

COMMUNITY ORIENTED PROBLEM SOLVING

1996 HERMAN GOLDSTEIN

TEAM AWARD



SANTA BARBARA POLICE DEPARTMENT
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INTRODUCTION

Detective Alex Altavilla and Officer Mike Aspland are enthusiastically nominated for the Police Executive Research Forum's annual Herman Goldstein Excellence in Problem Solving Award as a result of their highly successful problem solving effort at the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge, 302 East Haley Street in the city of Santa Barbara. The Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge was a night club occupying a one story commercial building on the northeast corner of Garden and Haley Streets. This is a commercial/residential district and is approximately two blocks from Santa Barbara's most heavily travelled and visited tourist area known as "Old Town." This commercial district has been the focus of a recent major redevelopment endeavor amounting to millions of dollars by the City and private business. Finally, this is an attempt to upgrade this section of town for tourism appeal, which is one of Santa Barbara's major industries and, in general, to increase the overall quality of life in the "Old Town" section of State Street.

SCANNING

WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?

For the past twenty years, the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge and the surrounding area of Garden and Haley Streets have been a haven for narcotics activity, primarily "rock

cocaine," where many patrons and visitors openly sold and used narcotics. It was common knowledge with Santa Barbara residents and those visiting the area that if you wanted to purchase rock cocaine, Garden and Haley Street was the place to go twenty-four hours a day, seven days week. In recent years local drug dealers competed with Los Angeles Crips/Blood gang members pedaling their rock cocaine inside and outside the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge and on adjacent street corners and in local area motels.

As with any area plagued by narcotics, there were other crimes associated with the area. Burglaries, thefts, robberies, assaults, prostitution and other assorted misdemeanor and felony offenses were a plague on this neighborhood. The Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge became the focal gathering point for both local and out of town criminals. Parolees, probationers, juveniles, junkies, fences, and criminals on the run from around the country congregated at/near this club. The frequency of reported crime and arrests were disproportionately the highest in the city of Santa Barbara. Because of the out of control narcotics activity and associated crime, the quality of life in the surrounding neighborhood and commercial district was dangerous and unsafe for the residents and business owners. The overall situation was unacceptable to the residents, the Police Department, and the community.

FOR WHOM WAS IT A PROBLEM? WHO WAS AFFECTED BY THE PROBLEM AND HOW WERE THEY AFFECTED?

There are at least four apartments located directly across the street from the Elks Lodge. Additionally, there are two apartment complexes and other residential dwellings located within one block of the Elk's Lodge. Residents were habitually harassed by subjects attempting to sell them drugs and prostitution. People who used drugs would be found in the residents' back yards, alleyways, and stairs. Children living and playing at these locations would risk stumbling across drug paraphernalia left behind by drug users and residents would find their car antennas broken off to be used as crack pipes. Lastly, residents became victims of property crimes on a regular basis.

In addition to people living in the area, there were numerous businesses located within the same block as the club. Merchants expressed fear of finding drug paraphernalia and human waste each morning when they arrived at work. Like their neighbors, they were also victims of property crimes. Those who patronized the businesses would complain of being panhandled for money, asked to buy drugs, and threatened by the criminal activity in the area.

The Santa Barbara Public Access Cable studios were located within 50 yards of the lodge. The station broadcasted late into the evening and had a parking lot located to the rear of

the building. This lot could not be seen from the street. Employees and users of the station were afraid to walk through their parking lot at night for fear of being accosted by drug users and sellers.

As a result of these crime problems, the Santa Barbara Police Department expended several thousand man hours annually. Officers and detectives would spend time handling calls for service, arresting and booking suspects, completing investigative follow-up, and conducting directed patrols in the area. These efforts, however, made little impact to reduce crime occurring in the area.

Police efforts dealing with these crime problems had a trickle-down effect on other areas of the criminal justice system. The District Attorney's Office saw increased case loads, as did Municipal and Superior Courts. The County Probation Department and State Parole Office found themselves dealing with a larger number of new probation/parole cases.

The deteriorating quality of life also negatively impacted area residents, churches, and businesses stretching over several blocks to one of Santa Barbara's major tourist districts, the "Old Town" area of State Street.

HOW DID THE DEPARTMENT HANDLE THE PROBLEM IN THE PAST?

Historically, the Santa Barbara Police Department took a traditional/reactive approach to handling the problem in the area of Garden Street and Haley Street. The focus included responding to calls for service, implementing directed patrols, and conducting undercover operations. In particular, two major undercover operations were conducted within the past five years. These efforts resulted in many individuals being sentenced to state prison for narcotics sales; however, the problem continued as new rock cocaine dealers rapidly replaced those arrested. The area developed a well-known reputation throughout California as Los Angeles Crips/Blood gang members entered the area dealing rock cocaine and at times competing and fighting with local area rock cocaine dealers.

