

1998 HERMAN GOLDSTEIN
AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN
PROBLEM-ORIENTED
POLICING

CHARLOTTE MECKLENBURG
POLICE DEPARTMENT



INDEPENDENCE LODGE
2400 EAST INDEPENDENCE
BLVD.
CHARLOTTE, N. C.

Abstract

The problem addressed by our department in this project is a small motel that had been the source of extensive 911 calls to the police as well as reports of prostitution, drug activity, and intoxicated and disorderly behavior. The motel was also very unsightly and in need of both external and internal repair. The problem was identified by several police officers from the Baker-One district that attended a two-day Problem Oriented Policing (POP) class at the department's academy in October 1997.

Records of 911 calls from the motel were pulled and the objective of the officers involved was to decrease the number of 911 calls and to improve the quality of life in and around the motel. A meeting was also scheduled with the property owner and security manager to discuss the problems and formulate a plan for solving them. The officers and owner were able to formulate a plan for keeping non-residents off the motel property through the installation of a new fence and turning an existing exit of one of the buildings into a fire exit. Employees of the motel also worked directly with the police to combat drug activity that was being conducted on the motel property. This was done through a cooperative effort between the police and the employees of the motel.

The number of 911 calls that originated from the motel was reduced from 26 calls in September 1997 to 8 calls in April 1998. Residents of the motel also felt safer due to the decreased foot traffic that was coming from a low income neighborhood located close to the motel. The owner of the motel also did extensive improvements both inside and outside of the motel. This included cleaning up the parking area, putting new siding on the buildings, and refurbishing several of the older rooms. Response from the residents

of the motel was that they felt that the motel was a safe place to stay due to the efforts of the police and owner of the motel.

A. Scanning

The problem that our district faced is a small motel located in the northern part of our police district. The motel is the Independence Lodge and is located on Independence Boulevard that is a major artery that runs through the center of Charlotte. The motel contains a total of 60 units. The motel is one of the most, if not the most, inexpensive motels in Charlotte. In the past the motel has had complaints of drug activity, prostitution, and intoxicated persons causing disturbances. There have also been an extensive number of domestic violence calls to the motel.

From a police standpoint our objective was twofold: first, to decrease the number of 911 calls coming from the motel and also to improve the quality of life for both the residents of the motel and the residents and business owners of the surrounding area. The majority of the 911 calls were not regarding actual crimes but were more of a disturbance nature. Several of the residents of the motel are long term and some are even families that are forced to live in the motel due to credit problems. These residents were particularly bothered by the ongoing disorderly conduct and drug activity.

An additional problem that was brought to the attention of our department was the living conditions in some of the rooms. On one occasion in the fall of 1997 a man that had just checked in flagged down a passing patrol car to register a complaint about his room. The man was an out of town construction worker staying temporarily at the motel and showed the officer his room. The bathroom in the room was filthy and there were roaches present in the bathroom, dresser drawers, and along the baseboards. The man had brought this to the attention of the manager on duty but the manager refused to refund his money. The officers were able to resolve the conflict but still had concerns

about the living conditions in the rooms. This reverts back to the department's desire to increase the quality of living for the residents of the motel.

There is another motel nearby which is a moderately priced Howard Johnson's. This motel has not been a source of problems and there is also a karate school, church, and an elementary school nearby. Respondents from the surveys done at the business's showed their concerns were homeless people loitering in the area, drug activity, prostitutes loitering in the area, and vandalism. There was also a concern from the school principal about residents of the motel trespassing on school property after dark. The school had also been broken into and vandalized on several occasions. Respondents from both the businesses and the motel residents also expressed concerns about stray animals on the motel property.

During April 1, 1997 through August 31, 1997 police responded to 101 calls to 911 for police service. The majority of these calls were regarding a domestic disturbance (25) or some other type of disturbance (22). There were also seven larcenies, two rapes, six assaults, and one stolen vehicle. This was seen as a major concern for the police department and one of the main objectives was to decrease the number of 911 calls that originated from the motel.

B. Analysis

On 9-10 October 1997 several members of our police district attended a problem oriented policing (POP) class at our police academy. Representatives from our district were asked to identify a problem in the district and the Independence Lodge was chosen.

