

# **GROUP HOMES: A MULTIAGENCY APPROACH TO A CITY WIDE PROBLEM REDUCING CALLS FOR SERVICE TO JUVENILE GROUP HOMES**

FRESNO POLICE DEPARTMENT, CALIFORNIA, 1996

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**THE PROBLEM:** Patrol officers have looked at juvenile group homes as a drain on police resources. In 1995, forty juvenile group homes were responsible for 1024 police calls for service. The calls range in priority from the simple runaway to disturbances and assaults. Moreover, five of the forty homes comprised a full 50% of those 1024 calls. A small group of these homes created an impression that group homes were heavy calls for service generators. Officers came to view themselves as supplemental staff for a group home.

**ANALYSIS:** Research indicated that a lack of communication between agencies and education about each agency's roles and reporting responsibilities were an impediment to handling problematic group homes. Group homes were unable to report problems and no universal means for analysis of group homes led to inconsistent addressing of problem locations. Effective group homes were not networking with ineffective ones to share successful operational tactics.

**RESPONSE:** A Group Home Forum involving all civic agencies that take part in the regulation and control of the group home industry was formed to encourage the regular exchange of information relating to the status of group homes. Quarterly meetings with agencies were held to address problems and needs of the group home industry. Training and education were provided to the group home industry to better serve their clients.

**ASSESSMENT:** A review of the calls for service to group homes have steadily decreased since the inception of the program. The distribution of calls for service is evening out. The percentages vary little between homes for number of calls generated. Based on the first quarter statistics a projected number of calls for service in 996 are approximately 575, that is a dramatic drop in calls from the 1024 of 1995.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The City of Fresno is approximately 100 square miles of urban residential neighborhoods. The city is divided into five policing areas, which together serve a population of over 405,000 ethnically diverse people. Last year the 526 sworn officers collectively responded to 393,560

calls for service. This shows a marked increase from the 242,077 that the department responded to in 1985.

Aside from the overall increase in calls for service, the Fresno Police Department has experienced a parallel rise in juvenile crime. As the level of violent offenses rise, so is the

number of potentially violent juveniles held in juvenile detention centers. As a result, the limited space that was once available in detention centers for all types of juvenile offenses, are being filled with only the most violent offenders. Juveniles that once were in secure detention facilities for non-violent offenses are now being placed in the group home setting. Due to the juvenile justice system's lack of space, the City of Fresno has experienced an alarming rise in calls for service at group homes within the last few years. The goal of the group home project was a simple one; reduce the number of calls for service coming from residential group homes.

In investigating this seemingly nebulous and complex social problem, the Fresno Police Department's Northeast Problem Oriented Policing Team and specifically Officers Don Gross and Eric Eide, have created a unique forum of agencies who have an interest in lessening the burden of residential group homes in the community.

## SCANNING

Historically, patrol officers have looked at group homes as a drain on police resources. Officers identify the locations of such homes on their particular beat and expect to return repeatedly for a myriad of calls. The calls range in priority from the simple runaway to disturbances and assaults. Often officers would see themselves as supplemental staff for a group home. Those in charge of the facility were unable to deal with the juveniles at the location and call law enforcement to deal with the particular problem child.

There were numerous complaints from patrol officers regarding continual problems at specific homes. Also, officers would report problems with certain group home's staff members failing to cooperate with them. Group home staff commonly called the police to scare and threaten juveniles they could not control.

At one point a city council member became involved in the group home debate and proposed a change in the city municipal code. This proposal would allow the city to charge for repetitive calls for police service to group

homes. This was an attempt to make the group homes more responsible for their use of city services. There was also a stream of requests that came from other council members on specific locations that needed attention from the P.O.P. team.

What became readily apparent was that the City was subsidizing a private service. When law enforcement and other agencies were called to the group homes repeatedly the taxpayer was now footing the bill for a service that was to be handled by a private concern. The group homes, which were already compensated for the care of these juveniles, were draining a disproportionate amount of police resources.

During the preliminary phase of the group home project, Department of Social Services Community Care Licensing, was contacted to provide a list of the all the group homes in the Fresno area. In analyzing police calls for service, it revealed forty locations were collectively responsible for 1024 calls for police service during 1995.

