

98-17

1998 Herman Goldstein Award Nomination
Excellence in Problem Oriented Policing

Nominees: Officer Paul Shersty and Officer Dwayne Fernandes

Abstract

Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes are to be commended for their commitment and success in an assignment others have attempted and failed. In January of 1997, Chief Overman challenged anyone to accept a full-time assignment to the Federal housing project in Delray Beach. Chief Overman recognized that residents of the project were becoming short-tempered and it was only a matter of time before a major incident erupted. Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes accepted the challenge and soon proved that diligence and a good work ethic can turn a blighted area into a model community.

When Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes were first assigned to the Carver Estates project they were faced with a community that distrusted the police and had little respect for each other. Juveniles ran unsupervised into the early hours of the morning, with no regard for those living in the area. Several residents invited drug dealers to live in their apartments and other residents openly ignored the growing drug traffic. Fortunately, not all of the residents accepted these conditions and eventually stepped forward to work with Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes.

The first task by Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes was to determine the problems the area faced. They found that most residents were intimidated by the threats from drug dealers and would leave their homes, rather than fight back. Second, it was determined that past strategies were ineffective. Despite extra patrols and increased police presence, crime continued to rise and residents' fear escalated. Knowing the drug dealers were not affected by mere police presence, Officers Fernandes and Shersty set out to win the support of the residents and encourage them to speak out against the terrorism of resident hoodlums.

Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes used every resource at their disposal, including local youth groups, business organizations, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions. They developed partnerships with these organizations and together they created solutions to problems that have plagued the Carver Estates project since its construction. In less than one year, Officer Fernandes and Officer Shersty created a residents association, organized a youth tutoring program, and developed a bond with the residents that has completely dissolved the distrust between residents and police.

The Federal Housing Authority has recognized Officer Fernandes and Officer Shersty for their accomplishments, honoring them with certificates of appreciation at a local event. According to Dorothy Ellington, Director of the Housing Authority, "Officer Fernandes and Officer Shersty have been a God-send." "We could not be happier that these two wonderful individuals have come to us in our darkest hour."

The Police Department has also reaped a great deal from Officer Fernandes and Officer Shersty's work in the Carver Estates area. Prior to their efforts, it was not uncommon for a minor call to develop into a major altercation between officers and residents. These incidents often resulted in officer injuries and additional ill will. Now, officers answer calls and respond to complaints without undue concern.

The Carver Estates area is a federally subsidized housing project in the city of Delray Beach. There are 204 apartments within fifteen buildings, which are constructed of pre-fabricated concrete. The residents of the project are predominantly African-American and all qualify as low-income families. The housing project is located amid a single-family residential development, a newly constructed apartment complex, the local cemetery, and an unkempt warehouse district. Approximately one block south of the housing project is a small convenience store.

The overall physical appearance of the complex was unpleasant. Where new sod once covered the ground only sand remained, leaving the area appearing barren. Dead trees lined roadways that were full of potholes and junk cars filled resident parking spaces. Being visible from a heavily traveled thoroughfare, the project offered a negative impression to passersby and adjacent residents. Because of the development's condition, residents lacked pride in their community and refused to accept responsibility to make any improvements. Instead, residents relied on the housing authority and the police to ensure the peace of the area and would call on them to handle even minor disputes between each other.

Police responses, including 911 hang-ups, required two police units and often resulted in calling additional officers. The police were, in general, apathetic to the resident's problems and the residents resented the poor service and lack of concern by the officers. Many times this combination resulted in unnecessary physical altercations and near riots between the police and the residents. Because of the potential for violence, officers avoided making arrests and handled complaints by merely driving through the area.

The area became known within Delray as a market for drug sales and violent crimes were on the rise. Domestic violence and noise from the drug activity were also becoming

commonplace. To combat the escalating crime, the Housing Authority obtained grant funding to pay for police presence during peak hours of criminal activity. Two officers patrolled the compound seven days a week, three to four hours per day. Despite the extra presence, problems in Carver Estates continued to rise. The quality of life was declining and residents were becoming more and more dissatisfied.

In response to the declining conditions and lack of police and resident cooperation, Chief Overman challenged any two officers with improving the area. Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes immediately volunteered for the assignment. In January 1997, Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes became the first full-time officers of Carver Estates.

Applying the SARA model and CPTED, Officer Shersty and Officer Fernandes began the arduous task of reducing the level of crime and reversing the deteriorating conditions. Through their evaluation they discovered a multitude of issues that affected the quality of life.

