

Keys to the City



Problem Solving in the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department

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Theft (Vehicle License Tabs)

While monitoring the impact of their work in the Washington/Locust business district (see Vol. 1, No. 2), **Ninth District Officers George Jonas and Fred Lengerer** noticed that vehicle license registration tabs were being reported stolen more frequently than usual.

The officers confirmed through the department's computer records that the theft of license tabs accounted for nearly 30% of the reported crime in the business area. In most cases, the tabs were removed from the license plate with a razor blade, while others reported the entire license plate stolen.

The officers decided to work on this as a separate problem, setting a short range goal of educating the local business people on how to deter the thefts. Fred created a flyer that described how the thefts were occurring and offered suggestions on how to prevent them. Simple ideas, like removing old tabs before placing the new tab on the license plate and then scoring the tab with a razor blade, were included. The flyers were mailed to 106 of the businesses in the area, suggesting they be posted conspicuously. A copy of the flyer also ran in the Ninth District Business-

men's Association newsletter.

To further analyze the problem, George requested from the **Computer Center** a listing of all reports in the city for theft of license tabs. In 1991 and 1992, 13,072 reports were taken (6,793 in 1991 and 6,279 in 1992). The majority of these reports were taken over the phone by P.I.R.S. operators.

George studied the steps of the reporting process and concluded that each incident takes an average of twenty four minutes to complete. This means in 1992, the Police Department spent 2,511 staff hours making police reports for the theft of license tabs.

The P.I.R.S. supervisor told George that most reports of this type are made at the end of each month. In 95% of incidents, the tab number was not available for the report.

Officials from the State Department of Revenue informed George that it was not necessary to have a police report made to obtain replacement tabs. However, Department of Revenue employees often suggest to owners of stolen tabs to notify the local police.

George and Fred wondered, if only 5% of the reports include the license tab number, what purpose did the other 95% of the reports serve other than to document that the incident was re-

ported?

A change in the design of the renewal tab could eliminate many thefts. Researching what other states are doing to address this same problem, George learned that officials in Texas have relocated the tab to the inside of the windshield. Colorado is experimenting with an "eggshell" design that breaks apart when tampered with. George considered the idea of redesigning the license plate to make it more difficult to remove the tabs. The idea of "pre-scored" tabs is also being discussed.

The officers intend to talk with local manufacturers of stickers to see what else might be available before approaching the Department of Revenue. If any readers have other suggestions, Fred or George welcome the ideas. The long term goal is to reduce theft, eliminate about 6,000 calls per year, and improve vehicle registration throughout the state.

Recovering Stolen Autos

Seventh District Officer Kathy Souders and Lieutenant Wayne Keasling developed a more efficient way of recovering stolen autos. A great deal of time is wasted while an officer waits for a tow truck to recover the see Stolen Autos, p.2

Stolen Autos, from p.1 auto. The purpose of waiting with the auto is to prevent the auto from being illegally moved before the tow truck arrives. This wait, sometimes hours long, is especially frustrating and wasteful during high call periods.

Lieutenant Keasling contacted several other departments and inquired about their procedures for recovering stolen autos. No one could offer a more efficient procedure, yet everyone expressed interest in the outcome of this project.

Lieutenant Keasling and Officer Souders then began thinking of alternative ways to immobilize the recovered auto, thus eliminating the need to have an officer "sit" on it until the tow truck arrived. They decided to try a locking device on the vehicle. Kathy wrote to the manufacturers of the "Club," an anti-theft device that fits onto the steering wheel, making it impossible to turn. She explained to them her idea. In response, the company supplied the Seventh District with seven clubs for a trial project.

Captain David Heath, Lieutenant Keasling, and Officer Souders developed the following guidelines for this method of recovery:

- Each supervisor's car will be equipped with a "Club."
- Vehicles that have been processed and are awaiting

tow will be "Clubbed" if the arrival of the tow truck is undetermined or greater than twenty minutes, or it is near watch relief.

- At the request of the officer, a supervisor will respond and secure the vehicle with the "Club." At the same time, a bright orange sticker that reads, "WARNING POLICE RECOVERY," will be applied to the windshield.
- When the tow truck arrives, the supervisor will return and remove the device.

Common sense will dictate when this procedure is appropriate. If the auto is especially valuable, this procedure would not be appropriate.

The "Club" has already been used on five separate occasions in the district. Lieutenant Keasling estimates that eleven staff hours were saved in just those incidents because of the new procedure. After a test period in the Seventh District, its effectiveness will be evaluated and considered for department-wide use.

O*⁵⁵^ Panhandling

In September 1992, Fourth District Officer Jim Rudden became involved with the city-wide problem of panhandling. Jim received several calls from downtown business people complaining that aggressive panhandlers were driving away potential customers. Jim also heard com-

plaints from angry citizens who had been intimidated into giving money to aggressive panhandlers. Beat officers expressed their frustrations dealing with this problem, claiming that even if an arrest was made, the panhandlers were back on the street within a few hours.

Jim's initial response to the problem was to use a program already in existence called "Project **Pride.**"

His program, which was developed by Sergeant George Jonas and Officers Fred Lengerer, Dan Crowe and **Rock Nilhas,** offered alternative sentencing for persons arrested for city charges.

During the court hearing, defendants are offered a choice between a \$100 dollar fine or four hours of community service. Panhandlers most often opt for the latter.

