

# **STOPPING OPEN-AIR DRUG SALES ON WEST CEDAR STREET, IN ARLINGTON, TEXAS**

ARLINGTON POLICE DEPARTMENT, NORTH PATROL DISTRICT 2006

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## **THE PROBLEM**

In late 2004, a neighborhood began to have significant problems with open-air drug sales. The area became a hotspot as police calls for service increased. Weekly complaints began to come in about drug sales occurring up and down the street and at one particular residence. Violent crimes, including weapons offenses, were rising as well as a host of other quality of life complaints.

The low-income area covering a little more than three blocks and made up of 60 single-family houses and duplexes generated 102 calls for police services in 90 days. The area, which is predominantly low income and made up of rental properties, had been in decline for several years. Crime had been a concern in the past, but efforts to remove drug dealers, prostitutes and reduce crime had only worked in the short term.

## **ANALYSIS**

A review of calls for service, site visits, interviews and undercover surveillance revealed that the open-air drug sales were responsible for problems in the neighborhood; however, the root cause of the problems dealt with the overall appearance and lack of ownership of the area residences. These issues allowed crime and nuisances to flourish in the neighborhood.

## **RESPONSE**

In order to combat the open-air drug sales, violent crimes, and general public disorder issues, a three-phase plan was developed. The first phase was to identify and eliminate all of the offenders involved in the drug trade in that area. The second phase was to develop a partnership with the area residents and property owners, so that quality of life issues could be addressed in the area. The third phase was to create and maintain a working relationship between the residents and the police. Education and cooperative efforts were developed hoping the problems would not return to the area.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Twelve months after the initiative began, calls for services in the neighborhood were reduced by 92%. The open-air

drug market is gone and children are now seen playing throughout the neighborhood. The transformation of the neighborhood was showcased during a well-attended National Night Out event, hosted by the area's new community watch group. Halfway through the project, a questionnaire was sent to residents and positive community feedback was received about the joint effort to eradicate this nuisance on West Cedar Street.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In late 2004, officers assigned to the Arlington Police Department's Beat 270 noticed the small neighborhood around West Cedar Street was deteriorating, and that open-air drug dealing was accelerating that decline. The area, which was no stranger to police activity, started to take on an even darker tone as open-air drug dealing started to occur. The area was visibly beginning to change as the neighborhood began to deteriorate. Yards were either not mowed or were grassless due to cars parked in the yard.

Evening shift Sergeant Jeff Rogers along with his HEAT Unit officers began working on the problem and quickly realized that an underlying problem needed to be addressed to ensure that the problems could be completely solved. Working with Sergeant Singh Boulom, the day shift sergeant, a 12-month SARA (Scan, Analyze, Respond and Assess) project was begun to identify the neighborhood's underlying issues and find long-term solutions.

Sergeant Rogers' and Sergeant Boulom's approach resulted in a neighborhood being re-born and police calls for service dropping 92%. A high-crime area demonstrably improved through a project that involved cooperation with other police divisions, other city departments, and the community. As proof of the operation's success, twelve months after the project began, calls for service remain very low and the area residents are experiencing a much better quality of life.

## Scanning

The City of Arlington, with a population over 362,000, is the third largest city in the Dallas-Fort Worth Texas Metropolitan Statistical Area. Arlington is located between Dallas and Fort Worth and promotes itself as “Fun Central.” Arlington hosts Six Flags over Texas, Hurricane Harbor, Texas Rangers Baseball, The Parks at Arlington Mall, the Arlington Convention Center, and in 2009 becomes the new home of the Dallas Cowboys football team. According to the Arlington Convention and Visitors Bureau, over 6.5 million visitors come to the city annually. Arlington is a very diverse city, culturally and economically, with the inevitable crime problems.

In north-central Arlington, a low-income, rental property neighborhood of approximately 60 single-family homes and duplexes exists along a three-block stretch of West Cedar Street. In the three-month period from October to December 2004, 63 calls for police service were worked in this three-block area: fifteen times the average for surrounding streets. Citizens complained specifically about the neighborhood becoming an open drug market, something area officers had already observed. Drug dealers gained a foothold in the neighborhood by taking up residence on West Cedar Street. With the area’s homes already in decline, junked vehicles became the norm on streets and yards became overrun with weeds and litter. As the dealers began to work the street, other offenses occurred, from simple disturbances of the peace to robbery. The area fell even further into decline.

## Analyze

Because of the complaints from residents and the number of police calls for service on West Cedar Street, the calls themselves were examined. Research revealed complaints of drug sales, robberies, weapons offenses, assaults, burglaries, thefts and disturbances of the peace. A detailed review of these calls found that drugs were a major underlying cause. People trying to support their drug habits were committing crimes, which resulted in further decline to the neighborhood.

