

**PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY
POLICE DEPARTMENT
Cpl. Tammy J. Chaffee**



**FORGING TRUSTING PARTNERSHIPS
BE EEN COPS AND THE
COMMUNITY**

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COMMUNITY
Prince George's County Police Department
District II**

Submitted by Corporal Tammy Chaffee

Summary:

In eastern Prince George's County approximately 20 miles from Washington, DC is a neighborhood whose reputation for violence, drug dealing and other criminal activity is well know. The neighborhood, named Sugar Hill reportedly of its reputation as an open-air drug market, is located in the town of Upper Marlboro, Maryland, which is patrolled by District II Prince George's County Police. Peerless Avenue is the main road through this neighborhood, which is dotted by single-family homes occupied by low income families. The neighborhood proved attractive to drug dealing because of its location directly adjacent to a major thoroughfare through Upper Marlboro, because of its myriad of escape routes through surrounding woods, and because its residents were powerless to do anything about it. The area was littered with abandoned cars and trash-strewn lots. Police were called to the neighborhood 65 times in 1998 and 67 times in 1999, mostly for violent offenses.

Corporal Tammy Chaffee, a nine year veteran with the Prince George's County Police Department and a member of the District II Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), was assigned to the area in the spring of 1999. Through her patrols, observation and talking with

residents, she discovered the extent of the problem and set about fixing it shortly after being assigned to the community. She had discovered earlier in her career that establishing a police presence and building relationships with the community was more important and effective than simply responding to service calls.

Through a combination of traditional police work and "officer friendly" type approaches that were previously unheard of in the community, she set about attacking the problem. She targeted drug dealers and buyers, cleaned up the block, and improved services for members of the community. She arranged for a nuisance home in the community to be burned down, and she organized a community day for area youth and families. Her most visible effort to date, however, has been the establishment of a COPS office and community center that attracts over 20 kids per day. The center, operated in partnership with area churches and other organizations and staffed entirely with volunteers, has won rave reviews not only for giving kids in the neighborhood something to do, but for improving their grades as well.

Chaffee's approach and her work have created more trust between the police and the community, which has resulted in the community taking a more proactive approach to problems in the neighborhood.

Scanning:

The name of the neighborhood off Route 301 is Sugar Hill. It is a small community approximately 20 miles from Washington, DC, nestled in the larger town of Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Sugar Hill is largely a residential community, with 22 single-family homes, 150 residents, including 70 children. The community is only a few blocks from the seat of Prince George's County government.

Sugar Hill was known as one of the most violent places in District H. For generations, the small community of Sugar Hill was plagued with drug dealing, prostitution, and other illegal activities. According to US Census data of a larger census tract that includes Sugar Hill, this area of Upper Marlboro, Maryland consist of mostly owner-occupied single family households. The area is largely African-American, with a per capita income of \$19, 365. Over 70% of its residents have never earned a college degree. While these statistics do not portray a rich neighborhood, they do not come close to describing the Sugar Hill area.

On the 15200-15500 block of Peerless Avenue, the dead-end street that comprises much of Sugar Hill, the per capita income averages around \$10,000. Almost none of its residents have earned a college degree. A majority of the residents have been arrested at least once, and those arrested are often the sons and daughters of parents and grandparents who have also been arrested. The community consists largely of older housing, some with no running water, many in disrepair.

Though it is not a rural community, it had characteristics similar to rural communities, such as the lack of streetlights, which encouraged criminal activity. At least 14 abandoned cars littered the area. There were no playgrounds or other recreational activities. Unkempt lawns, some with trash strewn on them, were commonplace.

Nestled around the cul-de-sac at the end of Peerless Avenue are 11 newer homes. Built in 1982, these 4 bedroom homes are owned and managed by the Prince George's County Housing Authority. They are used to rent to families who have a Housing Choice voucher from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This program, called Section 8, allows low-income families to rent any housing they choose, with the rent partially subsidized by HUD.

Analysis:

Corporal Chaffee, who has patrolled Old Bowie, and then spent 14 months in Special Operations, was assigned to patrol the Sugar Hill community in April 1999. Previous to that time, no special efforts were made by the police or anyone else to address the crime problem in the community. The neighborhood was so violent that even police officers would never respond to service calls by themselves. The local pizza delivery service, in clear violation of their policies, refused to deliver to the block out of concern for the safety of their drivers.

Corporal Chaffee, however, spent time in the community, talking with its residents and observing activity during patrols. She used

methods similar to those she had used in Old Bowie, which also had a drug and violence problem. She reached out to members in the community to build relationships and partner with them in problem-solving. She had been trained as a community-policing specialist in implementing the SARA model to solve problems in communities. It wasn't long before Corporal Chaffee discovered a few more crucial aspects to the neighborhood.