The four hours of community service require the defendant to clean certain areas of the city as determined by the arresting officers. Continuing to search for more ideas, Jim looked at other departments to see how they cope with similar problems. During his investigation he discovered something very interesting.

Panhandling laws in several municipalities had been declared "unconstitutionally vague" by the courts and, therefore, unenforceable. The courts stated that overly broad restrictions, commonly found in these laws, violated the First Amendment

right of free speech.

Looking at our present city ordinance prohibiting begging, Jim noticed that it was adopted in 1921 and contained language similar to those laws declared unconstitutional elsewhere. After meeting with Major Stephen Pollihan, then Commander of the Fourth District, and Mike Scott, Special Assistant to the Chief of Police and a trained lawyer, the group agreed that our panhandling laws would probably not withstand a legal challenge.

Legal research revealed some important case law. In 1980 the United States Supreme Court ruled that charitable solicitation is protected, but in 1990 upheld a lower court decision that placed restrictions on begging. The State of Washington Supreme Court held that the "obstruction of pedestrian" clause of an ordinance banning aggressive panhandling was constitutional.

It appeared that the courts would no longer uphold laws banning just the act of begging, but would uphold laws that banned the aggressive behavior of some panhandlers.

This meant that our ordinance had to be re-written in order to be enforceable. Major Pollihan contacted the Chair of the Public Safety Committee, Sixth Ward Alderwoman Marit Clark, and informed her of the findings.

In late April of this year, Jim, Mike, Major Pollihan, and

Alderwoman Clark presented an ordinance they drafted to Jim Hartung and Keith Fuller of the City Counselor's Office.

With the support of the Counselor's Office, Alderwoman Clark also secured the support of Aldermen Phyllis Young, Freeman Bosley Sr., Mary Ross, and Joseph Roddy.

In June, Alderwoman Clark, Mike Scott, Keith Fuller, and newly appointed City Counselor, Ronnie White, met and adopted the final draft of the new ordinance.

The new ordinance will ban "aggressive begging," specifically defining the prohibited conduct. This ordinance will give police officers an enforceable law that targets the problem behavior while protecting citizens' rights to ask for help.

The ordinance will be presented to the full Board of Aldermen later this summer.

Shootings, Gang Activity

Sixth District Officers Reginald Williams and Robert Farrow attended meetings of citizens in the Walnut Park Neighborhood and listened to their anxieties about the increasing gun violence and gang activity.

Robert and Reggie agreed to work on this problem, but told the residents that a large portion of their success would depend on the cooperation and involvement of the residents.

The officers hoped to accom-

plish three objectives in their investigation of the problem: Identify the gang members using the weapons, the location of the weapons they used, and the source or supplier of the weapons.

Acting on information supplied by community members and leaders, the officers were able to narrow their investigation and focus on a few houses. These homes were suspected of being "safe houses" for gang members and their weapons.

By working with several informants, the officers gathered enough information to acquire three search warrants. Executing the warrants, Robert and Reggie recovered several high power rifles and handguns, including AK-47s, shotguns and large amounts of ammunition. They arrested several gang members for weapons and possession of stolen property charges.

Next, the officers contacted federal authorities and asked for their assistance tracking the sale of these weapons, to identify the original source.

The identity of one of the informants, who was instrumental in the seizures, became known to the defendants. Robert and Reggie conveyed this information back to the community. Out of concern for the safety of this individual, the community provided vital assistance in relocating the informant to another city and ensuring that this person had access to support in their new home.

DOWN THE ROAD

What is being done to better manage radio calls?

A Workload Management Task Force has several experimental efforts underway to either eliminate or reduce dispatched radio calls.

In a large project that we hope to be able to report more on in future newsletters, the Task Force is seeking improvements to the department's response to alarms. Responding to alarms represents fully one call out of ten that is dispatched. The overwhelming majority of alarms are false.

Emergency Medical Services has agreed to request the dispatch of a police officer to the scene of a sick or injury case only under limited circumstances rather than routinely. After checking for stolen status, dispatchers will give out Parking Violations and Investigate an Auto calls as non-priority calls to be handled when time permits. Careless and Reckless Driving calls will be broadcast over the radio, but no officer will be dispatched. Minor traffic and nuisance complaints not in progress will be referred to the district or appropriate unit by H.S.L. message rather than being dispatched.

Police officers on limited duty for extended periods are now being assigned to Complaint Evaluation to help civilian personnel better analyze and screen calls for service. Additional personnel have been assigned to PIRS on overtime to take reports over the telephone.

Keys to the City is a regular publication of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department designed to share examples of good police-community problem solving in the City of St. Louis. Project descriptions should be sent to the COPS Coordinator's Office in Room 607 of Headquarters by departmental or electronic mail. Inquiries can also be directed to 444-5681.

**Metropolitan Police Dept., 1200 Clark Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63103**

Address correction requested

How many officers have been trained in community problem solving?

Six hundred and seventy-six officers, supervisors, and commanders have completed the two day in-service training. This represents 46% of the current sworn work force. Specialized workshops are being offered for command rank to focus on management issues related to community problem solving.

The National Night Out is a way to show citizens that they can help the police protect neighborhoods. It needs every police officer's support.

Give Neighborhood Crime & Drugs
A GOING AWAY PARTY
On YOUR block!



10th Annual Nitekmal Night Out Celebration
Tuesday, August 3, 1983
7 pm - 0 pm.

Organized by the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department

BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE
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