

# **The Overtown Problem Solving Team**

City of Miami Police Department

## **The Problem: Scanning.**

Overtown is one of Miami's most historic areas. During its heyday, it was the focal point for Miami's African American population. After a major expressway was built, urban blight soon set in. Various vacant, opened and abandoned structures were commonplace. Criminals used these structures to assist them with drug sales.

1445 NW 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue in Overtown was the most horrible of all such structures. This was a huge, three story complex which covered almost an entire city block. The owner is a well respected icon in the area. He either was unable to maintain his building or lacked interest in it. Over time the building deteriorated into a den of squalor. It was soon dubbed "New Jack" after a movie which chronicled how a drug kingpin took over an apartment complex and converted it into a drug empire.

Arrest would only provide a temporary solution as the overburdened criminal justice system would soon release offenders. Many criminals, fully aware of a justice system which in essence gave them tacit approval, returned and continued criminal activity.

For a number of years, children could be seen playing as heroin and crack addicts used drugs just a few feet away. Drug overdose deaths and arson were almost every day occurrences. Many residents felt powerless to complain as this was one of several buildings in the area. For years the crime continued to perpetuate itself.

Although the owner claimed to be concerned about his apartment complex, he at times acted powerless to remedy the myriad of problems the building presented. Tenants moved out and he refused to properly secure the premises. Trash was dumped and he refused to pick it up. He also ignored various summonses and fines levied by the City of Miami.

Problems at the structure continued to mount despite arrest details and organized trash pick-ups sponsored by the Overtown Neighborhood Enhancement Team office. As soon as the debris was cleared or arrest made, more trash was dumped and offenders soon returned after release from the Dade County Jail.

Complaints from citizens about illegal activity within the building began to rise. A story regarding the perpetual squalor in the building was depicted in the New Times which is a free local newspaper. Everyone within the South Florida region then became aware of the terrible living conditions.

The Overtown Problem Solving Team was started in Overtown in March of 2000. This particular building became the central focus of our problems due to the high rate of arson and criminal activity. Officer Foster began the scanning process of problem solving in an attempt to make the owner clean up his building. It was his intention to return the building to a state where paying tenants could reside in a crime free environment free of drugs.

Officer Foster then began networking with various officials within the City and the State in an effort to hold the owner accountable for the deplorable condition of his building. Officer Foster also met with the owner on several occasions as well as civic leaders to explain his position and begin the process of networking to ensure that the building would either be properly secured or demolished.

The owner continued to ignore warnings and Officer Foster soon moved towards demolishing the building. Officer Foster contacted Mr. Cedric Mar, who is in charge of Unsafe Structures within the City of Miami. Mr. Mar's assistance would prove invaluable to the success of this endeavor.

**Analysis:**

The problems surrounding the building were readily evident to the community as well as the Problem Solving Team. The actual cause of the problems required several levels of analysis.

Initially, Officer Foster needed to familiarize himself with the legal guidelines that were relevant to addressing the issues such as doing and obtaining title searches, building permit requirements, corporate trust, building code standards and building code enforcement.

A key analytical approach was a review of the crime triangle in this situation with the victims being the area residents, the owner of the building the offender and the location being the adjacent area. After the owner cancelled several meetings, Officer Foster took a different approach. He again continued networking with various officials within the State and City. He also sympathized with the citizens of Overtown, thus gaining their trust. Officer Foster then gained valuable knowledge which would aid him in getting the building demolished. Citizens began providing information to him because they knew that Officer Foster was concerned about their plight.

The problems continued to occur however, due to Officer Foster's perseverance and diligence, it became obvious that he intended to remain dedicated to this task in order to bring about a successful conclusion.

**Response:**

T, additional law enforcement methods such as arrests and watch orders were applied to counteract the illegal narcotics activity. These methods were not always responsive for the precluded conditions of the building.

Officer Foster worked with various agencies and continued compiling data of non-compliance by the owner. The direct result was to illustrate how the owner's lack of concern contributed to the problems continuing to exist, thus negatively affecting the community and impacting negatively on its poor quality of life.

The owner continued to ignore Officer Foster and he was eventually served with demolition papers. Again the owner was given a time frame to repair his problems however, just as before he ignored the warnings.

