the lounge and liquor store used to be. A small food market has taken the tavern's place.

Vacant buildings and lots are no longer an eyesore to the neighborhood. They have been torn down. Residents are maintaining the lots with the donated equipment from the city ensuring the area remains clean and trash free.

Probably the best goal achieved is that the residents are no longer afraid to talk with the police. I believe that some attitudes concerning the police have been changed. People who once refused to acknowledge us, now stop and wave us over just to talk.

I recommend that other police agencies who are thinking about becoming involved in problem solving to give the officers assigned to project areas the freedom to experiment with different ways of handling problems. Supervisors should be told to offer as much support to the patrol officers as possible. A supervisor may disagree with a certain officer's approach to a problem, however they should not criticize or refuse the officer's requests. Discuss the reasons why he may want to handle the problem in a particular fashion. Even though you may not agree, unless it violates department policy, let him try his idea out. Make it known that the department supports this type of policing and will make all department resources available to the patrol officer.

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