For one, it seemed that the source of much of the crime in the neighborhood was an abandoned two-story privately owned home. The previous residents of the home had been evicted because the house was in major disrepair, and the county had condemned the house. The owner, an 80-year-old woman, could not afford to maintain it or tear it down. So it became a haven for the drug dealers and other persons engaged in illegal activity. Many of the police service calls for the community were related to that house.

Chaffee also tapped into something that is inherent in many lower income African-Americans living in communities such as Sugar Hill - a fear and distrust of the police. In Old Bowie, Chaffee discovered that the residents there actually wanted to improve their communities and worked with the police to solve the problems.

Not so on Sugar Hill. Police appearances in the neighborhood were usually to respond to service calls, and it was seldom that a police officer showed up in the neighborhood other than to invoke his or her police

powers. They would come, typically to arrest someone, and never show again until the next service call. Because of the distrust, police usually were not called unless to respond to a violent activity or other incident that represented a threat to life or safety. Out of the total service calls to the Sugar Hill community in 1998, 65 were for violent crimes such as shootings or shots being *fired*, domestic violence, assaults, and fighting . In 1999, 67 of the 100 service calls were for violent crimes.

The devastation that poverty and the drug trade has taken in this community is obvious. At one point, it was not uncommon for the residents of Sugar Hill to wake up to gunfire and see a young man sprawled wounded or dead on the street or in the woods that surround this area. The neighborhood's reputation for violence and drugs was so prevalent in the county that housing inspectors often rode down Peerless Avenue, turned around at the cul-de-sac that ends the street, and quickly headed back up the road. They would take a cursory view of homes along the way and declare them safe, without ever getting out of their vehicles, because they were afraid. The nickname for the community, Sugar Hill, apparently was given to the community based upon the availability of drugs.

Corporal Chaffee had experienced the calamity first-hand. She was particularly concerned about the 70 children who lived in the block and were exposed to the goings-on. And she set about trying to change it.

Response:

Corporal Chaffee's first response was to rid the community of the abandoned home that had become a den for drug dealers and prostitutes and the source of many of the neighborhood's problems. She went to the county's fire department with an unusual idea - to literally burn the nuisance property down.

The house burning would be a "controlled burn," overseen by the Fire department. They would methodically set the crumbling house on fire, and then use the burning house as a *training* exercise for new fire department recruits. As a local reporter deadpanned, the idea "caught fire." But Chaffee needed the owner's permission to destroy the house. She found out the name and *address* of the owner of the house and approached her with an effective bargaining chip. The fire department would burn down the house during a training exercise, saving the owner the cost of demolition. The county would also absolve her of the fees that had been assessed against her because of the condition of the home.

Fortunately the owner agreed and gave them permission.

On Tuesday, October 5, 1999, during Fire Prevention week, county officials blocked off nearby Route 301, a major thoroughfare through Upper Marlboro. A group of fifth grade students from Riverdale Baptist School, in nearby Largo, were brought in, where firefighters used the home to teach the students about planning, implementing and practicing escape routes from their homes in case of fire. A harmless, simulated

fire was started, and a recruit, his wife and 3-year child volunteered to demonstrate the proper way to escape during a fire.

Afterwards, the real fire was started and the recruits got to find out what it was like to go into a burning building.

After the controlled burn left the house demolished, the county Public Works Department, contacted by Corporal Chaffee, came in, hauled away the debris, and graded the site.

Although the controlled burn happened almost 6 months after Chaffee had been assigned to Peerless, she remained busy in the meantime, working on two projects, one that was meant to foster community relations, and the other that was meant to rid the drug dealers from the community.

She got the Narcotics Unit involved and targeted buyers first. As the customers came into the community to buy drugs, officers would stop the vehicles as they exited, check for license and registration, and observe for probable cause. Then the focus was turned to the dealers. Undercover officers were sent into the community to make buys. When the transactions were completed, the dealers were promptly arrested.

Because of the efforts, Chaffee became the target of death threats from dealers in the community. But she also became the target of much adoration from the residents, and especially the kids.

That happened because of her tireless efforts to organize a Sugar Hill Community Day. The community day, held on July 17, 1999, was

organized to win the trust of the people in the community and to offer something for the kids, many of whom had nothing to do. She contacted the State's Attorney's Office, the PG County Sheriff's office, fellow police officers, the local WalMart, the Fire Department and other local businesses and organizations, all of whom contributed money, supplies, or services to help make the first Sugar Hill Community Day a day of fun and fruitful activities. Among them:

- The kids were treated to a moon bounce, accompanied by music from a local disc jockey.
- A raffle was held to win free bicycles.
- Many kids participated in the free pony rides offered by Pony Express.
- The Sheriff's office fingerprinted the children.
- Local restaurants contributed food and snacks.
- Free hearing and sight screenings were offered.
- Free books and crafts were offered by the PG County Public Library.

