

**THE CAT WOMAN
PROBLEMS AT 1135 NORLAND ROAD**

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG POLICE DEPARTMENT
APRIL 10, 2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SCANNING:

Officer Michael Tinsley first became aware of problems at a residence at 1135 Norland Road while assigned to a field training officer. Tinsley realized that there were a large number of repeat calls for service at that address. Most of the calls were absurd allegations made by the female resident of the house. Most of the allegations centered on the male resident of the house while others concerned the neighbors and their guests. Tinsley was told that both of the residents of the house were mentally impaired. His fellow officers seemed to accept the repeat calls as a part of the job. Officer Tinsley felt that there should be a way to reduce the repeat calls, and the resulting demand on officers' time, while assisting the residents in addressing the problems that were generating the calls.

ANALYSIS:

Officer Tinsley took a number of steps to analyze this problem. They included:

- a detailed analysis of the previous calls for service to the residence
- building a relationship with the female resident of the house which would provide insight into her problem and give him additional information to follow-up
- *gaining access to the house, which he found virtually uninhabitable, and getting Code Enforcement to document the violations of the City's housing code
- tracking down relatives of both residents of the house to gain insight into the history of their twisted relationship

*assessing the impact of the female resident's behavior on the rest of the neighborhood

RESPONSE:

Officer Tinsley developed a multi-faceted response plan that included:

- * obtaining a longer than normal involuntary commitment of the female resident
- *working with the male resident and his family to get the female resident evicted and placed under a restraining order
- * establishing a coalition of people to help clean the residence, bring it up to building code, refurbish it, and allow the male resident to move back in.
- *finding a new home for the female resident and separating her from the 23 cats that were keeping her from living a normal life

ASSESSMENT:

- *repeat calls have ceased
- +female resident now lives in boarding house, is in mental health treatment, and holds down a job
- *male resident keeps the house clean and in good repair and has begun building relationships with some of his neighbors.
- *neighbors who had previously felt unsafe are now out and about in the neighborhood and allow their children to play outdoors.

SCANNING

Approximately three years ago, Officer Michael Tinsley graduated from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Training Academy and was assigned to the department's Charlie Two District. From his first day on the job, Officer Tinsley embraced the department's problem solving philosophy and approached his work with the conviction that he could make a difference in the neighborhoods where he was assigned.

While riding with his training officer, Officer Tinsley became aware of what seemed to be an excessive number of calls for service at a residence at 1135 Norland Road, which is in a quiet working class neighborhood in Charlie Two. Most of the calls were to see the female resident of the house. Each of her complaints was more outrageous than the last. Most of the complaints dealt with the male resident of the house and ranged from his refusing to go to sleep; his alleged refusal to allow her to run water all night; her desire to have the police tell the male he was a "bad man" to unsubstantiated claims of physical abuse. Occasionally, the male resident would call police to complain about the female but his complaints were less frequent and less bizarre. There were also complaints from several other neighborhood residents including an Asian woman and an interracial couple. Their complaints centered on threats and racial slurs made by the female resident of the house who apparently was having difficulty adjusting to the changing demographics in her neighborhood.

Virtually all of these calls required a police response and took officers away from other departmental priorities. Officer Tinsley questioned fellow officers about the residents of 1135 Norland Road and was told that they were both 10-73, the Police Department's ten code for mental subjects. The officers had nicknamed the female resident of the house "Cat Woman" because she was known to keep a large number of cats at the residence. What Officer Tinsley could not understand was why his fellow officers accepted the situation at the residence as status quo and repeatedly responded to the residence with no change in the outcome of the calls. Officer Tinsley was assigned as a response area officer so devoting any substantive amount of time to problem solving activities was not required of him. When he was released from his training officer, Tinsley was actually assigned to a different response area within the Charlie Two District. However, Officer Tinsley was struck by the problems at this residence and decided to see if he could gain a better insight into what was occurring between the two people who lived there. His goal was to reduce the number of repeat calls to this address by assisting the residents in addressing the problems that generated the calls.