- The aesthetics of the area were intolerable and promoted vandalism and graffiti. The conditions were so poor many residents had openly given up hope.
- Noise from the juveniles loitering until 2:00AM was the number one complaint.
- Residents left their homes at night and returned the following morning because of the fear they would be accosted during the night while they slept.
- Burglary was a common crime and was primarily being committed by resident juveniles and drug addicts, hanging around Carver because of accessibility of drugs.
- Unsightly vehicles had been abandoned in the parking lots, many of them unregistered and not functional.
- The chain-link fence that had been installed to thwart trespassing and prevent undesirable foot traffic, was ineffective and in total disrepair. The fence had been

purposely damaged in several locations to allow drug dealers the ability to evade detection or escape apprehension. One of the openings in the fence allowed access to the adjacent residential neighborhood and created unwelcome traffic through their development. The neighborhood residents complained of drug sales and increased crime, claiming it was because the residents of the Housing Project walked through their area.

- The unemployment rate was extremely high, which was compounded by the inability of many low-income adults to afford transportation.
- Juveniles were forming gangs to replace structured activities. The drug dealers preyed on these youths to transport and deliver drugs to their buyers. A great deal of the vandalism, auto theft, burglaries, and robberies were attributed to these gangs.
- The Housing Authority had failed to adequately screen the applicants for apartments and had allowed repeat felony offenders to reside in the apartments. Single parents allowed drug dealers to live in their apartments in return for rent money. Although the failure to disclose all occupants of an apartment is a violation of the Housing code, restrictions were not enforced.

The first undertaking by the officers was to develop a "residents association." To assist in the development of the association, the officers solicited the help of a local neighborhood organizer, MAD DADS, and the City's Neighborhood Improvement Coordinator, Jennifer Hoffmeister. During the first meeting of only eight residents, the officers explained their intentions and appealed for community support. Through successive meetings the association has grown to 45 active members, with an average attendance of thirty residents. The residents elected a board of directors and have created a vision statement for the community.

The monthly meetings provide the officers an opportunity to communicate with residents about crime trends and crime prevention. Guest speakers are invited to address issues that are relevant to Carver Estates and its population. Thankfully, the association has become the voice for change, which is a key issue for future improvement and long-term eradication of crime.

With a cadre of guardians in place, the officers decided to apply the "Broken Windows" theory to the area. They began by addressing the accumulation of trash in dumpsters, which was constantly overflowing. The refuse would lie around for days accumulating insects and rodents, creating a health hazard. The wind would transport the overflow of debris throughout the complex, causing the area to be unsightly and promoting littering by residents.

The officers contacted the local sanitation service, BFI Sanitation, and negotiated an agreement that included the rescheduling of trash pickup days. The new schedule alleviated the unsightliness of the Dumpster areas and immediately alleviated the health hazard. However, littering by residents and visitors continued to be a problem. Officer Shersty and Fernandes enlisted the assistance of the "Community Service Program," which is a program of criminal offenders who work off community service hours. Each Saturday, the officers meet the CSP offenders in the lobby of the Police Department and transport them to Carver Estates, where they pickup and bag the debris lying on the ground. Residents recognized the efforts by the officers and the CSP and voluntarily joined them each Saturday to cleanup the grounds. The first joint effort yielded over 100 large garbage bags of trash.

In the beginning, MAD DADS suggested residents and police walk through the area and discuss the problems they observed. It was during one of the walks that residents commented how dilapidated the buildings and grounds had become. At the next association meeting, a plan to improve the aesthetics of the project was discussed. The renovation of the landscape would

include the replacement of dead trees and shrubbery, sod would be replaced, the chain-link fence would be replaced, and existing vegetation would be tended to. Graffiti would be removed from the buildings, sidewalks, and roadways. In addition, the buildings would be pressure-cleaned in preparation for painting.

This interest in improving the area provided an opportunity for the officers to apply many of the techniques of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design. Trees were trimmed to maximize the light from existing streetlights. Lighting was supplemented in common areas such as, the playground, the walkways, and the courtyards. Lights that were found to be inoperative, in need of other repairs, or provided insufficient light were identified and immediately corrected. Florida Power and Light provided assistance by offering a free assessment of the existing lighting and by providing a proposal for lighting that would enhance the security of the area.

To further enhance the security of the area and improve the appearance of the project, Officer Shersty and Fernandes proposed replacing the chain-link fence with a galvanized steel fence. Through investigation into fencing that is used to deter crime, they discovered a rugged, yet appealing, alternative. The funds for the fence were obtained through the Federal Housing Authority and was erected soon thereafter. The installation of the new fence eliminated the complaints from the residential neighborhood and eliminated several locations where drugs were sold. As an added bonus the new fence has removed the institutional look of the housing project and made it look more like a gated community.