The goals of the demolition were to rid the community of the illegal drug sales and use. In addition, area homeless sought refuge in the building and used drugs within sight of children playing. Officer Foster also felt that this would help promote a partnership between the community, businesses and city government with the goal to improve the quality of life in all of Overtown. It would also increase property values and stimulate a desire to invest in the land. Additionally, other landlords that are maintaining horrible buildings will be put on notice to remedy violations on their respective properties.

Officer Foster prepared for this endeavor by verifying all complaints. Performing weekly inspections to notify the appropriate agency of whatever problem existed. Proactive arrest details were conducted and code enforcement personnel shared the results of their inspections.

Research of television and news articles were kept for the purpose of documentation only. Department personnel combined and maintained data for enforcement action to correct the noncompliance issues. Every one in the Overtown P.S.T. was encouraged to remain focused despite mounting political pressure from the Overtown Community Redevelopment Association and an elected City Official who seemed opposed to the demolition.

Officer Foster faced an array of obstacles during the demolition process. From political pressure to working his way through a labyrinth of bureaucracy. He solicited the assistance of the Overtown Neighborhood Enhancement Team office, Overtown's business and community leaders, City of Miami's Unsafe Structures Department, the Fire Department and the Florida East Coast Railroad. Members of the community continued to meet regularly with Officer Foster to discuss the implementation of issues.

During the evaluation process Officer Foster methods were to use anecdotal evidence, direct observation by the Problem Solving Team's Officers and other agencies involved were asked to notify Officer Foster once compliance violations were met.

The results of Officer Foster's work as well as the response goals accomplished were to eliminate illegal narcotics sales, terminate illegal dumping, end the homeless population which took refuge in the complex and hold the building's owner accountable while bridging gaps in an ethnically sensitive area.

Once the building was demolished in September of 2001, a marked improvement was noticed in sanitation, an end to the drug use and homeless population, as well as an increase in property values. Criminal activity in the area dropped dramatically as the building no longer served as a means in which crimes could easily be committed. The response plan would have been more effective had the building's owner complied with violation in a timely fashion. Thus not allowing the building to deteriorate to the horrible state in which it ended up in.

Due to the building being demolished, the Overtown Problem Solving Team will no longer have to monitor it for future problems. However, due to illegal dumping which is rampant in the area, our team will monitor the property for such activity.

**Assessment:**

After months of work by Officer Foster and the Overtown PST, the City of Miami became convinced that the building should be demolished. This took place in September of 2001. During the demolition, Overtown's residents began to gather and applaud. Officer Foster's work and patience paid off and he has earned the respect of the citizenry.

They have grown to respect Officer Foster as well as the entire Problem Solving Team. This is due to the work Officer Foster has performed demolishing this building as well as several other similar structures. Citizens now confront us, albeit surreptitiously, to report illegal activity such as gambling, narcotic sales and dumping.

Crime in and around the building no longer exists. The Problem Solving Team continues working on the eradication of all derelict buildings in an on going effort to reduce crime and improve the quality of life.

During the demolition, local news and print media covered the story. One station made it top priority. The community saw first hand how Officer Foster and the Problem Solving Team worked tirelessly to end years of frustration. Several citizens were interviewed and

they expressed sincere joy with the officers for the type of work performed. A positive human-interest story was also written in the local newspaper the Miami Herald.

The story chronicled the method of problem solving that Officer Foster used during the process of demolition and explained how the community has accepted him as an officer whom they can trust.

The Overtown PST will continue to strive to return Overtown to the type of thriving community it once was during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We will continue utilizing the concept of problem solving through the S.A.R.A. concept in order to properly address a myriad of problems and concerns, which, have developed over the course of the last 30-40 years.

The demolition of this building and those like it has set a positive precedent in Community Policing in an area that has suffered civil unrest as well as economic and social strife.

It is important to note that Miami's major crimes in 2001 dropped to its lowest in 22 years. The Police Department had to go back to 1978 to find a year with such low crime rate.

While violent crimes throughout the United States fell by 7%, during the same period in Miami, crime fell by 17%. Citywide crime decreased by 11% from 2000 to 2001. Efforts

to reduce crime and improve the quality of life as those exhibited by Officer Foster contributed to this overall dramatic decrease in crime.

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