Through arrests, informants, and citizens, it was apparent the drug of choice sold on West Cedar Street was crack cocaine: highly addictive and a hard habit to break. Repeat customers meant dealers were making money and liking the location. Long-time residents could no longer drive down their street without harassment by dealers trying to sell them crack cocaine. The nuisances of trash and junked vehicles grew. With the drugs also came vagrants and prostitutes. Several drug dealers were identified as living on West Cedar Street, and many duplex tenants had previous histories with the police department and were known drug dealers.

To design a response, research was conducted to determine if offenders were homeowners or renters. If the offenders received subsidized housing assistance, that assistance could be taken away and they would be forced to move. In cases where they were renting, but not on

subsidized housing, officers could work with property owners to have those tenants evicted. Even if the offenders were homeowners, other legal avenues could be pursued. Officers researched home ownership by searching through tax and water department records.

The history of West Cedar Street showed a recurring pattern of drug problems, decline, and rebirth. The area would be cleaned up through law enforcement efforts, but without the neighborhood taking subsequent ownership for their quality of life, the drug and crime problems would return. Removing the dealers and teaching the residents how taking ownership of the neighborhood and their problems could prevent the return of drugs and crime.

## **Response**

A three-part plan was developed:

### **Phase I -- Increased Enforcement**

The operation plan was named the “West Cedar Street Operation.” It included Hot Spot Enforcement and Assistance Teams (HEAT), Narcotics Unit, K-9 Unit, patrol officers, Crime Prevention Unit, Traffic Unit, Special Operations (S.W.A.T.), Neighborhood Services, Public Works, the Housing Authority and local residents.

**HEAT Units** address hotspots and work special assignments. Each unit is made up of five highly motivated officers who are trained in surveillance tactics, drug interdiction, bicycle patrol, and other specialized areas. One of the five officers acts as a liaison among the police department, other agencies/departments, and the community. In this operation, they were responsible for researching ownership of the houses where drug sales were occurring. They would then determine the appropriate action. They were also responsible for identifying residents willing to work on developing a Community Watch Group.

**Suspect Methodology.** The dealers sold their drugs by approaching every person who drove or walked down Cedar Street. When a deal was made, the dealers collected the drugs from a nearby hiding place or, often, from another person. The buyers then left the area. Many of the dealers had experienced previous narcotics raids and became adept at concealing drugs. One of the favorite methods employed by the dealers was to bury drugs throughout their yard to avoid being caught with one large amount of narcotics.

**Operations.** Undercover narcotics officers began surveillance of the neighborhood to identify dealers and buyers. When a drug sale was observed, the narcotics officer would follow the buyer out of the area, and HEAT officers would initiate a traffic stop on the buyer. Zero tolerance measures were adopted to drive the buyers from the area. The K-9 Unit was used to detect drugs in the suspect vehicles. Probable cause or consent to search was used to locate narcotics when appropriate. Alternately, HEAT officers used foot and bike patrols around the target location as roving surveillance and make contact with suspected sellers and

buyers. Narcotics officers also made drug buys from targeted individuals and ultimately developed probable cause to obtain search warrants.

Intelligence gathering operations helped identify the main dealers and their vehicles. During surveillance operations, if one of the main dealers left the target location, undercover units would follow in an attempt to find the source of the drugs. (One of those sources was identified during this operation, a search warrant was obtained for his residence, and he was found to be a mid-level supplier for the area.) Officers also worked closely with area probation and parole officers to expedite the arrestees' revocation process.

During the first two weeks of the operation, 111 arrests were made, with 60 arrests drug related. In addition, 94 citations were issued. Shortly after the operation started a duplex of one of the dealers burned down in a suspicious fire. The following night narcotics officers conducted a buy-bust and ran the first search warrant at one of the dealer's residences. Over 15 grams of crack cocaine and hundreds of dollars were seized. After this initial push, one more search warrant was served on West Cedar Street. Through the end of June 2005, an additional 29 arrests were made -- seven of them drug related. By the end of June 2005, all dealers had moved out of the area.

## **Phase II --Develop a Partnership**

The mostly-male dealers used women to rent properties to avoid scrutiny by property owners. Next, they set up the property as their drug-selling hub. Since none of the locations was



found to receive housing assistance, officers informed the property owners of the drug activity at their rental properties. The officers working on this project contacted (either in person or by telephone) owners of the properties. The majority of the rental properties were found to be owned by individuals who lived either on West Cedar Street, in other parts of Arlington, or in other area cities. A large block of the rental properties were owned by one local owner. Some of the property owners were unaware of the problems in the area, while others were only concerned with receiving rent checks.

