

# Building Bridges by Mending Fences

In the City of Stuart, Florida, the Colony Court Apartments had a bad reputation. Colony Court is a large low-income apartment complex. Nearly all of the city's South and Central American population resides there. Many are illegal immigrants with families. Most are from Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama. The complex has traditionally been a problem for the police department, generating an extremely high volume of calls for service. Crimes of every type were reported routinely, and the migrant workers were frequently the targets of robberies, and beatings. The property was run down and those living there had no sense of pride or ownership for their surroundings.

The department's initial response was a poor one. We called the U. S. Border Patrol to haul all the illegal immigrants away. This was done in 1997. Naturally the fear of government escalated and the trust between the police department and the residents of Colony Court was gone. The crimes and problems continued into 1998 and 1999.

In 1999, a veteran detective was assigned to the escalating problems at Colony Court. After analyzing reports we created a problem oriented policing project at Colony Court with the goal of eliminating the problems. We quickly identified numerous factors which set Colony Court apart from other complexes in the city:

- The demand for police service was disproportionate to other similar sized complexes.
- There was an unusually high concentration of crimes such as robbery, battery, burglary and theft.
- The same type of victim was continually being targeted for such offenses with no apparent change of behavior to avoid re-occurrences.
- The language barrier between police and residents.
- The overall condition of the apartment complex and its grounds, to include lighting and landscaping.

In a multi-phased process that took nearly a year, Colony Court, now re-named Hidden Palms, was forever changed. The Hidden Palm apartments of today are an attractive, well-manicured, well behaved, and mostly crime free complex. The process included free language lessons to residents, the establishing of bank accounts, self-defense instruction, and crime prevention through environmental design.

By working with members of the community, several positive changes took place;

- 64% reduction in total calls for service from 1998 to 2010)
- 54% reduction in batteries
- 100%, reduction in robberies
- Substantial reductions in criminal mischief (-80%), burglaries (-75%), noise complaints (-90%), 911 hang-ups (-62%), trespassing (-76%), juvenile problems (-97%), fights (-75%), and trespassing (-76%).

**The Hidden Palms of today is now a beautiful, thriving apartment complex in Stuart. The Stuart Police Department responded to the same calls at Colony Court for years, with no change. Only when the police requested the assistance of the community did long lasting changes take place.**

## Contact information

Detective Steven M. Graff  
Stuart Police Department  
831) Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Stuart, FL 34994  
(561)220-3918  
Email [sgraff@stuartpd.martin.fl.us](mailto:sgraff@stuartpd.martin.fl.us)

Asst. Chief Joe Lyons  
Stuart Police Department  
830 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Stuart, FL 34994  
(561)220-3910  
Email [jlyons@stuartpd.martin.fl.us](mailto:jlyons@stuartpd.martin.fl.us)

# **Introduction**

Stuart is located in Martin County, on the East Coast of Florida. We are approximately thirty-five miles north of West Palm Beach. Stuart has a long history and was incorporated in 1914. The city encompasses 15 square miles, and has a resident population of about 15,000 people. The population swells to about 30,000 during the wintertime when our seasonal residents return from up north. Stuart serves as the county seat and has a very large business base. Over 100,000 people come into Stuart on a daily basis. The city is surrounded by water on three sides and is two miles from the Atlantic Ocean. We have been designated as the "Sailfish Capital of the World", a slogan we proudly display on our uniform patch.

In 1994, the Stuart Police Department adopted the concept of Community Policing. All employees, sworn and civilian, were trained in the concept. We receive yearly refresher training in Community Oriented Policing and Problem Oriented Policing. Throughout the years, specific officers were assigned to the Crime Prevention Unit with Community and Problem Oriented Policing as their primary goal. Patrol officers and detectives however also practice these concepts as part of their daily routine. It is not at all unusual for a dozen or more projects to be on going at the same time. Officers and detectives work in four patrol zones. They are responsible for identifying areas of concern, They are empowered to use all resources available to identify, analyze, and respond to the problem.

The Hidden Palms Apartment complex. (formerly Colony Court Apartments). is located at 1201 Palm Beach Road. It is comprised of six buildings and has 132 total units. The complex is located in a primarily residential area. It borders an elementary school to the north and east. a middle class neighborhood to the south, and low to middle class neighborhoods to the west. It is also in very close proximity to a high drug sale and crime area. This project focused on the complex and its grounds.

