

Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department  
West Hollywood Station



# **OPERATION OUTREACH**

Project Summary

## **"OPERATION OUTREACH"**

### **PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION (SCANNING)**

Over ten years ago, the residents of unincorporated West Hollywood voted to incorporate as the City of West Hollywood. Newly elected officials were strong believers in taxpayer financed soup kitchen and feeding programs and started many of them. This soon got out of hand, with large numbers of transients camping in parks and public areas to be closer to the no strings attached benefits. 99% were not from West Hollywood.

There are over 38,000 residents who live within West Hollywood's 1.9 square miles. Additionally, the population is never less than double that figure, due to the internationally known entertainment venues, shopping, and nearly 200 restaurants and nightclubs. It is among the most densely populated areas in Southern California. By 1995, there were estimated to be between 200-500 transients in the City of West Hollywood, a contract policing City of the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department. There are thousands more in the neighboring 10-15 square miles.

After years of providing free services, city officials and the community activists began to experience "compassion fatigue." They saw the crime rate and "perception of fear" explode. By 1992, the gradual elimination of these programs left only the West Hollywood Homeless Organization's (WHHO) 45 bed rehabilitation center. Nonetheless, the transients, and crime, remained. In fact, without the free giveaways, the nefarious activities of criminal transients increased in aggressiveness.

Public areas and parks remained inundated with hundreds of transients who loitered, slept, and drank, in full public view. Among other problems, this caused an underutilization of the park by residents who complained that deputies were not doing enough to address the issue, in spite of large numbers of related arrests and rapid responses to calls. City Environmental Services was also inundated with complaints from residents awakened by rummaging recycling thieves who left huge messes. The City also faced financial sanctions for not meeting government environmental quotas.

In paraphrasing "BROKEN WINDOWS," written by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, Columnist John Leo said, "when winos begin to doze off on stoops and sidewalks, a powerful signal goes out that the residents of the area have ceased to care about conditions. This leads to a break in morale and a feeling that events are out of control... The stage is set for prostitutes, druggies, and criminals to drift in, and the neighborhood goes under." This certainly proved true.

In early 1995, West Hollywood received matching funds from the Federal Crime Bill for six deputy sheriffs and a sergeant for community policing. The overall mission of these deputies was to "reduce the perception of fear" and to "involve the community and its resources."

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### **PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION (CONT...)**

As one of its many programs, the Community Oriented Policing - Sheriffs (COPS) Team deputies and civilian volunteers compiled, computerized and worked to resolve directed patrol requests. They noticed the most frequent requests (over 300 in one year), cgner\_elf\_Qj, transients-Mterirrg, panhandling, public drinking, etc. The deputies decided to make this issue a priority.

At the same time, City officials specified that whatever new approach was to be taken, each transient was to be treated as an individual, and that no homeless "sweeps" should occur. Most City council members and City officials were members of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and did not want a perception that the City was "anti-homeless." Deputies also knew that many cities are embroiled in litigation for implementing perceived draconian measures to address the "homeless problem."

It was obvious many people didn't differentiate between "criminal transients" and "the homeless." Instead, all transients were routinely referred to as "homeless," which inspires compassion, while the sometimes more accurate term of "criminal transients" evokes another image.

### **ANALYSIS**

How do sheriffs deputies respond to public demands to reduce crime, and the perception of fear that transients cause, without being perceived as cold-hearted and "anti-homeless"?

To address this, deputies exchanged new ideas, expectations, and limitations, with the City's Public Safety Office, City Environmental Services (Recycling & Refuse), West Hollywood Homeless Organization (WHHO), Public Safety Commissioners, community activists, neighborhood watch groups, and numerous other organizations. The community review reflected broad based "compassion fatigue." People were highly supportive of any legal, moral, and ethical method that could be developed. In fact, there were hundreds of people who were so fed up, they didn't care how it was done.

Deputies attended community policing training and read scores of articles. Unfortunately, the articles articulated the problems, but no solutions, let alone politically correct solutions. In fact, open hostility between social service agencies and police were common denominators.