Even more surprising was the fact that five of the forty homes comprised a full 50% of those 1024 calls. This statistic led to two very important discoveries. First, there was a small group of these licensed homes that were responsible for the impression that group homes were heavy calls for service generators. Secondly, and possibly more important, was a vast majority of these homes that went virtually unknown by law enforcement as group home locations at all.

In networking with licensing it became apparent that the agencies involved in the regulation of group homes either directly (such as Community Care Licensing) or indirectly (such as Police, Juvenile Probation and County Mental Health) had very little interagency communication. Licensing, for instance, relies on self-reporting of law enforcement contact by the group home. In some instances in comparing the number of police calls and number of law enforcement contacts reported to Licensing, fairly large discrepancies were found. Instances occurred where group homes were under reporting calls by as much as 50%. As a result of this lack of communication between agencies, there was also

a potential for lack of accountability by group homes for the use of public services (i.e. Police, Fire, Ambulance, etc.).

## ANALYSIS

In beginning the analysis phase of this project it was decided to begin by reviewing the past attempts to deal with the group home problem. Traditional solutions have been ineffective in dealing with problem group homes: regulation of the home's location, repeated law enforcement response, and fragmented punitive measures.

The first attempted solution, regulation of a group home location, is unfeasible as federal statute states that state, county or city governments cannot make any laws that affect the location of a residential group home that is six clients or less. Following this line of rationale appears to be a dead end, and as a result, often overlooked as a solution. This statute, however, is one of the most powerful tools to regulate the problem group home once the rationale for its existence is understood.

Another typical solution, repeated law enforcement response, is a drain on law enforcement resources that does not affect the root cause of the problem. By simply responding repeatedly to a group home, law enforcement actually becomes a supplemental form of staff to the problem home. In effect, the problem is nurtured by repetitive response by enabling the home to put off dealing with specific internal issues, as law enforcement soon becomes the safety valve when problems occur. In the long term, the temporary solution is too costly to the city.

Finally, fragmented punitive response has shown to be minimally effective for problem homes. By agencies looking at one home at a time and levying penalties individually rather than dealing with the problem comprehensively, we achieve no long-term benefits. More often than not, we simply engage in repetitive paper work with no real effect. In addition, group homes are very defensive when it comes to dealing with regulatory agencies. The perception of the group home industry is one of "us against them." Also, agencies involved in the group home arena often speak out of their field of expertise and

responsibility. This, at best, leads to a feeling of contempt by the individual group home and distrust by the industry as a whole.

After reviewing these prior attempts at a solution to the group home problem, agencies in Fresno that were most directly involved in the group home arena, were contacted.

These agencies are: Department of Social Services—Community Care Licensing (the agency responsible for direct regulation of the group home industry), Fresno County Juvenile Probation (the agency that is the main provider of the client base), Fresno County Mental Health (the agency that most often involved the treatment of the group home client) and Fresno County Department of Social Services (the agency that responds as an advocate of the client). The following facts became readily apparent:

- Due to lack of communication between involved agencies, group homes were able to under report problems they were incurring/causing.
- Lack of education about each agency's roles and reporting responsibilities led to misunderstanding regarding handling of problem group homes.
- Lack of networking between agencies involved in regulation group homes led to overlooking of potential problem locations and situations.
- No universal means for analysis of group homes led to inconsistent addressing of problem locations.
- Effective group homes were not networking with ineffective ones to share successful operational tactics.

In addition, group home problems were viewed as an economic model rather than a social one. Instead of looking at the nebulous societal causations, which manifest themselves in group home's calls for service, the group home product (client care) and how the consumer (society as a whole) could get the most from the supplier (the group home industry) were examined. In

realizing that the same agencies that were most affected by the quality of the group home product (IE law enforcement and other civic agencies) included the largest group home consumer (IE Juvenile Probation), a possible solution became more readily apparent.