## **Scanning**

After answering so many calls for service, we learned that the residents of Colony Court were intimidated by the police and dissatisfied with the level of service they were receiving. After many of their family members and friends were deported by the government in 1997, no level of trust and security remained. Many felt abandoned and alone. They viewed themselves as outcasts with no one to turn to for help. The apartment complex itself was in disrepair. The landscape and lighting conditions were atrocious. None of them had a sense of pride as to their living conditions. Many of the residents are migrant workers who do not speak English. They work in the local orange fields, as dishwashers, or other menial labor jobs. Because most are illegal immigrants, they do not have bank accounts. They carry large sums of cash because they do not understand our banking system and fear government. Local street criminals preyed on these residents because they were deemed easy targets. The men were beaten and robbed of their money. The criminals knew there was little chance that the victim would report the incident because of their immigration status. Officers also had difficulty conversing with the residents because of the language barrier. The severity of the problem finally came to a boil when three men were badly beaten and robbed.

Department administrators had recognized the problem and zone officers were trying to deal with it. After the latest robbery, a veteran detective was specifically assigned to this Problem Oriented Policing Project. This project was made a priority because of the long lasting problems at the complex and the

escalating violence focusing on its residents. After several weeks of research and meetings, we made the following observations:

The demand for police service was disproportionate to other similar sized complexes.

There was an unusually high concentration of crimes such as robbery, batten, trespassing, domestic violence, criminal mischief, burglary, and 911 hang-ups.

The same type of victim was continually being targeted for such offenses with no apparent change in behavior to avoid re-occurrences.

The language barrier between police and residents was leading to confusion and anger.

The overall condition of the complex and its grounds, to include lighting and landscaping.

Residents had no feeling of trust or pride in their police department.

Residents frequently carried large sums of cash.

## Analysis

Analysis was done by compiling all records related to the Colony Court Apartments since 1998. Interviews were done with apartment managers, and city officials. We found that the problems of Colony Court had been on going for many years. We were responding there on a daily basis, and no positive changes were occurring.

There were many people involved in the root problem including the management, tenants, city officials, and the police department. Several main areas were identified as the cause of the problem.

### IVTmanagement/Tenants

The management allowed the property to deteriorate and living conditions to become almost unbearable. They ignored maximum occupancy ordinances. They allowed broken lights to go unfixed and the grounds to be littered. Junk vehicles were left in the parking lots with no recourse. If the management had no sense of pride in the complex, how could the residents. Many of the tenants took no personal initiative in seeing the property kept up and litter free. Residents would frequently stand in large groups drinking, then discarding the containers onto the ground. Fights would break out and domestic violence cases escalated. Juveniles complaints soared as the children were following in their parents behavior. Because they were uneducated in the American banking system, and feared government, many carried large sums of cash making them easy targets for robberies. They did not understand basic crime prevention skills.

### Lack of action by the police and other city agencies

City code enforcement officials had neglected to act on the many code violations at the complex. They allowed many unsafe apartments to go unchecked, and the junk vehicles to remain, Code violations

were allowed to go unchecked for rears. The police department responded with an enforcement only policy, arresting violators without looking deeper into the problem. Extra patrol was provided but had no affect. After several robberies in 1997, we decided to focus on the victims instead of the reason why the robberies were occurring. In our first attempt at problem oriented policing at Colony Court. eve thought if we removed the victim from the environment. the problem would be solved. We elicited the help of the I.N.S. and the U.S. Border Patrol. We raided the complex and took away busloads of illegal immigrants, This was a terrible solution, and a poor decision. Not only did more illegal aliens move in right behind the ones who were deported, the level of trust between the residents and the police hit an all time low,

## Environmental Design Issues

Examination of the complex design highlighted numerous deficiencies. Lighting was nearly non-existent. Many doorway bulbs were broken out and the parking lot was not well luminated at all. This allowed drug and alcohol abuse to occur without fear of being seen. Officers on patrol found it extremely difficult to see in and around the complex. There was no landscaping, grass was in patches. bushes were torn apart. trees scarce. The buildings had old peeling paint jobs, and the stairways were crumbling with broken handrails. Garbage was strewn throughout the complex and on balconies.