Although crimes specifically committed by transients are not tracked, deputies concurred it was substantial, especially nuisance offenses. City crime statistics showed that station arrests were up from 4487 in 1994 to 4587 for 1995 (up 2.2%). The overall arrest ratio for crimes increased from 54.33% to 56.74%, while the arrest ratio for thefts alone rose from 29.7% in 1994 to 34.88% in 1995. Deputies routinely enforced "letter of the law" violations.

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### ANALYSIS (CONT...)

In viewing this, one could deduce that deputies were continuing to apply themselves to the job of arresting people, the right people. However, this effectiveness did not appear to be reflected in the fear perceived in the community review and by the people who generated over 300 directed patrols.

### SOLUTIONS (RESPONSE)

As a planned response to the review, deputies asked the social workers of the WHHO, City Environmental Services staff, and a shopping cart retrieval service to ride along with deputies in what became known as "Operation Outreach."

An Operations Plan clarifying the mission specifies, amongst other things, that deputies enforce the letter of the law. However, if no crime exists, transients will be informed of outreach services by a social workers. If transients wish to go to the shelter, deputies will immediately drive them there. At least monthly, the team approaches every transient that can be found.

Deputies did not expect to eliminate the problem. Instead, the realistic yet admittedly nebulous goal of "reducing the perception of fear" and positively impacting the community's quality of life, without a backlash, was set. In time, this long term approach was anticipated to positively impact the crime rate. Keeping the problem from becoming any worse was expected to be easily achieved.

### EXTRA TOOLS

#### Letters of Agency (trespassing arrest authorization)

On patrol, deputies often arrived at a problem and asked the transient to leave. Either he wouldn't leave, or would just walk away without being arrested. The public's perception of fear and negative view of law enforcement would increase as they saw the law was unable to resolve the issue. It seemed no one could/would sign the arrest forms, but plenty of people were able to call to complain.

Deputies responded to residents and business complaints of loitering by obtaining a "Letter of Agency" authorizing deputies to make trespassing arrests without the owner being present to sign the private person's (citizen's) arrest forms. Over 100 active letters of agency exist and 90% of the letter of agency locations have their problem eliminated within weeks.

The problems that are not easily eliminated are usually mini-market type locations. Since new transients come to the Los Angeles area from across the nation each week, these locations are considered to be high maintenance. However, it is rare a person is arrested twice, as the zero tolerance policy is quickly discovered.

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**EXTRA TOOLS**

Public Nuisance Charge (372 of the California Penal Code)

Deputies realized that a small percentage of criminal transients were occupying an inordinate amount of time, with about 30 transients arrested at least 15 times per year. Just two such men had a total of 43 arrests in 1995. Since the entire station made 4587 arrests in 1995, these men made up nearly 1% of all arrests, not to mention all the calls that didn't result in an arrest. Unfortunately, local judges consistently gave these individuals "time served" after their night in jail. Certainly, these men, and dozens of others, were independently responsible for a lot of the public's perception of fear.

Because of Operation Outreach, deputies heightened their credibility in the eyes of court officials. Deputies capitalized on that by compiling detailed histories of the most problematic criminal transients and writing individual public nuisance supplemental reports. Now, with each arrest, the court views a lengthy synopsis of public nuisance, rather than a report that essentially says, "saw drunk, arrested same."

**RESULTS (EVALUATION)**

To measure the effectiveness of a program that strives to "reduce the perception of fear" isn't easy. The goal itself requires that one not look simply to short term statistics to measure results. However, some comparative examples are appropriate.

During the eight monthly Operation Outreaches thus far, there were 74 arrests, and of the 187 unduplicated social worker contacts, 89 transients refused help. This confirmed many people's perception that "homeless" for some, is a choice. Many do not want to face the rehabilitation homeless shelter, that requires sobriety and working towards becoming a contributing member of society, while others welcome the help.

WHHO shelter workers report increased participation by transients in social services designed to get them off the streets. Shelter workers have tremendous respect for deputies as transients universally report that deputies treat them professionally, but don't give any breaks when the law is violated.