ANALYSIS

Officer Tinsley began his analysis of the problem by finding out as much as he could about the two residents of the house. He questioned his fellow officers who had responded to calls there in the past. He found that the residence belonged to the male resident, Roger, who is developmentally disabled. Roger has the IQ of a 5th or 6th grader

and has difficulty dealing with some of the everyday realities of life. Despite those difficulties, he is able to maintain a custodial job at a city-owned auditorium and has sufficient income to live frugally. Some 12 years ago, Roger met a woman, Teresa, who saw in Roger an opportunity to bolster her own sagging fortunes. She convinced Roger to allow her to move in with him as a caregiver. That relationship, which had lasted 12 years at the time Officer Tinsley intervened, was anything but positive for Roger. Teresa apparently suffered from schizophrenia and abused both alcohol and drugs. She intimidated the hapless Roger who felt that he and Teresa had entered into a more traditional male-female relationship. Teresa, in essence, established a reign of terror over Roger, giving him orders and accusing him of acts ranging from spraying the contents of aerosol cans into the air to physical abuse. Teresa's mental problems impacted her ability to reason and many of the calls for service dealt with outlandish allegations against Roger, the neighbors, and cab drivers whom Teresa apparently used for transportation.

Teresa's intimidation did not end with Roger. The neighborhood where Teresa and Roger lived is rapidly becoming multi-ethnic and Teresa apparently could not deal with the new faces on her block. She shouted racial slurs at an Asian woman and held up signs protesting an interracial couple who had moved into the area. She would call the police and claim that her neighbors were using drugs. If a neighbor had company, Teresa would take down the license tags of the guests and call the police with outrageous claims of illegal activity. She did not like one of the neighbors' dog and would take her cats into the neighbor's yard, hoping to provoke the dog into viscous behavior so that she could call Animal Control. The neighbors were afraid of Teresa and felt that her presence was

negatively impacting the quality of life on an otherwise quiet street. Very few of the residents who lived on the same block as Teresa and Roger would take walks or let their children play in their yards. They were afraid of her behavior and the influence that she might have on the children.

When Officer Tinsley began analyzing the calls at this address, he went back to the period from January 1, 1994 to December 31, 1996, which was prior to his being assigned to the Charlie Two District. He found that there had been 61 calls for service to that address. He also realized that the complainants, usually Teresa and, on occasion, Roger, always met the responding officers outside, so that the officers never saw the inside of the house. During the nine months that Officer Tinsley worked intensively on this problem, there were an additional 51 calls for service to the residence. 47 of the calls were made by Roger and Teresa and four were made by neighbors in regard to Teresa's behavior.

Officer Tinsley began going by the house to see if he could build rapport with Teresa, get to know Roger, and gain access to the inside of the house. Teresa began confiding in Officer Tinsley but much of what she said confirmed the earlier reports that she had serious mental problems. Teresa, who claimed that she used to be an actress, was obsessed with the idea that she had been sexually abused by virtually every male with whom she had come in contact. Her allegations of abuse included her brother, who is a college professor in Japan. Teresa also claimed that she had been abused by police officers who had allegedly raped her.

Teresa also told Officer Tinsley that Roger had a sister named Linda. Roger talked to Linda regularly but Teresa said that she did not like her and it was clear that she did not want Roger to be influenced by his family.

Officer Tinsley suggested to Teresa that she should consider getting treatment from Area Mental Health. Teresa indicated that she had done so in the past but did not trust any of the counselors. She felt they were not listening to her and only wanted her money. She said she only trusted private doctors but could not afford them.

Officer Tinsley felt that he was beginning to build a relationship with Teresa but he was concerned that her hallucinations of sexual abuse would extend to him and felt that it would be useful if a female social worker could begin working with him to get additional information from Teresa. He contacted the Department of Social Services and got them to assign a community social worker, who specialized in working with adults, to assist him in dealing with Teresa. He convinced Teresa to allow the social worker to share information with him so that all parties involved in trying to assist her could have access to all pertinent information.

Officer Tinsley tracked down Roger's sister, Linda, who was frustrated with police, frightened for her brother and helpless in dealing with Teresa. She had been unable to intervene because of Teresa's total domination over Roger. Linda talked to Roger daily and he had told her that he feared for his life as Teresa had threatened to kill him in his

sleep. Linda was aware that police were routinely called to the residence but she felt that police officers really did not care about Roger since nothing at the residence had really changed. She also told officers that she was certain that the inside of the house was in total disrepair and that she was even willing to let the city take the property if something could be done to help Roger. Officer Tinsley assured her that his analysis of the problem would result in an action plan that should finally make a difference.