## Response

After analysis showed us what the deep-rooted problems were. we set out to form a partnership utilizing multiple agencies to make a solution work. All possible resources were considered. To make the plan work we needed the help of a private bank, the local community college, the Catholic Church. complex owners and management. the police department and code enforcement. We set the following goals:

### Goals

**Upon** examination of **the** issues that faced the residents of Colony **Court**, we set out with **the** following goals:

1. Drive illegal activity from the complex.
2. Enroll residents in an "English as a Second Language" course.
3. Teach residents self-defense and basic safety skills.
4. Educate residents on the banking system and start accounts.
5. Reduce the need for police services.
6. Restore the residents faith in the police department by building a cooperative working relationship.

Our response involved at least four separate and distinct tactics.

### Phase 1. Gaining Trust

We had to break down the anti-trust barrier that separated the residents and the police. To do so, we sought the assistance of Sister Teresa Auad of the Archdiocese of Palm Beach. Sister Auad is a trusted ally and advocate of the residents of Hidden Palms and other immigrants in Martin County, Together we

began rebuilding the broken relationship that had existed for years. We scheduled meetings once a month. What started out as a low turn out, soon had many of the previously frightened residents attending. Together we established many of the goals listed above. Once trust was restored\_ they were more willing to follow-up on the suggestions and advice that we provided.

Utilizing all available resources, we solicited the help of our senior Crime Prevention Officer at the department. He is also the department's self-defense instructor. We knew we had to build the confidence of the residents and teach them basic safety skills at the same time. We taught basic self-defense and taught them to walk in-groups and avoid dark, isolated area's of the complex. We hoped by teaching these skills, that we could reduce the rate of robbery, assault. and battery.

Next we solicited the help of one of our senior citizen volunteers. He is fluent in Spanish and many of its dialects. He is part of our Citizen Patrol, and at our request we asked him to make Hidden Palms a daily stop. He frequently visits the complex, speaking with the residents and their children. He is able to relay their concerns to officers, and is their primary contact. He has become an important part of the success of the project.

## Phase 2. The Language Barrier

To assist residents with the communication barrier, we sought the help of Indian River Community College. A teacher who teaches "English as a Second Language" agreed to volunteer his time to help the residents learn English. The college waived fees and allowed the teacher to use college resources to assist with the project.

## Phase 3. Bank Accounts

Our analysis showed that many of the residents carried large sums of cash on their person. and that was the reason they were being targeted for robbery. Because of their illegal status and fear of the government, they *were* reluctant to put their money into banks. We had to educate the residents on the benefit of using a bank, then convince them to start accounts. We met with the President and Vice President of the First Bank of Indiantown about helping us solve this problem. They already serve a large migrant clientele in Indiantown. Indiantown is located in western Martin County and is primarily an agricultural area. Together they attended one of our monthly meetings and explained how the banking institution works. The President of the bank was fluent in Spanish which helped him gain the trust of the residents.

The residents told us that they needed some form of identification to assist in banking. The bank brought all the equipment necessary to make ID cards on the spot. They brought cameras and photographed the residents who were interested in signing up. They then typed their personal information onto the card\_ then laminated them. All this was done in one meeting. Additionally, we told residents that we would recognize these bank ID cards as legitimate forms of identification.

## Phase 4. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

The complex was sold bringing new owners and management. Together with the police department they chose to invest in the residents by giving the complex a complete make over. The buildings were freshly painted\_ the grounds landscaped and entire complex illuminated. Dark areas were eliminated and criminals no longer had places to hide in wait for unsuspecting residents to walk by. The residents had a

new sense of pride for their surroundings. The Colony Court Apartments were now a memory and the Hidden Palms Apartments were born.

The new management didn't stop there. They enforced the maximum occupancy ordinance for each apartment\_ eliminating apartments with two or three families living inside. Those families forced to move were given opportunities to move into separate apartments. They also began evicting problem tenants. Problem tenants were identified as those who were a constant source of police attention. This took care of the habitual drunks and other rowdy troublemakers. Law abiding tenants were asked to abide by the new rules governing the complex or face eviction. Complex managers worked with code enforcement to remove junked vehicles. and conic into compliance on the other minor code violations.

## **Assessment**

Since the project was finished, we have continuously reassessed the health of the Hidden Palms Apartments by reviewing our original goals.

### **--Drive illegal activity from the complex**

Problem tenants were evicted. The police department and complex management worked together to identify and remove the troublemakers. Juveniles were supervised. Those juveniles showing an increased chance of offending were referred to our Youth Intervention Program for counseling and guidance. The following results were obtained by comparing the statistics from 1998 to the project's conclusion in 2000.