## RESPONSE

In treating the group home industry as an economic model the most cost effective solution became apparent:

- Formation of Group Home Forum involving all civic agencies that take part in the regulation and control of the group home industry.
- Regular and consistent exchange of information relating to the status of group homes in the City of Fresno.
- Quarterly meetings with agencies to address problems and needs of the group home industry.
- Provide training and education to the group home industry to better serve the clients in the home.

The agencies involved in the group home project were the Fresno Police Department, Community Care Licensing, Fresno County Juvenile Probation, Fresno County Department of Social Services, and Fresno County Mental Health Department. Representatives of the agencies met and discussed the issues that they felt were important in the success of residential group homes.

Each agency had a specific area of expertise and knowledge to contribute to the project. The Fresno Police Department acted as the information-gathering agency. Our department was able to give specific statistics as the number and types of calls for service generated by each group home. Fresno County Juvenile Probation was able to provide the expertise in the area of regulation of the placements that their agency had made. As this agency was the single largest entity in the City placing juveniles in homes, they have an enormous amount of economic control over the industry. Fresno County

Department of Social Services provided expertise in the area of child placement through the County and again held a large economic lever. Fresno County Mental Health provided insight as to the counseling aspect of group homes and to the mechanism wherein children with serious emotional difficulties could be helped.

The forum then began to look at each individual agency's specific function and was able to better define how they could dovetail their perspective responsibilities together to provide a comprehensive answer to the group home problem. The agencies mutually agreed as to the goals of the forum, which were:

- Provide expertise to one another for the mutual benefit of the community in relation to group home operation.
- Provide education and training for the group homes as an industry.
- Identify group homes in need of positive change and provide agency specific assistance to assist that home.
- As a last resort take all appropriate regulatory steps to sanction a group home which persists in being problematic.

After the formation of the forum a date was set for a seminar to address all of the group home administrators in the metropolitan Fresno Area. This seminar took place on November 2, 1995 and served several purposes.

First, this was a chance for the group home administrators to meet the members of the forum. The seminar served as an introduction to the goal of the forum itself, to provide education and training for the group home industry to better serve their clients. Next, it presented the group home administrators a unified group of agencies with a specific and united purpose. In the past regulatory agencies were not aware of each other's course of action or their respective areas of responsibility, this allowed for problems to go unnoticed. Additionally, it made the group home industry aware that there would be uniform accountability as the agencies were able

to more effectively monitor the industry as a whole. Finally, it provided the industry with a new source of education and information for problems they were encountering in the group home arena. Group home administrators were encouraged to contact the agencies for which they had questions and to ask for advice for their problems.

A second meeting was held in order to respond to the unanimous request of the group home providers for training in the area of street gang and drug influence recognition. On February 26, 1996 the Fresno Police Department, along with Fresno County Juvenile Probation spoke to over 100 group home administrators to better educate them on what to look for in the juveniles they serve.

This type of communication among agencies and the group home industry will continue. Meetings are held at the end of each quarter to exchange information as to the concerns of the group home community. Also, involved agencies are able to address pertinent trends they see developing in individual homes as well as the industry as a whole.

## ASSESSMENT

The results of the group home project have been very promising. In reviewing the calls for service that group homes in the City of Fresno produce there has been a steady drop since the inception of the program (see Figure 1) The distribution of calls for service is flattening out also. No longer do only five homes comprise 50% of the calls for service (see Figure 2). Rather, the percentages vary little between homes for number of calls generated. Based on the first quarter statistics a projected number of calls for service in 996 are approximately 575, that is a dramatic drop in calls from the 1024 of 1995.

More importantly, the response from the group home industry has been overwhelmingly positive. The initial fears of a confrontational relationship between the forum and the group home industry have given way to a mutual respect. The group homes now realize they have a ready source of information should they need assistance in a particular area. Interestingly there

have been no instances of sanctions being taken against a group home as a result of the actions of the forum.

