

Transient Project Interstate 805 Corridor

On December 28, 2001, Robert Jones murdered Robert Rubio while he was sleeping in a transient camp located just north of El Cajon Boulevard along Interstate 805. The suspect, Robert Jones, told homicide detectives he killed Rubio so he could have Rubio's bedroll. Councilwoman Toni Atkins, District 3, asked that the problem be given extra attention. Transients have used the Interstate 805 corridor as an area to live because of the overgrown brush and its proximity to businesses and homes, which are often used by transients as targets of criminal acts. The police department has the responsibility of responding to calls regarding transients living and committing crimes in the area and developing a viable solution to solve the community problems. These transient related issues affected the residents in a negative manner and impacted their overall quality of life.

Sources of Information:

- City Council District 3
- San Diego Police Department Crime Analysis
- San Diego Police Department, Homicide Unit
- City Heights area residents
- City Heights area businesses
- San Diego Union-Tribune

Symptoms:

- A high volume of police calls regarding transient activity
- Increased criminal activity, especially violent crimes
- Public intoxication and related activities including fights, vandalism, urinating in public, drug use.

Analysis:

- Crime Analysis Unit provided number of calls for service for transient related activity (prowling, theft, burglaries, vandalism, trespassing, panhandling)
- Informal survey of community members, business owners, and residents.
- Personal observations of transient camps

Response:

- Crime prevention through environmental design

- Proactive enforcement, including the use of citations and custodial arrests
- Utilizing outside resources to remove overgrown brush and debris
- Replanting of area with low lying plants and shrubs
- Providing social services, including shelter, job placement, medical services

Short-term objectives:

- Reduce crime and calls for service
- Improve the quality life for residents and business owners
- Remove/reduce number of transients living along 1-805 corridor
- Remove trash and debris from existing transient camps
- Deter transients from living along the 1-805 corridor
- Provide social services to affected persons

Long-term goals:

- Remove all overgrown brush along the Interstate 805 corridor
- Replant affected area with low lying plants and shrubs
- Remove transient population and provide alternative living arrangements
- Assist/provide permanent social services to persons living along the 1-805 corridor

Assessment:

- 80% reduction of transient camps in the affected area
- Reduction in calls for service
- Community satisfaction
- 75% reduction in transient related complaints
- ¹ • Three subjects referred to shelters
- Two subjects referred to career services
- One subject referred to drug rehabilitation
- 13 subjects arrested
- 40 illegal camps removed
- 4 acres of brush cleared
- New partnerships with Caltrans, Alpha Project, and the Homeless Outreach Team

The San Diego Police Department and the impacted community benefited greatly from this project. Additionally, several new partnerships were formed as a result of this project.

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SCANNING:

Historical:

For many years the area along Interstate 805 from University Avenue to Adams Avenue has been plagued with numerous transients encampments. In turn, these encampments have been the subject of numerous citizen complaints and calls for service. Likewise, these encampments affect the quality of life for residents living in the immediate area. The persons living in these encampments often commit crimes in the immediate area. In most cases, these crimes are low-level misdemeanors and usually go unnoticed by the public. On December 28, 2001, Robert Rubio, a local transient was murdered while sleeping in a encampment located at El Cajon Boulevard and Interstate 805. Upon arrest the suspect, Robert Jones, told detectives he killed Rubio because he wanted Rubio's bedroll.

After the homicide, Councilwoman Toni Atkins, District 3, received numerous complaints from citizens calling for immediate action. In turn, Councilwoman Atkins contacted Chief David Bejarano and asked that the problem be given special attention. Chief Bejarano contacted Captain Cornicelli of Mid-City Division and assigned the problem to the command.

ORIGIN:

After the homicide of Robert Rubio, Sergeant David Nisleit and Officer Tim Smith went to the scene where Rubio was killed. The area in question was between an on-ramp to Northbound Interstate 805 and El Cajon Boulevard. The encampment was about 30 feet from the on-ramp, but not visible to the street due to thick overgrown brush.

Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith entered the area and found five active camps with persons currently residing inside. Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith found six encampments, which were vacant and no longer in use. This small area is about an acre in size and overgrown with thick brush. Inside the thick brush were tunnels for walking and pockets of clear brush with areas for fires. Other trails lead to an area used as a restroom. This area was littered with human feces, syringes, narcotic paraphernalia, and trash.

The brush was overgrown to the point which looking in from the overpass, you could not determine the depth of brush or see any camps or tunnels. The entrance to the camps was well hidden and appeared to go nowhere. A makeshift memorial had been erected at the location of the homicide. Concerned citizens had left food and blankets along the roadway and memorial site furthering the problem.