- Juvenile Problems reduced by 97%**
- Burglary reduced by 75%**
- Criminal Mischief reduced by 80%**
- Domestic Violence reduced by 70%**
- Fights reduced by 75%**
- Drug complaints reduced by 50%**
- Noise complaints reduced by 90%**
- Trespassing reduced by 76%**
- 911 Hang-ups reduced by 62%**

The residents played a key role in the reduction rate by working together with police and management. They have taken pride in their new surroundings and have made the complex a great place to live.

### **--Enroll residents in an "English as a Second Language" course.**

Many residents have taken advantage of this free service. Thanks to Indian River Community College and a dedicated teacher, this experiment has turned into a tremendous success. The classes continue today.

### **—Teach residents self-defense and basic safety skills**

Our goal was to educate the residents on how not to be a victim, and at the same time build their self-confidence. By teaching basic crime prevention skills, we had hoped to decrease the number robberies, assaults, and batteries. The following results were obtained by comparing the statistics from 1998 to the project's conclusion in 2000:

**—Robberies reduced by 100%**

**---Assaults reduced by 60%**

**---Batteries reduced by 54%**

### **--Educate residents on the banking system and have them start accounts**

Our goal was to prevent large sums of cash from being carried by residents. If the offenders knew the residents no longer carried cash, they would be less likely to try and rob them. After the initial meeting with the representatives of a local bank, over two dozen residents signed up for new accounts. Bank ID cards were made on scene and distributed.

### **—Reduce the need for police services**

Police calls to Colony Court Apartments were examined using our computer aided dispatch system. High demand for police services is symptomatic of underlying problems. Conversely, a drop in the demand for police services can be an indicator that underlying problems have been addressed. We understand that it can be a mistake to put too much weight on statistics relating only to police call volume. We do however understand that a significant reduction in the demand for service in one location could allow officers to spend their discretionary time proactively in another.

**—372 calls for service in 1998**

**—200 calls for service in 1999**

**—135 calls for service in 2000**

### **—Restore the resident's faith in the police department**

This type of goal is difficult to measure. By examining the changes at the complex, and by looking at how many residents participated in the initiatives sponsored by the department, one could only surmise that the faith has indeed been restored. Officers are welcome at the complex and are no longer feared. Residents are willing to come to the police for resolving their problems, where in the past this was rare.

# **Agency Information**

## **--Level of Involvement**

Initially, this project was implemented by a single detective. As time went on, all employees became actively involved.

## **—Training**

The department received training in C.O.P and P.O.P, prior to this project. The detective assigned as the project coordinator earned his Florida Crime Prevention Practitioner rating in 2000 by attending the three crime prevention schools taught by the Florida Attorney Generals Office.

## **—Resources**

The detective assigned this project was given the freedom to do what ever it took to get the job done, however he was also responsible for his daily case load of unsolved crimes. He referred to the following guidelines and manuals for assistance:

- "Designing Safer Communities" by the National Crime Prevention Council
- "Safe Cities" by Wekerle and Whitzman
- "Solving Crime Problems in Residential Neighborhoods" by Feins, Epstein, and Widom
- "Fixing Broken Windows" by Kelling and Coles
- "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design" by Florida Attorney Generals Office
- "Handbook of Loss Prevention and Crime Prevention" by Florida Attorney Generals Office

# **Synopsis**

The Stuart Police Department took on a project that had gone unfulfilled for years. Traditional law enforcement methods were not working. By taking advantage of ingenuity and foresight, we formed a coalition of professionals who were up to the task. Together we created change that far surpassed our greatest expectations. The Hidden Palms Apartments of today are an attractive, well-manicured, well-behaved, and mostly crime free complex. They generate no more calls for service than any other similar size complex in the city. This project is truly the epitome of our slogan "In Partnership with the Community".



## **Project Contact Persons**

**Detective Steven M. Graff**  
**Stuart Police Department**  
**830 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.**  
**Stuart, FL 34994**

**Phone:** (561) 220-3918

**Fax:** (561) 288-5390

**Email:** [sgraffestuart.d.martin.fl.us](mailto:sgraffestuart.d.martin.fl.us)

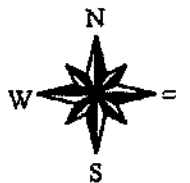
**Asst. Chief Joseph Lyons**  
**Stuart Police Department**  
**830 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.**  
**Stuart, FL 34994**