During a walk-through, officers noted over twenty vehicles that were missing tires, had not been moved for an extended period of time, and many that were unregistered. These vehicles were classified as "abandoned" and efforts were begun to remove them from the area. Computer checks disclosed three of the vehicles were stolen and others belonged to residents of Carver

Estates. Code enforcement officers assisted by red tagging vehicles and towing unresponsive owners. Vehicles that the owners could not be identified were immediately towed. The residents who owned one of these vehicles were given the opportunity to repair the vehicle and register them. Within two months all of the abandoned vehicles were removed and plans were on the way to prevent a future occurrence.

Residents met and discussed solutions to future unwanted vehicles and during the discussion the officers proposed a parking permit system that would identify resident vehicles and ensure parking spaces. At first residents were reluctant because of the restriction it would impose on legitimate visitors, but through open dialog a resolution was accomplished. The Housing Authority assigned residents parking spaces and issued permits when the resident provided a valid vehicle registration. This program provided intelligence to police officers, and has deterred residents and non-resident from abandoned vehicles in the parking lots.

As the area improved aesthetically and the guardians in place, the officers focused on the cause of specific crimes and began designing solutions. Research of past cases disclosed that the favored method of entry and exit during a burglary was the windows. A survey of the residents revealed the majority of window locks were broken and had never been repaired. Working with the maintenance personnel the window locks were repaired which significantly reduced burglaries.

A more compelling problem was the number of auto thefts, vandalism, narcotics activity, and gang related incidents that had become common to Carver Estates. It was discovered that many of these crimes were being committed by resident youth and that the age of the offenders was primarily pre-teen. Officer Fernandes and Shersty decided on a non-traditional approach to the problem. They organized a program that focused on after-school periods and weekends.

With the assistance of Cathy Fryer, a local educator, Officer Fernandes and Shersty developed an after school program that included a computer lab and a tutorial service. The officers set up eight computers in a substation located on the property. Supplies required to run the program were solicited from local businesses and the Carver Youth Program. Officer Fernandes and Shersty are personally active in tutoring and counseling at-risk students. As part of the at-risk tutorial curriculum, the officers incorporate lectures on truancy and offer access to other community resources, i.e., MAD DADS Youth Choir, Baseball Programs, etc. Students who improve their grades are rewarded with field trips, visits to local attractions, and receive recognition as high achievers. Transportation and chaperoning of field trips is provided by Officer Fernandes and Shersty or by officers involved in the Kids and Cops program.

The strength of the Carver Estates Program is the weekly meetings held on Saturdays between 2:00PM and 5:00PM. Officer Fernandes and Shersty coordinate the participation of the youth in a community service project, i.e. picking up trash, delivering meals to needy families, etc., each week and then provide them with a free lunch. After participating in the community event the officer provide a planned activity such as a movie or guest speaker. The Youth Program allows officers to communicate and interact with children who were previously being influenced by drug dealers. The residents credit this program with dramatically reducing the involvement of these children in the sale and use of narcotics.

Another program that is credited with developing a close rapport with the children is the "Thursday Evening Dinners." On designated Thursdays—as the officers' caseload allows—Officer Fernandes and Shersty join youth group members and together they prepare a meal. The children and the officers benefit from the teamwork of preparing a meal and from the camaraderie and fellowship enjoyed during mealtime. The rapport and trust developed by this

program is invaluable. The program allows the officers to discuss private matters with the youth while in a non-threatening environment. As has been the case, officers discover indicators of abuse or neglect and are able to make the appropriate referrals.

Another aspect of the Youth Program is the coordination of a Boy Scout troop. The troop has sixteen members and meets weekly. The benefit of the Boy Scout program is the structured interaction between the adult leadership, which is provided by adults who live in the project. The program promotes community involvement and works to enhance each participant's self-esteem.

As an additional measure to interdict gang activity, Officer Fernandes and Shersty routinely meet the school buses at drop-off times. Their presence has reduced the number of fights and vandalism at the bus stop. This initiative has had a positive impact on the neighboring residential development.

Recently, Officer Fernandes and Shersty applied for and received a \$600.00 grant from the Southland Corporation. The funds were solicited to finance a summer program, which will allow the continuation of tutoring and the Saturday interaction program through the summer vacation. Summer vacation is usually a period of increased criminal activity that is attributed to the idleness of the area youth. By continuing to pay attention to at-risk children and provide them with activities, it is hoped that crime will not increase and would ideally decrease. Although this is the first year a summer program has been provided, expectations for its success are extremely high.