After seeing the magnitude of encampments in this small area, Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith looked to the West across the 1-805 at thick overgrown brush. The same problem extended to the north of the original problem and South of the original problem. On January 11, 2001, Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith prepared a squad of officers to document the overall problem, which was determined to be much greater than found on the initial on-ramp area. Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith determined the problem to be a two-mile stretch of roadway from University Avenue to Adams Avenue, along Interstate 805. Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith along with the assisting officers located 30 active encampments and over 40 vacant or day use sites. After reviewing the location it was apparent the environment was conducive to building transient camps. To combat the problem, the environment had to be changed.

ANALYSIS:

The units of analysis used to evaluate the problem were as follows:

We reviewed the number of calls for police service regarding transient activity.

(vandalism, theft, burglary, trespassing, prowling) The SDPD Crime Analysis Unit obtained this information from their computer database. With the help of Crime Analysis and walking the infected area, numerous other problems were identified such as panhandling, prostitution, narcotics activity, loitering, fires, littering, illegal dumping, and public intoxication.

During the initial stages of this information gathering process, we realized the importance of gathering all stakeholders. This would enable us to establish a two way street for communication. We conducted an informal survey of community members, business owners, and homeowners. This survey information was an effective measure to analyze the significance of the problem.

We reviewed and analyzed the results from previous project where Caltrans cleared a small area used by transients. (Clearing one small area only moved the camps to the next nearby location.)

Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith interviewed transients living in the target area. This allowed us to gain valuable insight into the reasons why this location was being used. All persons interviewed stated the overgrown brush was the primary reason they liked the area as well as its close proximity to local businesses.

As mentioned earlier, Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith walked the entire Interstate 805 corridor from University Avenue to Adams Avenue. This revealed 30 active transient camps and 40 camps that were vacant or no longer being used.

STAKEHOLDERS:

First and foremost the stakeholders who were immediately affected were the citizens, residents, and business owners living in the immediate area. Their motivation for resolving this problem was enhanced peace of mind, improved quality of life and hopefully increased property value.

The next stakeholder was the San Diego Police Department. The out of service time, fiscal impact and staffing needed to effectively address these calls for service was a major factor. This included both Mid-City Division and Western Division of the San Diego Police Department.

California Transportation (Cal-Trans) owned the property in question and is a large stakeholder. Cal-Trans was not aware of the activity taking place on their state owned property. Cal-Trans had planted the brush in the early 1970's along the freeway not knowing the long-term growth of the brush. Cal-Trans could also be subject to civil litigation because of incidents occurring on their property.

Alpha Project, a non-profit organization, was also a large stakeholder in the project. Alpha Project was chosen to complete all the brush removal.

PREVIOUS SYSTEM OF RESPONSE:

This has been a problem area with loitering and panhandling as long as the Mid-City division has been open (1995). The activity takes place twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Previous enforcement tactics had been to write citations to persons as they panhandle and commit infractions. The citation would turn into a warrant; the subject would later be arrested thus eliminating the problem for a short time. It was found by speaking to the transients, panhandlers, and persons living in the brush the arrests would

provide them a three to fifteen day clean up period in San Diego County jail where they would be given good food and allowed to clean up prior to returning to the exact same location to commit the exact same offenses. Pro-active arrests assisted in moving the problem, but never attacked the reason why the above crimes and activity occurred in this area.

Officer Smith contacted and spoke to Community Resource Officer's (CRO) for both the Mid-City Division and Western Division to find out the extent of complaints received by citizens afflicted by the problem caused by having the transients and encampments along the Interstate 805 corridor.

CRO Officer Taitano informed Officer Smith about the complaints from business owners, residents whose property butt up against Interstate 805, and apartment complex owners along the same area. The above complaints are documented on citizen's request forms (CRE). CRO Taitano also received information from Councilwoman Toni Atkins office about problems in the area.

CRO Officer Tulumello received similar complaints and knew of locations where persons were living inside the affected area. CRO Officer Tulumello also had several CRE's from citizens about the criminal activity and quality of life issues.

CRO Officer Takeuchi, of Western Division, had received similar complaints about narcotic use and persons living in the brush along side the freeway. Persons holding signs asking for money at the Boundary Street Southbound Interstate 805 entrance was a consistent complaint from citizens. The same persons were living just a few feet away in the thick overgrown brush. The complaint stated when the persons were not living in the brush or begging for money, they would be loitering behind the apartment complex at

3800 Boundary Street urinating in the alley. Often times used and uncapped hypodermic syringes were found in the alley after the person had left.