Community surveys were done of twenty-two people including residents of the motel and

employees of nearby businesses in an attempt to solicit their input on problems at the motel. The problems identified by respondents included loitering, noise, drug activity, vandalism, and prostitution. The Independence Lodge has been a source of problems since the department was realigned in March of 1995 and fell under the Baker One District. It was the objective of the officers involved to work with the owner and employees of the motel to come up with viable solutions both to decrease the number of 911 calls and to improve the conditions at the motel. It was the opinion of the officers involved that even though this was a "cheap motel" the people that sought lodging there still deserved a decent place to stay. Everyone felt that with the cooperation of the owner and the employees and a little work on the part of all the parties involved, the situation could be greatly improved. One of the things mentioned by the respondents on the survey was increased police presence. The motel is located on a dead end street off Independence Boulevard and officers rarely patrolled the property. This was one request that we could easily accomplish through "hot spot" policing. By having a marked car ride through the area and have officers walk the buildings on foot, if even for 10-15 minutes, would both deter criminal activity and show the residents we were making our presence known. The problems seem to be occurring predominately during the evening hours and on weekends so we decided to focus our efforts on these periods.

C. Response

After conducting the survey a meeting was scheduled with the owner of the motel, George Trakas, and Tom Miller. Trakas owns several rental properties throughout Charlotte, including three motels, and Miller is retired from the Navy and handles

security for the properties. The meeting was set for October 17, 1997 and while Trakas could not attend, Miller was very responsive and seemed willing to help improve the conditions and quality of life at the motel. He also said we would have the support of Trakas and any recommendations we made would be acted upon. One of our initial concerns was a vacant lot that was bordered by the motel and a secondary street. The lot has no lighting and many of the residents used the lot as a cut through to a nearby convenience store. There is a low income neighborhood located about a half mile from the motel and individuals were coming from that neighborhood to the motel and were contributing to the drug activity and prostitution problems. These individuals were cutting through the lot and going into the building that faces the lot. Miller stated that many of the problems at the motel had originated at that building. Other issues discussed at the meeting included the need for improvements to be done to the property, both exterior and interior, and more lighting for the parking area. It was the opinion of the officers that if the conditions of the motel were improved this would attract guests that would not cause problems and hopefully reduce the incidents of social disorder at the motel. During the meeting Miller also provided the officers with a current list of persons banned from the motel as well as a copy of the motel registration form and rules. The officers also told Miller that those who worked in the area would attempt to come to the motel at least once on second shift and spend 10-15 minutes around the property. Third shift officers were also encouraged to do the same. More time would be spent if conditions allowed. The officers and Miller also exchanged pager and office phone numbers so all parties involved could be contacted. Miller assured us we had the full support of the owner and he would act on any suggestions we made.

The first objective was to come up with proposed solutions for the vacant lot and the foot traffic that was originating from the low income neighborhood. The first step was to determine who owned the lot. After a few phone calls it was determined that the lot actually belonged to the elementary school. A call to the school board informed us that the principal of the school had authority over the lot and she could use it for any purpose we desired. The principal was very supportive of the department's efforts and gave us carte blanche with the lot. Miller organized the maintenance crew that worked for Trakas' rental properties and they were able to clear all the debris and vegetation from the lot as well as cut down several trees. This increased the small amount of lighting from the parking lot and street that reached the lot as well as increased the visibility of the lot from both the street and motel parking lot. In an effort to curb the foot traffic that went into the motel a six-foot chain link fence was erected by the maintenance crew that encircled the lot and went up into the parking area of the motel. This forced anyone coming from the side street to walk around the fence and come into the parking lot into plain view and eliminated access to the rear of the building where many of the problems were occurring. It took around two days to get the lot cleared and the fence erected. Initially there were some negative feedback from the residents since they had to walk around the fence to get to the nearby convenience store. Miller informed the employees of the motel to let the residents know that the fence was put up for their safety and to discourage non-guests from coming on the property. It is the policy of the motel that non-paying guests are not allowed. A female resident of the motel had been the victim of an armed robbery last year in the dimly lit vacant lot and Miller wanted the residents to be aware of this also.

A fire inspector from the Charlotte Fire Department was contacted and agreed to come and inspect the property the first week of November. Several violations were identified and the owner was given 20 days to correct the deficiencies. The violations included defective fire extinguishers, stairs that needed to be replaced, and outlet covers that needed to be replaced. A subsequent inspection done by the same fire inspector showed all the violations had been corrected. Miller had an excellent idea relating to the fire inspection. He made the rear door of the building that is adjacent to the vacant lot an approved fire escape. This is the same building where many of the previous problems had originated and eliminated access to the building from this door from the outside. The exit door was locked from the outside and an additional door was placed on a small porch outside and this door was also locked from the outside. This designated fire escape together with the fence virtually eliminated outside foot traffic coming into that building and onto motel property.