The owners were encouraged to evict the dealers as quickly as possible. Officers highlighted the benefits of renting to tenants that are more responsible and the benefits of conducting credit and background checks on renters. If the owners were not willing to evict the subjects or cooperate, Neighborhood Services would issue the property owner a citation for Operating a Business in a Residence Without a Permit (city ordinance). The majority of the property owners cooperated and began the eviction process.

Neighborhood Services also assisted by taking enforcement action on code violations on West Cedar Street. During the operation, 28 code violation citations were written for unclean premises, keeping junked vehicles, and high weeds or grass. Gradually, the neighborhood began to look better. The “Broken Window Theory” was applied: if the neighborhood looked nicer, criminals would be less likely to congregate there. In addition, if the code violations could be corrected, the quality of life for residents would improve and help foster pride in their neighborhood.

**Community Meetings** were held with Cedar Street residents at the Ott Cribbs Public Safety Center. At the first meeting in mid March 2005, 21 residents attended. The police department acknowledged residents' concerns, and sought their feedback and support. Attendees from the department's senior staff assured residents of a commitment to eliminate dealers from their neighborhood, and began a dialogue on forming a crime watch group. A second meeting, presented by the department's Community Services unit at the end of May 2005, discussed crime prevention hints and environmental issues affecting the neighborhood. Tips on reducing the likelihood of being a victim and the importance of knowing neighbors were stressed. Only 12 residents attended this meeting, but they brought to our attention the fact that Hispanic residents were interested in hearing the presentation in Spanish.

In June 2005, we worked with a resident to organize and host her own community meeting. Community Services and beat officers also attended, and the nucleus for a future watch group began. Based on interest from the May meeting, another well-attended community meeting was held in mid July 2005 for Spanish-speaking residents. They were interested in ways to protect themselves and their property, plus ways to prevent problems from returning to their neighborhood.

On August 2, 2005, a National Night Out block party was held on an adjacent street. Residents on Hester and West Cedar streets were invited, and approximately 20 residents met with one another at a block party. The event was again well attended by the police department's senior staff, who continued to support the neighborhood. The organizer of the block party volunteered to be the community watch coordinator for her block. A community

watch group was finally established in the West Cedar Street area. The attendees all agreed that since the West Cedar Street Operation had begun, the area was safer and a nicer place to live.

### **Phase III --Maintenance and Order**

Patrol officers continue a strong presence in the area and take appropriate enforcement actions when necessary. Neighborhood Services continues to monitor the area and to educate the residents on various code issues. Code violators are warned and then cited if the violation is not corrected. With the start up of a community watch group and support from the police, the maintenance phase of the plan appears to be a success, and will continue. As long as the vested groups remain vigilant for quality of life problems, West Cedar Street will continue to improve.

### **Assessment**

From October to December 2004, 63 calls for police service were answered in a three-block area around West Cedar Street. From January to March 2005, 102 calls for service were worked in the same area: a 61% increase. The criminal activity in the neighborhood was becoming a significant drain on police resources and was negatively affecting the health, safety and welfare of residents. An evaluation of the police calls for service showed that the illegal drug sales were at the root of the area's problems. The operation on West Cedar Street began in March 2005 and concluded in March 2006.

As the West Cedar Street Operation progressed, calls for service began to fall off. Between April and June 2005, calls for service dropped to 29. The following quarter (July to September 2005), calls for service dropped again to only 20. In the last quarter of 2005 (October to December), calls rose slightly, to 28, but were still 55% lower than the same time the previous year. In the last quarter of the project covering January to March 2006, calls for service fell to only eight. A 92% reduction in calls was achieved. Drug dealers were identified, arrested or moved from the area. Open-air drug sales were no longer the norm on West Cedar Street. Today, children are playing up and down the street, instead of dealers swarming cars trying to sell their drugs. The community watch group formed in the neighborhood has helped to build a feeling of ownership for residents.

Halfway through the 12-month project, a questionnaire was sent out to residents on West Cedar and adjoining streets to determine if the project was effective and to gauge the perception of crime in the neighborhood. One hundred and fifty surveys were distributed on July 5, 2005, and 32 were completed and returned (a 21% return rate). To ensure that the respondents had a historical perception of the problems, a control question asked the length of time the resident had lived in the area. Anybody living in the area less than six months was discarded. Of the surveys returned only two fell in this category and were not considered.

The survey showed that 60% of the respondents felt safe in their neighborhood, with only 20% stating that they did not feel safe. When asked about the job that the Arlington Police Department was doing in their neighborhood, 77% believed the police department was doing a good job. The survey reflected that only 16% of the respondents disagreed that crime was

on the decrease in their neighborhood. Only 13% of the residents disagreed that the police department had put extensive resources and effort into the area to reduce crime. One of the high points in the survey was that 57% of respondents indicated they were willing to participate in a community watch group. A copy of the survey and results is provided in Appendix A and B.