Officer Smith met with several of the persons making the complaints to the police department to determine the extent of the problems. Officer Smith learned that residents whose fence backed up against the area were experiencing graffiti on their property, narcotic paraphernalia thrown onto their property, litter problems, transients confronting property owners and verbally abusing them, and fear of persons climbing over fences onto homeowners property and committing property crimes.

Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith spoke to local business owners in the area about the problems occurring . Business owners believed persons loitering on their property and aggressive panhandling were hurting their business. Business owners also believed the recent homicide was going to deter legitimate customers to the area.

On February 5,2002 a male wrote a demand note for cash stating he had gun, held up the bank located at 3347 El Cajon Boulevard, The male appeared to be transient and fled the bank prior to receiving any cash. The bank was shut down as per protocol and the police along with the FBI (Federal Burial of Investigations) were called to the scene. The suspect was last seen running towards the large thick brush inside the project area. The suspect, Robert Ojala, was later found and arrested while he was hiding in an encampment. Officers assisting in the project found Ojala as he hid. Ojala was wearing the same clothing and was on parole for narcotic related offenses. Officers who knew the brush area and the location of camps inside found Ojala.

The overgrown brush along Interstate 805 has been the scene of a homicide, it was a get away and hideout for a commercial bank robber, and is a known location for narcotic users and transients to live.

The thick brush provides a safe place for criminal activity to occur. To enter the brush was an officer safety issue because of the lack of lighting at night and unfamiliarity with the terrain. To combat this, Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith used A.B.L.E. (Air-Bourne Law Enforcement) helicopter to take overhead photos of the target area. Officer Smith was able to locate and label all campsites and routes of egress in and out of the area. Officer Smith also obtained the use of night vision goggles to locate camps at night without illuminating it with a flashlight.

Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith contacted the Caltrans representative for the area.

Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith were able to find out since the property was owned and maintained by the State of California, the California Highway Patrol was tasked with patrolling and handling all calls to the area. The California Highway Patrol does not have personnel to conduct pro-active enforcement in this area in regards to illegal lodging and other complaints. Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith received written permission for the San Diego Police Department to patrol and take any action as needed from the State of California representative Merl Nusz.

RESPONSE:

After reviewing the analysis Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith decided to address the problem utilizing five different methods. First, we had to change the environment, which was conducive to transients living and committing crimes in the affected area. Therefore, a partnership with several agencies, primarily Caltrans and Alpha Project, had to be

formed. This partnership started January 09,2002, Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith met with Caltrans Director, Merl Nusz, and asked permission to address the transient problem on state property. Nusz advised Caltrans would help remove debris but insisted no brush was to be removed. On January 11,2002, Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith posted every active transient camp with a no trespassing sign. In addition, the sign stated lodging was not allowed in the area. The sign stated each camp had to be removed within 72 hours or all property left would be discarded by the State. On January 16, 2002, subcontractors working for Caltrans removed nearly 10 yards of debris from transient camps located near the homicide scene. Several days' later debris from other transient camps was removed by Caltrans. Although this action removed debris from the affected area, it did little to deter transients from living in the area. On February 06,2002, a second meeting with Caltrans was held. During this meeting numerous photos depicting the problem were shown to the regional director. After expressing our concerns and explaining the severity of the problem Caltrans agreed to allow removing the brush one location at a time, but stated they did not have the funds or staffing to complete the project. Caltrans did agree to pay disposal fees and provide trash trucks. Sergeant Nisleit and Officer Smith contacted Councilwoman Toni Atkins who agreed to fund the brush removal. From there, Alpha Project was hired to complete the project. On January 19, 2002, the brush along Interstate 805 and El Cajon Boulevard was removed. In total over 24,000 pounds of brush was removed from this site. On March 6, 2002, the brush at Interstate 805 and the west side of University Avenue was removed. In total over 32,000 pounds of brush was removed from this site. Two months later, the east side of Interstate 805 at University Avenue was cleared. Additionally, a 100-yard area was cleared along

the east side of Interstate 805, just south Of University Avenue. In all four areas were cleared of all brush and debris. Caltrans replanted all four locations utilizing probation work crews and ice plant that had been removed from other sites. Because the labor was free and existing ice plant was used no expense was passed on to taxpayers.

The second step was to inform the community and to ask for there help. This was done by notifying neighborhood watch groups and community leaders. Additionally, affected businesses were contacted and informed of the project.