Arrests varied from alcohol related offenses, to narcotics, to letter of agency trespassing arrests, etc. Had deputies conducted "sweeps" without the outreach workers, it is highly probable there would have been major negative repercussions for operations averaging 10 arrests of the "homeless" each time. However, there have been absolutely no negative repercussions.

Although City Environmental Services does not keep statistics on citizen complaints, supervisors state they are down dramatically. In fact, their participation is waning as they no longer perceive this years-old time monopolizer to be a major problem. City collection of recyclables continues to climb.

Deputies request transients to remove their property from stolen shopping carts and place it into huge plastic bags provided to them. The retrieval service takes the cart and returns it to the store. The number of transients pushing shopping carts in the City has dropped dramatically as the tone was set that a legal way to address the situation was established. During the eight operations, 377 shopping carts, mostly abandoned, were removed from the streets.

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RESULTS (CONT...)

The courts are also taking these quality of life issues more seriously. Recently, problematic transients have received six months in jail for public drunk and other nuisance crimes, as well as mandated alcohol counseling.

Some transients remained in the area but no longer commit nuisance crimes in public view, while other long term public drunks now go to great lengths to conceal their drinking from public view. A few confess they are more afraid of another long winded speech from a social worker than of getting arrested, or having to carry all their belongings in a hefty bag. Some displacement has occurred but WHHO workers counseling areas include the entire perimeter of West Hollywood and some neighboring police agencies are now availing themselves of the WHHO services.

The goal of keeping the problem from getting any worse was rapidly achieved. Directed patrol requests to deputies and the city have decreased dramatically. Deputies are routinely openly thanked by City officials and members of the public for the considerable decrease in public nuisance activity.

Informing the public was part of the Sheriffs Department's strategy, so deputies invited the media to ride along. Reporters and homeless advocates have said they are unaware of any operations like this. A few police agencies briefly conducted "sweeps" while social workers independently counseled transients. No communication between social workers and the police existed.

Three local papers and the Los Angeles Times have ridden along and published stories of the success of these operations. People from City Hall, the community, and participants were interviewed and described the tremendous success that has been achieved. Additionally, an article written by the Sheriffs department is to be published in the summer issue of the Sheriff Times.

**INSTITUTIONALIZATION (PHILOSOPHY AND ORGANIZATION)**

This operation and other effective measures have increasingly involved all patrol personnel. Patrol deputies see the merit and effectiveness of this "politically correct", yet "letter of the law" approach. They have increased similar arrests and give shelter referral cards to transients when it's not an Operation Outreach night. Patrol deputies are working towards the idea that if a transient is committing a crime, he goes to jail. If not, he is given referral information.

Concerns by Sheriffs supervisors that deputies would resent or dislike the idea proved totally inaccurate. Most deputies were so tired of handling calls about this seemingly unsolvable issue, they were truly grateful that something, anything, was being done. Other deputies are impressed by the consistently high arrest statistics and "letter of the law" enforcement policy.

Interestingly enough, deputies have gained new respect for the social workers for being willing to go into dark alleys to help someone. Deputies have overheard some of the shelter workers "liberal" friends query them during the ride-along about "working with the cops." The social workers dedication and knowledge that they are reaching transients they would not otherwise reach, helps to motivate them. They have not interfered nor critiqued the deputies duty to enforce the letter of the law. Because all entities use on duty personnel, no additional costs are incurred by any entity.

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### **INSTITUTIONALIZATION (CONT...)**

As with many successful ways of working towards solutions, if these methods were halted today, the success achieved would be quickly eroded. This is a long-term, never give up project.

Deputies have received many inquiries from other police agencies as a result of articles about Operation Outreach. In each case, operations plans have been provided to facilitate their implementation of similar efforts. Operation Outreach is readily adaptable to any interested police agency and has proven itself to be an innovative and effective approach to the transient issue.

Business Marketing principals talk about "goodwill." The goodwill attained by the Sheriffs Department with all mentioned entities has been substantial, and worth the effort alone. Operation Outreach is not a panacea to this long term societal and criminal issue, but is an effective way to work together instead of against each other.