The analysis took on an international connection as Officer Tinsley also tracked down Teresa's brother in Tokyo. The brother provided additional information about Teresa's past and said that he had been dealing with her problems since she was sixteen. He also told the officer that he was aware of the allegations of sexual abuse that Teresa made against most men she came in contact with. Teresa's brother contacted her and urged her to cooperate with the officer who was genuinely trying to help her. He also reinforced the need for Teresa to give her consent for the officer and social worker to share information.

Officer Tinsley had been formulating a plan and was waiting for the opportunity to put his plan into action. His break came when Roger took off, apparently in response to Teresa's threats to kill him in his sleep. When Roger disappeared, his sister filed a missing persons report. Roger had bought a bus ticket to Buffalo, New York and was located by Buffalo Police asleep on a bench with a wad of cash in his hand. Buffalo Police were instructed to buy Roger a plane ticket back to Charlotte where he was taken to live with his sister while Officer Tinsley attempted to sort out the shambles of his life.

Officer Tinsley was finally able to gain admission to the house and was shocked by what he saw. While he had expected the house to be in disrepair, he was stunned to find debris all over the house. There were 23 cats in the house and there were cat feces everywhere. Spoiled food was sitting out and there were roaches and fleas in abundance. The smell of cat feces and urine was overpowering and there were unattended litter boxes literally lined up against the wall. There was barely a place to sit as virtually every surface was covered with boxes, clothes, papers, etc. There were also numerous violations of the city's housing code, with vast improvements needed to bring the house up to the city's minimum standards.

After Roger was located in Buffalo, his family attempted to have Teresa evicted. Under North Carolina law, Teresa had been living with Roger for a long enough period of time that she was considered to be in a common law relationship, giving her the right to be on the property. The eviction attempts were consequently unsuccessful.

RESPONSE

Officer Tinsley now felt that he had sufficient knowledge of the problems at 1135 Norland Road to begin to act. He felt that it was imperative both to get Teresa out of the house and to get her the mental health treatment that she desperately needed. Officer Tinsley had the social worker assist him in getting Teresa involuntarily committed to a mental health facility. Teresa had been in such facilities in the past but the evaluations had been cursory and the conclusion had been that Teresa did not pose a physical threat to herself or others. Knowing that was far from the whole story and that her threats of violence had escalated, Officer Tinsley and the social worker negotiated with the magistrate who would have to issue the commitment order to insure that Teresa would be kept at the mental health facility for a two-week period. During that time she was to receive counseling as well as evaluation of her drug and alcohol use and an assessment of the medication that she was supposed to be taking to help with her mental state.

With Teresa out of the house, Officer Tinsley, Roger, and his sister once again initiated eviction proceedings against Teresa. Officer Tinsley outlined an approach under which the judge was provided with evidence that the relationship was dangerous to Roger and should be terminated. The officer convinced a judge to give Teresa only two weeks to leave the Norland Road residence, as opposed to the usual 30-day period. The judge also issued a restraining order against Teresa. The officer knew that time was of the essence if he were to make his plan work. While Teresa was in the mental health facility, the social worker began preparing her for the fact that she was going to have a new place to

live and that the cats, which were her prized possessions, were not going to be able to go with her.

Upon her release from the mental health facility, Teresa found a lawyer to help her fight the eviction but they were unsuccessful. The judge ordered her to have all of her things out of the house within a two-week period. The social worker was searching for a new place for Teresa to live and the officer had taken the precaution of having a search warrant drawn up that would allow Animal Control to remove the cats if Teresa refused to cooperate.

Teresa moved her things out of the house but no one was quite sure where she had gone. One day, Officer Tinsley was riding in the neighborhood and heard a commotion at a residence about a block from the Norland Road residence. He investigated and found Teresa in the front yard of that house, arguing loudly with an older male who was obviously intoxicated. The officer found that Teresa had moved her things to this house where the elderly female resident, who suffered from dementia, thought that Teresa was a high school friend from 1928. The male appeared to have a drinking problem and it was clear that he and Teresa would fuel each other's bad habits. This would not only destroy any progress that Teresa had made; it would also likely generate a new round of calls for service for the Charlie Two District. Officer Tinsley contacted the community social worker who was able to expedite Teresa's move into a boarding house on Central Avenue. The boarding house has a strict policy prohibiting alcohol or drug use on the

premises. It is located on a major traffic artery with frequent bus service so Teresa could be less dependent on the cabs that seemed to incite her ire.