The third step and one of the most important was to utilize the help of social services. The department's Homeless Outreach Team was contacted and assisted by providing information regarding available assistance concerning shelter, job placement, drug counseling, mental health treatment, and other social services. In fact, as a result of the assistance three persons were referred to local shelters, two received career services, including one person being hired by Alpha Project, and one person was admitted into a drug rehabilitation program.

The fourth step in the response phase was to utilize traditional law enforcement tactics, including the use of citations and custodial arrests, as a deterrent for living in the target area. To date 13 subjects have been arrested for various misdemeanor and felony crimes.

The final step was to be proactive in reassessing the project to ensure the project was meeting the short and long-term goals. In fact, as one area was cleared a new location would become active with transient encampments. This meant we had to be flexible to ensure brush removal and proactive enforcement was being maintained.

The short-term goals for the implementation of this phase of the plan were as follows:

- Reduce crime and calls for service
- Increase public awareness
- Form partnerships with outside agencies (City Council, Caltrans, Alpha Project)
- Improve the quality life for residents and business owners
- Remove/reduce number of transients living along 1-805 corridor
- Remove trash and debris from existing transient camps
- Remove the thick brush and replace with low level plants and shrubs
- Deter transients from living along the 1-805 corridor
- Provide social services to affected persons

The long-term goals for the implementation of this phase of the plan were as follows:

- Remove all overgrown brush along the Interstate 805 corridor
- Replant affected area with low lying plants and shrubs
- Remove transient population and provide alternative living arrangements
- Assist/provide permanent social services to persons living along the 1-805

corridor

- Restore peace of mind and quality of life to the citizens affected by this problem

The intention of our response phase was to meet all our mentioned short and long-term goals. Additionally, we wanted the project to help improve the appearance of the Interstate 805 corridor, which would add value to nearby properties.

ASSESSMENT:

We determined several means of measuring the success of the project. The first measure was the how successful we were in removing brush and debris from the affected area. At the start of the project the goal was for complete brush removal in the affected area. To date, five locations have been cleared. The remaining locations are scheduled to be cleared mid to late 2003. The second measure was community satisfaction reflected in the reduction in the number of calls for service regarding transient activity. The third measure was the success of forming new partnerships with Caltrans and Alpha Project. In fact a big success from the project is Alpha Project being hired by the State as a subcontractor responsible for clearing brush and debris. Additionally, including social services and the Homeless Outreach Team provided new resources, which had never been utilized to address transient specific problems. As a result of the project the Homeless Outreach Team regularly visits the project area and offers social services to the few people still using the area to live.

The short-term response goals which were set forth were accomplished. We were able to effectively reduce the calls for service. Secondly, we were able to do crime prevention by changing the environment for the better. We were also successful at raising the level of awareness in the community, sending a strong message about our new enforcement posture. Lastly, we were successful at providing social services to citizens who truly needed the assistance.

The project's long-term goals were also accomplished. We enhanced the appearance of the community and the quality of life for the residents. We were able to greatly reduce

the amount of persons living along the Interstate 805 corridor. The project also helped remove the opportunity for criminals to use the area to commit crimes.

The police department and the impacted community benefited greatly from this project.

Like any other problem, without consistent enforcement and periodic monitoring, the problems are likely to recur. The areas completely cleared of brush and replanted have had a 100 % reduction in calls for service, 100% reduction in crime, 100% reduction in out of service time for law enforcement, 100% reduction in citations and arrests, and 100% reduction involving community complaints. Transient related calls have diminished considerable in the project area which has not yet had the brush removed.

The officers assigned to this area will remain diligent at monitoring the activity, collecting and analyzing statistical data and ensuring that the few remaining locations are cleared of all brush and debris. The problem solving methods utilized during this project have been adopted by our organization and are currently being taught to officers at other divisions for implementation and use.

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REFERENCE LIST:

California Penal Code Section 647 (j)

California Vehicle Code section 22520.5 (A)

Cops Publication: Tackling Crime and Other Public-Safety Problems, By Rana Sampson and Michael Scott

San Diego Union-Tribune, December 29,2002

San Diego Union-Tribune, October 10,2002

San Diego Municipal Code section 54.0105

Mid-City Division
1-805 Corridor
Transient Project

Sergeant Dave Nisleit #4303
Officer Tim Smith #4888



Project Origin

The Sari Diego Union- Tribune

"Police found two halves of a broken two-by-four in the empty section of the brush between two roadways, miles of Interstate 805 and an off-ramp from I-15, Caron Blvd. Workers have since cleared the brush from the six-sided piece of land."