Shortly after the community day, the community began to see other improvements at the hand of Corporal Chaffee. She got the county to put up streetlights. Because of the drug activity occurring in several of the Section 8 homes at the end of the block, many of the tenants were evicted, leaving several homes vacant. Housing officials came in and fixed up many of the homes, getting them ready to rent to new families. One of the homes, however, never made it back into the rental pool, thanks to Chaffee.

Her idea was to use one of the vacant homes as an office for the District II Community Oriented Policing Services and as a community center for the neighborhood youth. The center would be a follow-up to the community day by helping to maintain a positive police presence in the community, while offering the kids educational and recreational activities. She contacted housing officials, made presentations and phone calls, asking for the 4-bedroom home. PG County housing officials agreed and allowed her to use the home. Once she acquired the home, she needed help to get the office operational.

Relying on the contacts she had made through the community day and previous efforts, she tried to round up assistance from other organizations and businesses to help bring the project together. She visited area churches and shared her vision about the project. One of those churches was Greater Mt. Nebo AME Church, located just up the road from Peerless Avenue and right around the corner from District II headquarters. She was also introduced to a local minister through Hank Arrington of the State's Attorney's office. Rev. Ricky Lyons lent his support to the project and suggested to Conquest Offender Reintegration Ministries (CORM) that they adopt the project. Though CORM, a Washington, DC non-profit organization of which Lyons is a member of the board of directors, dealt primarily with adult ex-offenders, it agreed to adopt the project based upon its experience with the youth of adult offenders.

Lyons and CORM, with the assistance of Greater Mt. Nebo, organized a clean-up day for the house, located at 15202 Peerless Avenue. On April 29, 2000, about a year after Chaffee was assigned to Peerless, several volunteers converged on the home to pull the boards off the windows of the home, pick up trash, cut grass, pull weeds and branches, and clean the inside of the home. Maintenance of the home remained the responsibility of the Housing Authority.

During the following few months, Chaffee worked the phones and made other contacts to get the community center off the ground. She got the State's Attorney's Office to donate computers to the center. She got CORM to assume responsibility for paying utilities and minor maintenance. She bought, out of her own pocket, books, draperies, and encyclopedias from yard sales. One of the yard sale organizers put her in contact with Martin Dale of the Black Data Processing Association. Mr. Dale configured the center's computers.

But her biggest coup was when Juanita Parks, a member of Greater Mt. Nebo, recognized Chaffee at a local supermarket. Parks had recognized her from the meeting she had attended at the church. Chaffee pitched the project to Parks, who subsequently agreed to assume responsibility for running the center on a day-to-day basis.

On November 11, 2000, the center was officially opened with an Open House to invite the community to see the center. Visitors were given a tour of the center, which included a computer lab, a kitchen, the

COPS office, a clothing room, and a study room, and feasted on snacks donated by CORM.

Since then the "House of Fun Center", as the neighborhood youths call it, has been the site of several activities *in* addition to daily tutoring and recreational activities. One of them was a "Breakfast With Santa", held on a rainy day in December 2000. Over 20 neighborhood children and youths swarmed on the center to be fed eggs, bacon, toast, jelly and juice and to get a visit from Santa Claus, who rode to the center on a fire engine. The truck, taken out of service by Upper Marlboro Volunteer Fire Station 20 specifically for the occasion, rolled down Peerless, its bells and sirens blaring, with Rudolph and Frosty, played by Chaffee's two daughters in dress-up, perched on top along with Santa. The noisy procession drew many more youth and adults out of their homes and out into the rain to the center, which quickly became filled to capacity. Chaffee delivered a short message to the crowd, declaring her love for the community and telling them that this was their center and that it should be taken care of and respectful.

Later, each of the children got a free gift, which were donated by Collington Episcopal Life Care Community *in* nearby Mitchellville, MD and placed under a tree donated by the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 89.

Assessment:

The success of Corporal Chaffee and the Prince George's County Police Department's efforts in the community were overwhelming. Residents and former residents of the community report that the quality of life has improved tremendously since 1999. Because of the controlled burn of the abandoned house, a major center of criminal activity was eliminated, which severely curtailed vagrancy in the community. One former resident reported in a recent newspaper article about the project that she was afraid to leave the house when she lived there. After a visit to Peerless Avenue recently, she sees a 100% turnaround.

