

PUBLIC HOUSING SAFETY SCREENING PROGRAM OF SACRAMENTO COUNTY

“

The projects are kids. Everywhere you go kids are playing. If checking on applicants will keep out child molesters, rapists and drug pushers, I'm all for it.

”

Naomi Santiago

Public Housing Resident

Captain Rick Braziel
Sacramento Police Department

Pat Duplechan, Director of Housing
Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency

Catherine Camacho
Safe Streets, Inc.

November 93-October 1994

PUBLIC HOUSING SAFETY SCREENING PROGRAM OF SACRAMENTO COUNTY

Scanning The Problem:

Many Public Housing complexes in Sacramento County have been plagued by drug dealing, gang violence and associated non-violent crimes such as automobile theft, burglary and graffiti. The Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency was unable to effectively determine the nature of those potential applicants for public housing due to restrictive state laws on accessing criminal history information. Therefore, many individuals with violent and repetitive criminal histories were allowed into public housing leading to concentrated problem areas for the Police Department.

The inability to effectively screen out potentially dangerous tenants negatively affected the workloads of the Police Department, the housing authority, the district attorney, the county courts and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. More importantly, many law abiding public housing tenants were living in constant fear. The Police Department and the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency took the lead and formed a committee made up of representatives from the concerned agencies and the community tasked with finding a way to improve the situation.

Analysis:

In the past, the Sacramento Police Department had handled calls for service in public housing as isolated occurrences. As new Problem Oriented Policing strategies became ingrained in the individual officers, the roots to many problems surrounding public housing came to light.

The SPD worked with SHRA to evict many public housing residents when crimes were

committed and helped to bring in other city agencies (Code Enforcement, Fire Department, etc.) to improve overall conditions in the complexes.

Response:

Captain Rick Braziel, Pat Duplechan of SHRA and Catherine Camacho of Safe Streets, Inc., began to research the possibility of preventing potential problem individuals from obtaining public housing. They accessed state and federal laws and regulations regarding housing certification criteria and privacy rights of individuals. They found favorable support in federal regulation for denying housing to those with certain violent backgrounds or whose criminal records could reasonably make them a threat to the health or safety of other public housing residents. They also found examples in other cities of concentrated efforts to screen tenants and enforce laws in public housing. Using this information, they worked with the community to introduce legislation at the state level to allow direct access by the Sacramento Housing and Redevelopment Agency to state Department of Justice data bases for the purposes of screening public housing tenants. Until this time, the Attorney General of the State of California had denied access to this valuable resource for this purpose.

California State Senator Leroy Greene sponsored Senate Bill 54 in 1994, which would allow for state criminal record summaries to be used by the SPD and SHRA to screen public housing tenants on a two year pilot program in Sacramento County. It was met by opposition from a range of civil and tenants rights organizations. The committee formed by SPD and SHRA began to build a constituency in response to the opposition. They cooperated with other agencies to share staff resources and sought community input into how to implement the screening program. They were flexible and allowed several amendments to the legislation to incorporate due process for those turned down for housing and to guard against discrimination in tenant selection.

Assessment:

The goals had originally been to reduce crime and increase safety in public housing, to reduce costs to SHRA for eviction proceedings, lost rent, damages and staff time, and to improve the image of public housing. All these goals have been met to some degree since SB 54 passed and the SHRA has been able to screen out tenants with questionable histories.

Additionally, the SHRA has funded a Community Service Officer position in the SPD to conduct the criminal history reviews and provide that information to SHRA. The team work has paid off by preventing over 900 violent offenders and falsifiers of applications from gaining public housing. In terms of calls for service and police dollars saved, many of our worst public housing complexes now have no more than a trickle of calls for service, and violent activity has dropped dramatically, in some areas resulting in 100% reduction in certain crime categories such as murder, rape and arson.

The screening process was but one way that the SPD has attempted to incorporate community agencies into its effort to improve public safety in Sacramento. We are confident that many more successes are yet to come as the resources available within the community partner up with those within our department to solve the problems or society faces.