At the patrol level, officers would make frequent checks of the area between calls for service. These spot checks resulted in the arrest of many people for violations such as being under the influence of cocaine, possession of drugs, drug paraphernalia, robbery, and felony/misdemeanor battery violations. Patrol officers also used letters of authority from property owners to enter and arrest subjects who trespassed on surrounding properties for the purpose of committing drug related crimes. The Santa Barbara City Public Works Department even installed high intensity lights in the intersection to make the area brighter at night. Per the Police Department's request, General Telephone modified area pay phones so they could no longer handle in-coming phone calls.

Overall, the Police Department's response lacked consistency and coordination between concerned parties inside and outside the organization, and failed to incorporate innovative problem solving techniques. Moreover, the true root of the problem was never identified or addressed and there was a lack of effective direction regarding this problem. No matter how rigorous the enforcement efforts, it seemed that the problem would return within a short period.

WHAT INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED ON THE PROBLEM? WERE THERE ANY DIFFICULTIES OBTAINING THE INFORMATION?

Statistically, for a thirteen year period (1983 to 1996) there were approximately 2,181 reported offenses at the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge and the immediate area. These offenses ranged from simple Municipal Code violations to thefts, assaults, prostitution, fencing stolen property and narcotic sales and possession offenses. In addition, these offenses resulted in 2,415 arrests during that same period.

One of the more significant crimes to occur, which was directly related to the narcotics and prostitution problem at Garden and Haley Street, was the brutal 1992 murder of a prostitute who frequented the Garden and Haley Street area. Though this case is still unsolved, investigators state that witnesses last saw the victim in this area shortly before her death.

Over the same period hundreds of complaints of drug sales had been reported by residents, tourists and businesses in the neighborhood. Officers also interviewed and surveyed people in the neighborhood. The narcotics unit also conducted surveillance of the Dennis Palmer Elks Lodge.

Despite a near continuous law enforcement effort to identify, arrest and imprison known drug dealers in the area the problem continued to escalate and grow worse with the invasion of the out of town Crips/Blood gang members. After reviewing crime statistics, conducting surveillance and reviewing numerous pieces of information from informants and complaining parties, Detective Altavilla and Officer Aspland realized that past efforts had failed to solve the ever increasing narcotics problem.

ANALYSIS

WHAT WAS THE GOAL OF THE PROBLEM SOLVING EFFORT?

Narcotics Detective Alex Altavilla and Beat Coordinator Officer Mike Aspland worked together and developed a comprehensive vision to eliminate the problem entirely and to improve the quality of life in the immediate area. Their effort employed the resources of public and private entities, and focused the entire organization on solving this problem.

Given our agency's past performance in addressing this problem, many in the organization thought this was an unrealistic goal, but that did not discourage their vision.

WHAT STRATEGIES WERE DEVELOPED?

The Santa Barbara Police Department's Operations Division utilizes the "Problem Solving Team Policing" concept at the patrol level. Each team is part of an Area Command that is based on beat areas within the city. Each team holds monthly meetings for officers assigned to specific beats. These team meetings allow officers assigned to one area, who work different shifts, to come together at one time to identify problems that affect where they work. Patrol officers exchange information and discuss solutions to problems collectively as a unit rather than on their own. Without these meetings, such an exchange of information and ideas would not occur.

Officer Aspland was assigned as the Beat Coordinator for the area where the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge was located. As the Beat Coordinator for the affected area, Officer Aspland was responsible for coordinating and running the team meetings. The issues associated with the Dennis Palmer Elks Lodge location were raised at a team meeting held during July 1995. Officers working this area expressed frustration with the on-going

problems at the Dennis Palmer Elks Lodge and discussed possible responses to the problem.

As a result of this meeting, Officer Aspland's team sergeant and the Department's narcotics sergeant began holding planning sessions with members of the Police Department to identify and acquire the resources necessary to address this problem.

Detective Altavilla and Officer Aspland participated in the planning process to develop an overall strategy that employed traditional and non-traditional policing techniques. Learning from past efforts, they held a Problem Analysis Advisory Committee (P.A.A.C.) meeting consisting of representatives both inside and outside of the organization. The District Attorney's Office, Probation Department and State of California Alcohol Beverage Control (A.B.C.) all participated in this meeting. The Police Department was represented by all three division commanders, watch commanders, patrol sergeants, detective sergeants, narcotic detectives, beat coordinators, and patrol officers.

As a result of the P.A.A.C, it was decided that a three step, multi-agency response to the problem would be used.