Service calls to Peerless Avenue plummeted from 67 in 1999 to 23 in 2000. A further analysis of those service calls reveals that many members of the community have come to trust the police department since the controlled burn and the community day. Many of the calls in the later part of 1999 and all of 2000 were proactive calls such as reporting suspicious persons in the community, indicating that residents had started the call the police when they notice suspicious activity, rather than responding to criminal incidents that had already happened.

The Community Center and COPS office has also served as a vehicle to restore quality of life to the community. Center volunteer Juanita Parks has built relationships with many children, youth and parents in the community. Many of the kids visit the community center after-school on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, when the center is open. As a result, grades for many of the students in the

community have improved. Ms. Parks is also a frequent attendee at PTA meetings, student-teacher conferences, and other events at Marlton Elementary School, where the kids attend. Many kids in the community see her as a matronly figure and ask her to accompany them on these events. Even Ms. Parks herself reported that at one time, she didn't feel comfortable being in the community. Now, the community is safer, because of the police presence and Chaffee's efforts to rid the community of drug dealers. It is cleaner, because Chaffee got the city to tow away the abandoned cars and puts up streetlights. And the community center has won raves, not only from the students, but from parents and other members of the community. Even Marlton Elementary recently did a newsletter article on the project. It has not only improved grades, but has given the kids something to do with their idle time, and has introduced structure and discipline into many of their lives for the first time.

The initial success of the project has also attracted more volunteers. While in November and December 2000 the center had only 1 or 2 volunteers, the center currently has 5 active tutors.

Chaffee's efforts have not only been recognized in print media, but she and CORM board member Ricky Lyons were recently awarded the Maryland Governor's Crime Prevention Award for their work on Peerless Avenue. Chaffee was also voted Police Officer of the Year in 1999 by the

Knights of Columbus, and was given a Unit citation in 2000 for her work on Peerless.

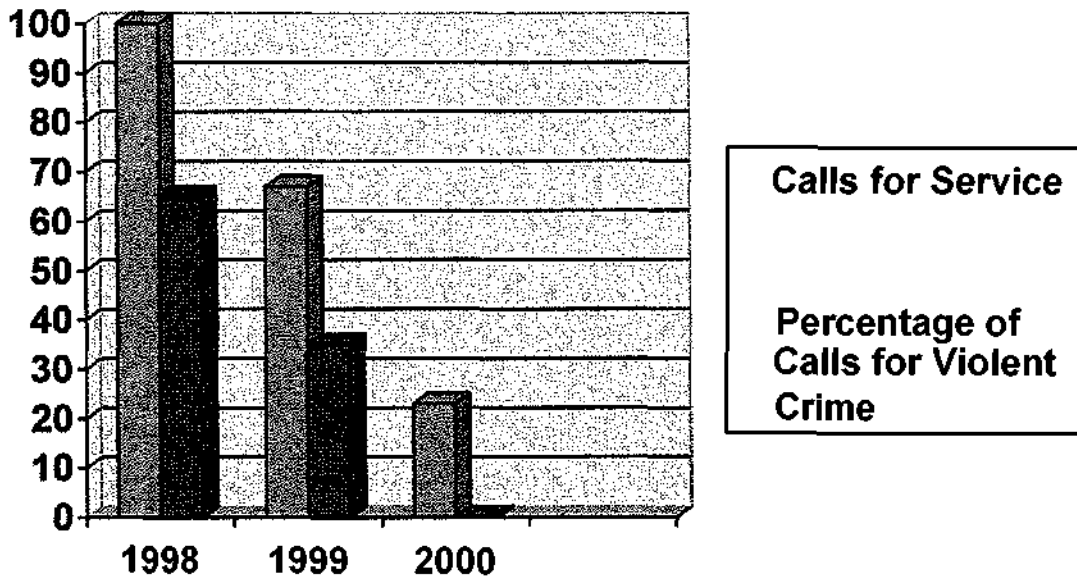
Continued response will be needed to maintain the areas of success on Peerless Avenue. Occasionally there is dealing or using in the community, but now the residents are more likely to report it before it escalates to 1998 levels. Efforts are under way to link the area kids with one-on-one mentors. The COPS office in the community center will help to maintain a police presence in the neighborhood, and future events will be planned to help maintain camaraderie between the police and the community.

Agency and Officer Information

Chaffee and the officers in Community Policing of District H, Prince George's County Police, implemented this unique approach with no funding from the department and little funding outside of the department. However, Chaffee reached out to the community, including churches and businesses, to solicit their support.

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Calls for Service for Peerless Ave