

Homeless Men's Shelter

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, North Carolina

Scanning

The Uptown Men's Shelter at 1210 North Tryon Street provides temporary housing, mental health counseling, substance abuse treatment, and employment and permanent housing assistance to 200 homeless men. The shelter is located near a soup kitchen on a major business corridor adjacent to a residential neighborhood. Calls-for-service at the Uptown Shelter have increased over the years. Police in the David Three District reported that many responses to the shelter did not require police attention. Area businesses complained of losing business because patrons linked criminal activity with the homeless population. Police found that many of the homeless in the neighborhood were not associated with the shelter.

Analysis

Community Policing Coordinators Nathan King and Ginny Woodlief devised a survey of 911 calls at the shelter to determine whether the shelter's management had taken appropriate action before calling. The survey disclosed that most of the calls concerned matters that should have been resolved by the shelter's management. Police found that managers of the shelter were poorly trained and had little understanding of the appropriate use of 911. Of the 642 calls placed for service to the shelter in 1998, 78 percent required neither an offense report nor an arrest. Police clearly were being used as surrogate shelter managers.

The officers interviewed residents and business owners and found that the respondents assumed that shelter residents caused all the crime in the area. In 1998, 216 suspects listed the shelter as home at the time of their arrest. In truth, only 88 of the suspects were either shelter visitors or residents when they were arrested. Suspects listed the shelter as their home because the address gave them easier access to a State identification card. The cards facilitate the cashing of paychecks from temporary labor services and government subsistence programs.

The officers found that the shelter's few written policies on management were inconsistently applied. For example, some managers would place a resident on probation, others would ban the resident for several hours, and still others invoked permanent bans—all for the same offense. Moreover, the physical appearance of the shelter and its surroundings helped foster crime: An overgrown lot bordering the shelter provided concealment; the shelter parking lot was poorly lit and had two entrances, which hindered efforts to control access; residents walked the railroad next to the shelter to get to the soup kitchen; and high grass along the tracks provided one more concealed area.

Officers King and Woodlief set several goals:

- Establish a productive working relationship with the shelter staff.
- Improve management of the shelter.
- Reduce the number of calls-for-service to the shelter.
- Reduce criminal activity at the shelter.
- Reduce the fear that the facility generated among residents of the neighborhood.

Response

Shelter staffers denied they had a problem, and the shelter director denied any obligation to the community. Officers Woodlief and King then decided to galvanize the community. They suggested to the North Tryon Street Business Coalition and to residents of the Lockwood area that they confront shelter management about their concerns. The officers also spoke with the shelter's board of directors and with a county commissioner. The commissioner reminded the managers that county funds are a critical component of the shelter's budget. The board of directors replaced the site director with the day manager who had been more cooperative with police.

The survey that police had taken of the 911 calls helped single out shift managers who needed additional training in enforcement of shelter rules. The survey provided examples of improper use of 911, which in turn gave shelter management a clear picture of the problem. Each supervisor now logs the nature and outcome of 911 calls placed during the supervisor's shift. In their training of staff and managers, the officers suggested ways to identify potentially volatile situations so that police could be called before violence broke out. The officers emphasized the distinct roles of police and shelter managers.

The shelter improved use of ID badges. Police noted that it was difficult to identify shelter residents, which hindered the timely sharing of information between police and management. Officers realized that an identification system and tighter controls at the shelter would help dispel neighborhood fears and prejudice. Shelter managers adopted a written policy, consistently applied across all shifts, that articulates the grounds for banning people from the shelter. The shelter improved lighting on its property and joined in efforts to clean up the immediate area. The shelter posted "No Loitering" signs and closed one of the two entrances to the parking lot. Police expanded their authority in the area by adopting agreements with several businesses and with Norfolk Southern Railroad. The agreements, known as "Authorization to Act as Agent," empower police to enforce the law on private property in the absence of the owner or manager.

Officers set up a method for shelter residents to pass information about criminal activity to an intermediary on the shelter staff, who in turn provide the information to police. This allows residents to share information with police without fear of being intimidated or of becoming known as a snitch. The program is another way that officers hope to gain the trust of a population that traditionally has had an uneasy relationship with police.

Assessment

Police are aware that correcting problems at the shelter is an ongoing effort, not in small part because of the transience of the homeless and the high turnover rate among shelter employees. The most obvious measure of success is the reduction in 911 calls-for-service to the shelter during 1999. In 1998, calls had reached a high of 642. The next year brought only 282 calls-for-service to the shelter.

Members of the North Tryon Street Business Coalition and residents of the Lockwood area say they believe that improvements in management procedures and in the physical environment have gone a long way to reduce many of the problems—loitering, assaults, drug dealing—associated with the shelter. Residents and business owners alike have changed their perception of the shelter, believing that the shelter wants to be a part of the solution, not part of the problem.