With Teresa and the cats out of the way, Officer Tinsley began working on his plan to make the house habitable and allow Roger to move back in. He helped Roger's sister arrange to rent a large dumpster so that they could get rid of all the junk and debris that had accumulated. The family set off flea bombs over a period of three weeks to rid the house of the flea population that was the legacy of 23 cats that had not been well cared for.

Officer Tinsley formed a coalition of people who were willing to help in cleaning and repairing the house. They included, Roger's co-workers from the auditorium, members of several churches who were willing to assist in community projects, and Roger's family. They thoroughly cleaned the house and were able to make the necessary repairs to bring the house up to code. They then went to the Salvation Army and obtained furniture for the house that was clean and presentable. At that point, Roger was able to move back into the house.

ASSESSMENT

The repeat calls for service to 1135 Norland Road have ceased. Roger lives quietly in the house and maintains it in an orderly fashion. Although Officer Tinsley is not assigned to

that neighborhood, he still checks on Roger regularly to insure that he is able to take care of himself properly and to let him know that there are people that he can call on if he needs help. Now that Teresa is gone, Roger comes out more and has actually established a relationship with some of his neighbors, making him feel less isolated. Roger's family credits Officer Tinsley with helping to turn Roger's life around.

As for Teresa, she is still living in the boarding house on Central Avenue and is continuing to work with counselors to deal with her mental problems and history of alcohol and drug abuse. She has now stabilized to the point that she is able to hold down a job at a restaurant. Without Officer Tinsley's intervention, it is unlikely that she would have gotten the necessary treatment and been able to start rebuilding her life. When Teresa encounters Officer Tinsley, she always makes a point of telling him that she no longer sees Roger.

The residents of Norland Road feel that their quality of life has been enhanced by the officer's intervention to solve this problem. Now that Teresa and her threats and intimidating manner are gone, there are more people outside. Roger's neighbors now take walks and sit on their front porches and let their children play outside. One woman had been so upset by Teresa's presence that she had planned to move and had actually put her house up for sale. When she learned that Teresa was gone, she removed the "For Sale" sign from her property.

The Charlie Two District has more time to devote to neighborhood priorities now that its officers must no longer respond to all of the calls generated at 1135 Norland Road. As for Officer Tinsley, he is more convinced than ever that the community policing philosophy with its emphasis on problem solving is the most effective way to deliver police services. He has seen that a police officer being able to establish a connection with an individual and bring the appropriate resources to bear on his problem can indeed change a life. Officer Tinsley says, "police work is a privilege when you have the ability to do so much in a person's life."

Officer Michael Tinsley, Roger, and Teresa, the Cat Woman, are proof that community policing can improve a neighborhood's quality of life one person at a time. Officer Tinsley's tenacity, his ability to build relationships with the most difficult of citizens and his leverage of community resources helped to restore order to one home on Norland Road and a greater sense of tranquility for all of the neighborhood residents.

Attached are before and after pictures of the residence at 1135 Norland Road and a letter of thanks from Roger's sister.

AGENCY AND OFFICER INFORMATION

This problem solving initiative is unique because it was adopted by an individual officer who had just completed the field training portion of his first police year. Like all Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police officers, Officer Tinsley had been trained in the community policing philosophy and the techniques of problem solving in recruit school. Once he was released from his training officer, Tinsley was assigned as a radio response officer in a different Charlie Two response area. His primary responsibility was to answer calls for service in his assigned area. However, this house had made an impression on him and he believed that a solution could be found that would reduce the repeat calls for service and free up manpower while providing genuine help to the residents. Officer Tinsley's sergeant agreed to give him some time to work on this problem and worked with him to adjust his hours on days that he needed to meet with service providers and do other tasks that could only be done during normal business hours. The officer received no special incentives for taking on what was essentially extra work over and above his assigned duties and there were no departmental funds expended on the project. The officer used some of his problem solving training from recruit school but essentially devised his own plan based upon the unique personalities and needs of Roger and Teresa.

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