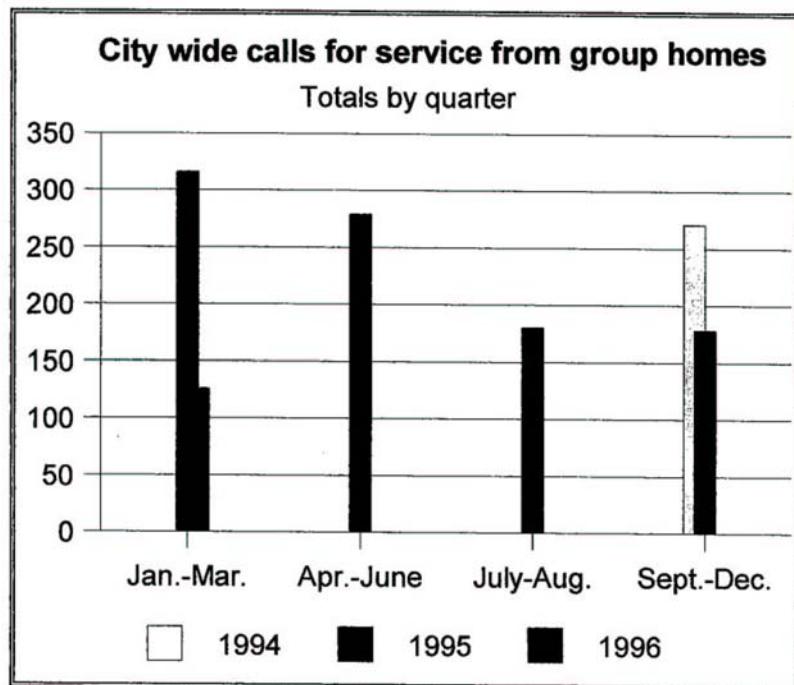
## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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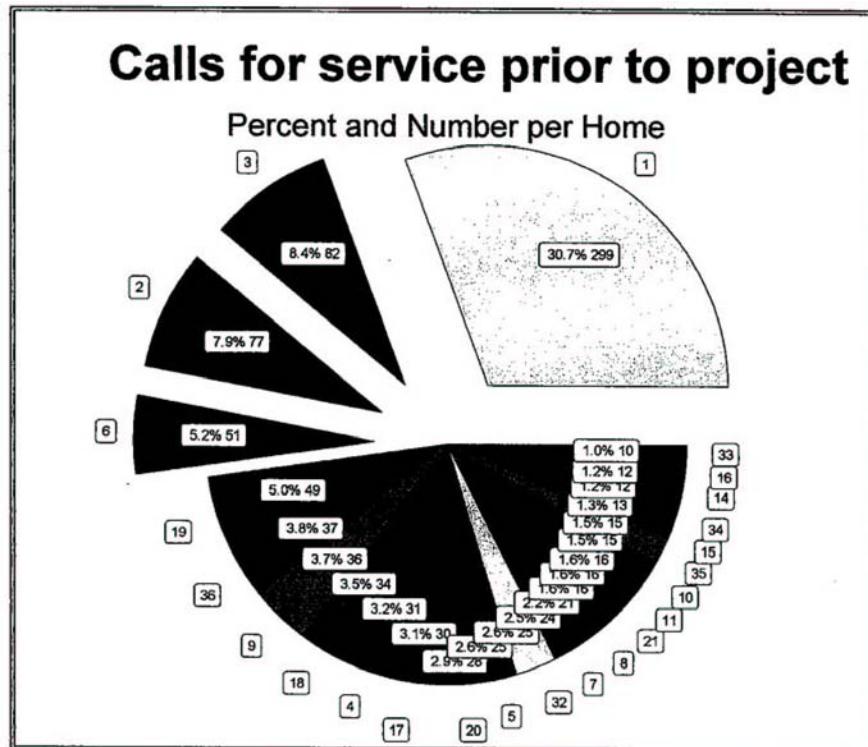
## NOTES

1. The group home project was originated at the officer level in the Northeast policing area.
2. Officers Don Gross and his partner Eric Eide envisioned the project as a way to impact the number of calls for service from the 20 group homes that were located in their policing area.
3. Officers relied on the expertise of the other involved agencies in order to manage this problem solving effort.
4. The commitment of resources from the Fresno Police Department was minimal (approximately 40 man hours total) for a yearlong program.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

