



# UP FRONT

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## Problem Oriented Policing in Northeastern

by Guy Swanger

When police officers choose to apply Problem Oriented Policing (POP), they become more than enforcers of law and order. Their roles evolve into troubleshooters, facilitators of action and most importantly, coordinators of people who can effectively solve community problems.

These problems may not always involve conspicuous criminal activity, but this does not eliminate the police department's responsibility in identifying and solving the problem. The community concerns we ignore today will only grow larger tomorrow. When an officer explains to a citizen that the problem is a "civil" one and not criminal, this is not an acceptable solution. By engaging the necessary agencies and assisting the citizen with either referrals or a solution, a police officer may not have to return to speak with that same citizen about the same problem a few days later.

Police Officer Roger McNeill understands this all too well. In early May of 1989, McNeill met with the owner of a business complex on Miramar Road. The owner, Ms. Cannon, was not complaining about vandals, a burglary problem, or groups of young adults loitering in the parking lot after hours. Her concerns were with the neighboring businesses.

Apparently the adjacent businesses were an auto repair shop and a used car lot. The repair shop used the dumpsters for Ms. Cannon's business to discard old car parts. It stored clients' vehicles in Ms. Cannon's lot, and parked the remaining cars on the streets for extended periods of time. Behind Ms. Cannon's business, the repair shop erected a makeshift business office with an old mobile home which she considered an eyesore. She told McNeill that she had written a

letter to the Zoning Department a month earlier but had received no reply.

As police officers in a city where it is common to answer twenty radio calls a shift, handle domestic violence calls and assaults on a continuous basis, and write two or three legal documents in a car with horrid lighting every day, we most likely would have told Ms. Cannon that her problem was not a police matter but a zoning problem. We would have explained that there were currently more pressing matters, such as the increasing gang problem near the high school, that needed police attention. This is not a rationale for not helping her but simply the fact that the San Diego Police Department does not have enough police officers.

While Officer McNeill could have told Ms. Cannon this, he was fully aware that this situation would eventually become worse. By applying the techniques emphasized by Problem Oriented Policing (POP), McNeill aimed to assist Ms. Cannon with her problem and hopefully prevent the police department from having to return to this problem again. In following the simple but helpful guidelines outlined in POP, McNeill set out to create a long term solution.

These guidelines are a four-step model that can assist the officer in understanding the real problem and thus constructing a more appropriate solution. The four steps, which are SCANNING, ANALYSIS, RESPONSE, AND ASSESSMENT, exist to assist the officer, not restrict him. But while McNeill was attempting to use this model to create a long term solution, he was aware that he needed to eliminate some of Ms. Cannon's immediate concerns.

To alleviate the problem of the unlawful use of the dumpsters, McNeill suggested to Ms. Cannon that she place locks on the dumpster lids to prevent the repair shop from using her business' dumpsters.

The next day he telephoned the Fire Prevention Unit. McNeill learned that Fire inspectors were aware of the repair shop and its numerous violations.

McNeill arranged to meet with the Fire inspector at the site to become more familiar with the problems. He also met the owners of the car shop. He discovered that there were many building code violations, as well as health violations. An old truck bed that contained a water bed was used for sleeping quarters. A shower was found at the rear of the site with no drainage system. The water inspection, City Zoning, the County Health Department, San Diego Gas and Electric, and Fire Prevention, McNeill hoped to compel the car repair shop owners to make the necessary corrections. He waited until the agencies had completed their inspections before returning to speak with Ms. Cannon.

Officer McNeill noticed some immediate improvements around Ms. Cannon's business. She did install locks on the dumpsters. She also placed "Private Property" signs at the entrance to the business and placed poles with cable attachments on the lot. The poles prevented the unauthorized use of the lot during the weekends.

The owners of the car lot received a letter from the concerned agencies to make the necessary corrections or face civil and criminal action by the City Attorney's Office. The owners, who received the letter in early July, were given until August 9 to submit a schedule for these corrections.

Ms. Cannon is pleased with the actions taken by the San Diego Police Department and the other agencies who assisted with her problem. She no longer experiences the parking or dumping problem from the business next door. While Officer McNeill primarily served as a coordinator of the effort to assist Ms. Cannon with her problem, his role reinforced an often forgotten but important point. As San Diego Police Officers, we should never forget our clientele and the problems that frustrate them. The problems we label as insignificant may be major to those we serve.