Officer Fernandes and Shersty also realize that not all children will participate in their programs and some youth will become part of the judicial system. In that context, they work closely with the community control officers of the Palm Beach County Probation and Parole; Juvenile Division. The officers are kept apprised of juveniles who are currently under house

arrest or are on enhanced supervision. Juveniles assigned these statuses are monitored and their activities are tracked. Officer Fernandes and Shersty meet with the juvenile's parents and work to resolve conditions that lead to the arrest. This close relationship is beneficial to the family and has reduced recidivist crimes by those on probation.

Officer Fernandes and Shersty are also involved with the adults of the community. The majority of the residents of Carver Estates receive Federal assistance and many of them have little or no experience budgeting or organizing household expenses. With this in mind, Officer Fernandes and Shersty work with the Housing Authority's Adult Services programs. An important service offered is the "Self-Sufficiency Program." The Self-Sufficiency Program allows qualifying residents an opportunity to open an escrow account that may be used for the purchase of a home, purchase of a car, or may be used to pay medical expenses. Each participant agrees to an increase in his or her monthly rent, which is placed in an account by the Housing Authority. Financial counseling is also provided for those who inquire. Through the Adult Services, HUD provides resource material and home referral lists to involved individuals.

Officer Fernandes and Shersty instituted a Conflict Resolution program, designed to curb the incidents of violence between residents. The need for this program was evident upon review of the high number of domestic problems and disturbances between residents. Residents involved in disputes are contacted by Officer Fernandes and Shersty and provided with the opportunity to air their differences. A neutral environment is selected and the officers facilitate the conversation. Possible remedies are discussed and an agreement between parties is usually reached. Recidivism in this program is virtually non-existent, because the participants learn the skills to settle disputes without hostility or physical confrontation. The conflict resolution

program is credited with fostering cohesiveness within the community and reducing the number of domestic disturbances within the area.

Few agencies have implemented the Federal "One Strike Your Out" policy, but Officer Fernandes and Shersty, working with a local attorney, have successfully used this controversial policy. As a testimony to the strength of the partnership between the Housing Authority and the officers, the First Strike policy has been used to evict residents who have a felony record. It is also used to evict those who commit crimes and those who willingly harbor criminals. As a preventative measure, Officer Fernandes and Shersty are involved in the screening of potential applicants.

To further cement their partnership with the residents of Carver Estates Officer Fernandes and Shersty participated in the organization of a "Fun Day." Held on October 18, 1997, Fun Day included K-9 demonstrations by the Delray Beach Police Department's K-9 Unit, a live DJ (also a Delray Beach police officer), games, arts and crafts for resident children, rides such as a giant slide, a train, and an air jump house. The Boca Hotel and Resort sponsored a barbecue and job fair with job applications accepted on site.

When Officer Fernandes and Shersty first volunteered for the Carver Estates project they were faced with a hostile group of residents, who were more inclined to accept the presence of drug dealer than the presence of police officers. They began their endeavor by evaluating the causes of problems that plagued the area, assessing who could be used as guardians, and determining what approaches had been attempted in the past. Their analysis lead them to the creation of a residents association, the creation of a youth program, the implementation of a mediation program, and the development of partnerships with local youth groups, business organizations, non-profit organizations, and educational institutions.

At first glance, and purely from a statistical point of view, it would appear that crime and disorder have risen in the Carver Estates project (see attached charts). Looking at the problem from a more involved and historical point of view, Officer Fernandes and Shersty have accomplished more than those who preceded them in the previous 15 years have. Residents are more comfortable and willing to report problems. They now believe their complaints will be addressed compassionately and fairly. The increased crime reports since 1996, is a testimony to the improved trust and communication between the residents and the police.

The future of Carver Estates looks very bright. Citizens are in the process of creating a tips line to provide police with crime information. Career days that provide residents with occupational and educational opportunities are being scheduled throughout the coming year. Through participation and mentoring of the residents association, Officer Fernandes and Shersty have developed guardians who are genuinely concerned with the quality of life within the housing project and are committed to maintaining order. These guardians have taken an active role in the decision making process and are willing to speak up for stricter rules and less liberal policies. Decisions such as building color, beautification, roadway repair, lighting, and curfew enforcement are slowly being overtaken and managed by the residents.

COMPARISON OF COMPLAINTS JANUARY 1996 TO APRIL 1998