**Phone:** (561) 220-3910

**Fax:** (561) 220-5986

**Email:** [lyons.c@stuartpd.martin.fl.us](mailto:lyons.c@stuartpd.martin.fl.us)

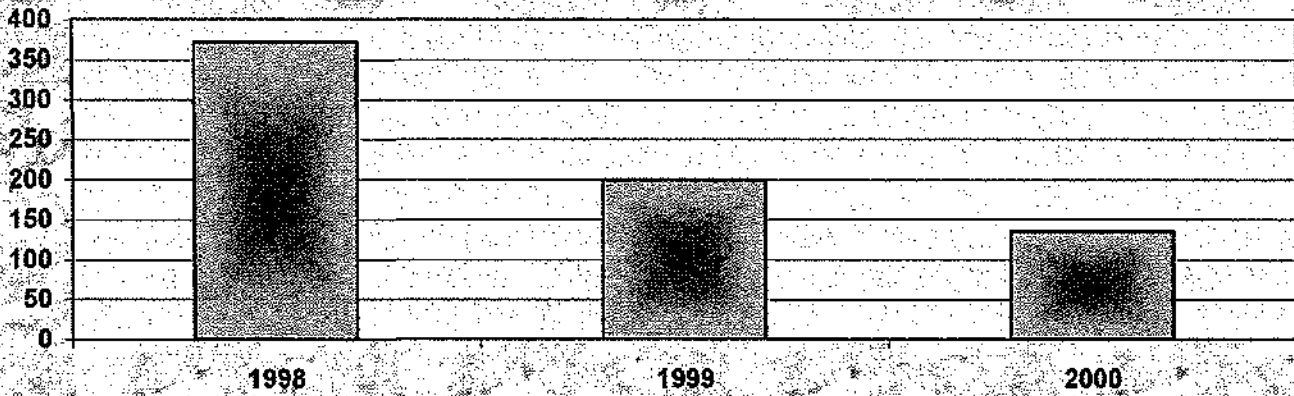
# Appendix 1



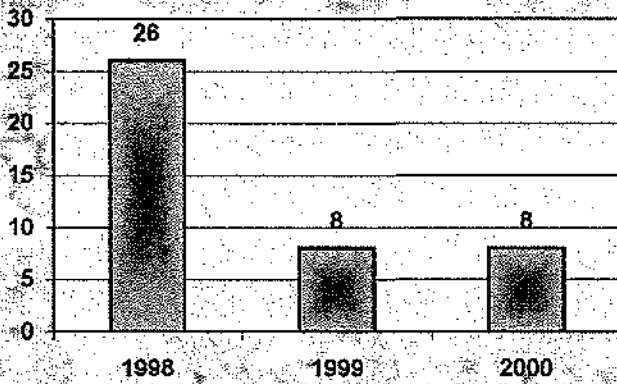
# Appendix 3 Statistical Analysis

## Police Calls to Colony Court

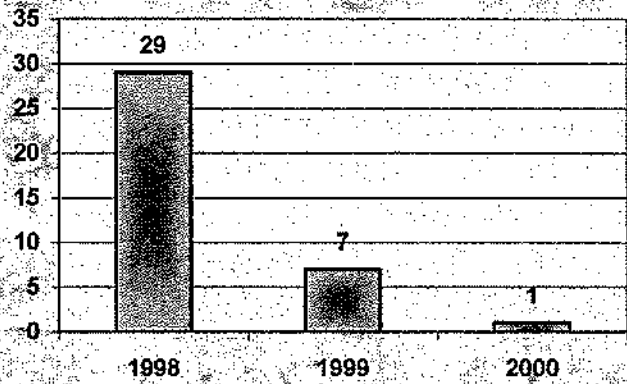
### Total calls



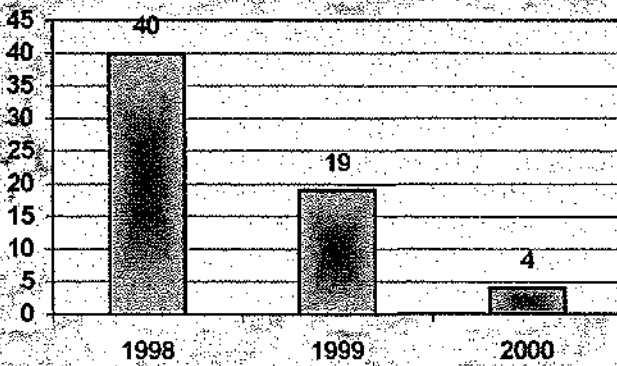
### Domestics



### Juv Compl



### Noise



### Trespassing