The first step was to target the street level rock cocaine dealers and those individuals from Santa Barbara and the "Crips" and "Bloods" street gang members from outside the area who were supplying the rock cocaine to the street dealers. This required the resources from the Narcotics Unit, beat officers, Tactical Patrol Force Officers (a special unit in the Operations Division), agents from A.B.C., and representatives from the Probation Department and District Attorney's Office.

The second step was to revoke the license to sell alcoholic beverages at the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge. This step required the resources of the State of California Department of Alcohol Beverage Control. There was a need for a strong commitment from A.B.C., who in the past, had failed to follow through with license revocation as promised after the two previous undercover operations.

The third step was the eviction of the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge from the premise at 302 East Haley Street. This required the resources of the Santa Barbara Police Department, District Attorney's Office and the four absentee property owners and their attorneys. Additionally, the success of this project required the commitment and support of residents living in the area, as well as business and property owners.

RESPONSE

One of the traditional techniques employed by Detective Altavilla and Officer Aspland was the application of an undercover buy/bust operation. Unlike the previous two buy/bust operations, this operation used personnel not only from the Police Department but from the Probation Department, District Attorney's Office and A.B.C. During this operation, A.B.C. actually provided all the undercover agents who made the rock cocaine purchases from inside and outside the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge. The District Attorney's Office committed one Deputy District Attorney to handle all prosecution to ensure consistency and to initiate the abatement of the building if the property owners failed to cooperate.

In this operation, every narcotics transaction was videotaped to enhance the prosecution of suspects, A.B.C. revocation efforts, and to provide a permanent record to support the extraordinary approach and mitigate criticism from any source.

During a two week period the buy/bust operation was conducted using A.B.C. agents under the direction and control of Police Department personnel. Thirty-four rock cocaine purchases were conducted inside and outside the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge, which were all documented on videotape. A search warrant was served at the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge where rock cocaine and dealer paraphernalia was seized. In total, twenty-eight

suspects were arrested for sales or possession for sales of rock cocaine. Several of the arrestees were Los Angeles Crips/Bloods street gang members who were supplying the rock cocaine to the street dealers. All suspects arrested were convicted and ninety percent of the defendants were sentenced to state prison terms.

Detective Altavilla knew that the evidence and information, such as the videotaped transactions secured during the first component, the buy/bust operation, would be invaluable when dealing with the last two components of the response.

Detective Altavilla knew that A.B.C. was eager to move forward with liquor license revocation, unlike their response after our previous two buy/bust operations. Detective Altavilla anticipated this positive response by A.B.C. because of their involvement at the P.A.A.C. meeting during and the rest of the operation. A.B.C. ultimately suspended the license and are currently in the revocation process.

Detective Altavilla knew that as long as the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge remained at 302 East Haley Street so would the rock cocaine sales. Therefore, Detective Altavilla forged on with the third and final component of the response. The removal of the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge from the building.

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After locating the absentee property owners in Los Angeles, Detective Altavilla advised

them of the situation and the ramifications if they failed to take action. This was followed-up by a letter advising the property owners that the property would be abated or forfeited if the conditions continued. Through Detective Altavilla's perseverance, he was able to convince the attorneys representing the property owners that the case for abatement and forfeiture was strong. Faced with overwhelming evidence, the attorneys convinced the property owners to evict the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge. Ultimately, they were evicted and the narcotics activity and crimes associated with the narcotics activity no longer exist.

ASSESSMENT

WAS THE GOAL ACCOMPLISHED?

Recent information from residents, business owners, and drug informants prove that narcotics activity and associated crimes have completely stopped. Property owners are investing money in building improvements and new businesses are moving into locations that previously were vacant. Both residents and business owners have renewed confidence and trust in their ability to work with the Santa Barbara Police Department to solve problems.

Needless to say, the permanent removal of the Dennis Palmer Elk's Lodge from the

neighborhood, and the narcotics activity directly associated with the establishment, have significantly improved the quality of life in the neighborhood and the Old Town area. Without doubt, this was a truly successful problem solving effort to the largest and most persistent crime dilemma in the past twenty years.

Every contributor to this problem solving project considers our collaborative efforts a victory. As the author of this nomination, I am proud to nominate Detective Alex Altavilla and Officer Mike Aspland, both of whom had the courage and the vision to take a proactive approach to an age old crime problem by using the "SARA" principle to develop a strategy which was successful. Furthermore, Detective Alex Altavilla's and Officer Mike Aspland's perseverance, innovation, risk taking, leadership and problem solving skills have made a significant difference in their community. Their effort is in the greatest tradition of the Herman Goldstein Award.