

5492 IMPERIAL AVENUE

The apartment complex at 5492 Imperial Avenue is less than a year old, three stories high and contains over seventy five units. An on-site manager is employed by a management company that is responsible for the upkeep of the complex which is divided into four buildings with a small common grass area situated in the middle of the buildings. Two laundry rooms are located at the east and west ends of the complex. The apartments are in the southeast section of San Diego where the majority of residences for two blocks are apartment complexes. The other complexes have battled narcotic problems for several years.

Narcotic activity around these apartment complexes is a burdensome chore for patrol officers as it is difficult to separate the tenants from the drug users and dealers. The suspects often run into apartments to evade police officers who cannot legally follow them into these units. Officer safety is also an issue as the police are usually outnumbered and cannot safely run into unfamiliar apartments. Resident managers may willingly participate or be coerced into assisting drug dealers with maintaining their lucrative narcotic businesses. Fearful or passive tenants may also find themselves in similar situations which contributes to a steady increase in drug clientele within a few days after drug dealers move into an area. Once illegal narcotic activity finds its way into a complex, dissipating the reputation that drugs are available at that location becomes more difficult than actually ridding the complex of drug use and sales.

Six months after opening the complex to residents, the apartment complex at 5492 Imperial Avenue began to experience serious problems with drug users and dealers who congregated around the laundry rooms, often using drugs on the premises. When police officers responded to calls of narcotic activity at the complex, the suspects evaded officers by running through a canyon on the northside, an open field on the east side, and a row of apartments on the west side. Several tenants allowed drug dealers to seek refuge in their apartments. Gunfire and gang fights became common occurrences

during evening hours, but there were very few reported calls regarding the illegal activity.

Officers Gail Arcediano and Dave Walker worked the beat which included 5492 Imperial Avenue. During their routine patrol, they began to observe large groups of Black males loitering in and around the complex. When the officers stopped to investigate the activity, the groups of males ran into various apartments and surrounding areas but signs of drug and gang activity were still visible. With the assistance of officers from other watches, Arcediano and Walker began to apply selective enforcement at the complex resulting in temporary relief for the residents who expressed concern to the officers about the illegal activity.

The officers decided to use Problem Oriented Policing to find a long-term solution to the narcotic problems at this location. Their first step in collecting data was to speak with the apartment manager. Based on previous experience with managers who were intimidated by drug dealers or received gratuities for cooperation, the officers attempted to gauge the manager's willingness to rid the complex of illegal activity by asking him to install specific security measures around the complex. This request involved putting locks on the laundry room doors and installing additional lighting in the center of the complex. Arcediano and Walker began to evaluate the arrest and field interview data and also talked with suspects which revealed the identity of the drug dealers, the gangs involved, and the tenants who were possibly collaborating with the dealers.

A few weeks later, the manager had not complied with their requests. Reports of shootings began to rise steadily as did the level of drug activity. The officers located the management company and spoke with a company representative who gave the officers a key to a vacant apartment. Walker and Arcediano used the apartment to observe first-hand the persons involved in the drug dealing and to identify weapons used by the dealers so the officers could decide if they would need assistance in tackling the problem.

After completing their surveillance, the officers sought assistance from the Department's Gang Detail. While the detectives were obtaining search warrants for the apartments where drug dealing had been observed, Arcediano and Walker secured the management company's assurances that problem tenants would be evicted. The management company also placed a security door on the laundry room and were in the process of preparing eviction notices for the tenants who were participating in the drug activity.

In one evening, five search warrants were served simultaneously with the assistance of the SWAT unit. Several guns, drugs, and drug paraphernalia were recovered during that evening. A number of eviction notices, verified by the officers calling the San Diego County Marehall's Office, were served immediately after the police action.

Walker and Arcediano continued to work with the management company while the evictions went through the legal process. The number of arrests begin to diminish, but arrests were still made throughout the complex. The officers talked with the management company about their applicant screening process and urged them to seek assistance in finding quality tenants for the property. When the evictions were completed, the drug activity decreased substantially. Some elements of drug activity remained, but the officers continued to monitor the complex and maintained communication with the management company.

Within a few months the management company was replaced. The new company hired security guards, improved the physical grounds around the apartments, and implemented a careful screening process of prospective tenants. Today the apartment complex is virtually drug free. There are no radio calls of drug and gang activity. Arcediano and Walker have directed their activities to other beat problems but drive through the complex from time to time to ensure that problems do not reoccur.