As the dealers were moved off West Cedar Street, officers were concerned that they would move to other neighborhoods. A comparison of police service calls for the neighboring streets around West Cedar was completed. The calls in neighborhoods around West Cedar Street stayed relatively the same. The problem had not merely been displaced to the surrounding area. As the remaining dealers moved out of the neighborhood, officers continued to monitor their activity. Wherever they moved, they were monitored to ensure they did not take over another neighborhood. Maximum enforcement was emphasized, and if dealers attempted to start selling drugs again, officers worked to move them quickly out of the area.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The key to success in this neighborhood will be maintaining the area. Monitoring of West Cedar Street must be ongoing to guarantee the dealers do not return. Residents and property owners remain accountable for their neighborhood, keeping it unwelcome to drug dealers by reporting suspicious activity and knowing who belongs in their neighborhood.

We met the overall objective of the West Cedar Street Operation: reducing police calls for service and improving life for residents by their involvement. Officers working in the area were freed up and allowed to service a wider area of their beat, instead of focusing on a small three-block area. Removing the drug dealers, vagrants, prostitutes and criminals substantially changed the area: violent crimes, burglaries and nightly disturbances were gone.

## APPENDIX A

### Arlington Police Department Customer Satisfaction Survey

The Arlington Police Department has selected you to participate in a survey concerning your community. Your answers will be treated confidentially. Please mail back the survey no later than Aug. 5, 2005. A self-addressed envelope with a stamp has been provided. Your answers will help the Arlington Police Department better serve you and your community. Any questions can be directed to Sergeant S. Boulom #1674 at (817) 459-5355 or (817) 459-5700.

1. When did you move into the neighborhood? \_\_\_\_\_ (*month & year*)
2. I feel safe in my neighborhood. (*please circle your response*)  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
3. The police department is doing a good job.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
4. Crime in my neighborhood was on the increase six months ago.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
5. Crime in my neighborhood is currently on the decrease.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
6. My neighborhood is better than it was six months ago.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
7. The police department has put a lot of effort in reducing crime in my neighborhood.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
8. I am satisfied with the police presence in my neighborhood.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
9. My neighborhood would benefit from a community crime watch group.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
10. I am willing to participate in a community crime watch program.  
Strongly Agree   Somewhat Agree   Unsure   Somewhat Disagree   Strongly Disagree
11. My suggestion on how the police department can improve my neighborhood is: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

**Total Responses: 30**

I feel safe in my neighborhood.									
Strongly Agree	5	Somewhat Agree	13	Unsure	6	Somewhat Disagree	4	Strongly Disagree	2
	17%		43%		20%		13%		7%
<b>AGREE 60%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 20%</b>				

The police department is doing a good job.									
Strongly Agree	9	Somewhat Agree	14	Unsure	4	Somewhat Disagree	2	Strongly Disagree	1
	30%		47%		13%		7%		3%
<b>AGREE 77%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 10%</b>				

Crime in my neighborhood was on the increase six months ago.									
Strongly Agree	8	Somewhat Agree	6	Unsure	10	Somewhat Disagree	4	Strongly Disagree	2
	27%		20%		33%		13%		7%
<b>AGREE 47%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 20%</b>				

Crime in my neighborhood is currently on the decrease.									
Strongly Agree	7	Somewhat Agree	5	Unsure	13	Somewhat Disagree	1	Strongly Disagree	4
	23%		17%		43%		3%		13%
<b>AGREE 40%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 16%</b>				

My neighborhood is better than it was six months ago.									
Strongly Agree	7	Somewhat Agree	7	Unsure	8	Somewhat Disagree	4	Strongly Disagree	4
	23%		23%		27%		13%		13%
<b>AGREE 46%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 26%</b>				

The police department has put a lot of effort in reducing crime in my neighborhood.									
Strongly Agree	12	Somewhat Agree	6	Unsure	8	Somewhat Disagree	3	Strongly Disagree	1
	40%		20%		27%		10%		3%
<b>AGREE 60%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 13%</b>				

I am satisfied with the police presence in my neighborhood.									
Strongly Agree	11	Somewhat Agree	11	Unsure	1	Somewhat Disagree	5	Strongly Disagree	2
	37%		37%		3%		17%		7%
<b>AGREE 74%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 24%</b>				

My neighborhood would benefit from a community crime watch group.									
Strongly Agree	16	Somewhat Agree	6	Unsure	7	Somewhat Disagree	1	Strongly Disagree	0
	53%		20%		23%		3%		0%
<b>AGREE 73%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 3%</b>				

I am willing to participate in a community crime watch program.									
Strongly Agree	14	Somewhat Agree	3	Unsure	11	Somewhat Disagree	1	Strongly Disagree	1
	47%		10%		37%		3%		3%
<b>AGREE 57%</b>					<b>DISAGREE 6%</b>				