The motel owner also had extensive work done on both the inside and outside of the motel. New vinyl siding was placed on several of the buildings as well as new carpet put inside the buildings. The interior of several of the buildings was also painted. Additionally, a large unsightly sign located in front of the motel that was dented and bent from having been hit with vehicles numerous times was also removed. Just the simple removal of the damaged sign increased the appearance of the motel from Independence Boulevard dramatically. The owner also had the entire property fumigated in an attempt to handle the roach problem. The new vinyl siding and removing the sign greatly improved the appearance of the property.

In late October Miller informed two officers that a resident of the motel had been causing problems on the property for several weeks. The individual involved is a mental patient and had been a resident of the motel for several months. He is an outpatient from the local mental health facility and his rent is paid by that facility and he also receives food stamps. This person is an admitted drug user and has previous arrests for larceny. On this day the individual became upset with Miller and was threatening to bum the motel down. The officers and Miller both agreed that he needed to be evicted from the motel. One officer inspected Miller's room and found it to be filthy and infested with roaches. The following week Miller and Shelly Lewis, the manager of the motel, took the necessary steps to have the individual evicted and his room was padlocked. Miller said the individual was known to bring prostitutes into his room as well as use drugs there. When the individual was evicted Miller informed him he was banned from the property and not to come back. Currently he has not returned to the property nor has he been the source of any further problems.

Miller posted signs throughout the motel and included as a part of the registration that no drug activity would be tolerated and any reports of such activity would be immediately reported to the police. No trespassing and "Registered Guests Only" signs were also posted throughout the property. During late October Miller informed police that one of the employees had seen a large marijuana plant growing in one of the resident's rooms. Acting on this information two officers conducted a "knock and talk" at the individual's room. The individual lived at the motel with his girlfriend and two small children. He consented to a search of his room and the plant was gone and only a small amount of marijuana was found. The individual and his family were immediately

evicted. Miller ensured us he would keep us informed of any drug activity that came to his attention.

In order to address the issue of stray animals Officer Balestra, who is the supervisor of the Deadly Dog Task Force, was called for assistance. Officer Balestra removed a large dog that had been staying in the corner of the parking lot. The dog was both unsightly and created a health hazard. Officer Balestra promised to assist in any future situations where animals were causing a problem at the motel. Officers who routinely patrol the motel have noted that stray animals or other animals have not been a problem.

D. Assessment

As was mentioned during the scanning segment, from a police standpoint our objective was to both decrease the number of 911 calls from the motel and increase the quality of life for those living and working at and around the motel. The number of 911 calls was used as a benchmark to measure our success or failure. As mentioned before there were 24 calls in August of 1997 and 26 in September. During October, which is when the project began, the number of calls fell to fifteen. Here is a list of the total 911 calls from the motel from July 1997 through April 1998:

July 1997 - 15 calls	December - 11 calls
August - 24 calls	January 1998 - 9 calls
September - 26 calls	February - 4 calls
October - 15 calls	March - 7 calls
November - 10 calls	April - 8 calls

Feedback from Tom Miller and other employees of the motel has been very positive. Now Miller evicts anyone that violates the rules of the motel and if the persons involved refuse to leave, he knows he can call the police and have our full support in the eviction process. Miller has been very proactive and has worked extensively with the officers involved on this project. The project would not have been a success without his dedicated efforts.

Officers involved have conducted informal interviews with the residents of the motel and most agree that the motel is quiet and is not perceived as a place where they are afraid to stay. A few of the residents stated that it was the large amount of foot traffic in and out of other motels that they have stayed that has made them fearful. When the project began there was a hole in the six-foot chain link fence that separated the rear of the motel from the elementary school. This was a concern for both the school principal and Miller since it gave people a hidden access to both the school after dark and onto motel property. Officers encouraged Miller to have the fence repaired and to check it periodically to ensure it remained intact. The hole was immediately repaired and to date the fence has not been damaged. The residents and motel employees have mentioned that the foot traffic in and out of the motel has been decreased dramatically. This can be attributed to both the fence and the fire escape/exit door that were constructed. This perception of a high crime and/or dangerous place through extensive foot traffic is a topic that the officers involved feel should not be underestimated. By eliminating the non-resident foot traffic coming into the motel, the residents not only feel safer but it also

police department and from the Charlotte Fire Department to assist in the project as well as assistance from the strategic planning and analysis division of the police department.

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Calls for Service Independence Motel

