

THE VILLAGE TOWNHOUSE PROJECT EMPOWERING AND EDUCATING FAMILIES IN A LOW-INCOME APARTMENT COMPLEX

CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG POLICE EPARTMENT, NORTH CAROLINA, 1994

THE PROBLEM: A low-income apartment complex consisted of primarily uneducated, unemployed, single-mothers on public assistance. Few positive role models existed, while the children were exposed to a myriad of negative influences. The children often became truant followed by involvement in criminal activity. Crack cocaine exacerbated the problems as drug related violence was a common occurrence. The residents became fearful of the drug dealers, vandalism, and sounds of gunfire that characterized the complex.

ANALYSIS: Previous efforts at organizing the community were unsuccessful or short-lived. Residents lived in fear and lacked the cohesiveness needed to effect lasting change. Traditional law enforcement efforts consisted of patrols and undercover drug operations.

RESPONSE: Officer Johnson concentrated on building the residents' trust through her persistent efforts to become involved with the community. Johnson establishing a tutoring program and an empowerment program for families in order to get the children and their parents involved in school and established a tutoring center.

ASSESSMENT: The children go to school receptive to learning and both their grades and behavior have improved. Their teachers reported less behavioral problems. Parents have become more involved in their children's educations and have even began to purse their own educations. Drug activity and most categories of crime have decreased at the apartments.

INTRODUCTION

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department's implementation of community based policing in July 1992 marked a bold departure from the department's previous delivery of police services. While the department enjoyed a positive relationship with the community and was known nationwide as an innovative and progressive police agency, it still relied upon the traditional methods of bringing "one-size-fits-all" police services to a city of almost 400,000 people.

Officers generally responded to radio calls for service and although these calls were handled professionally and compassionately, the officers actually did little to have any long-term lasting impact on a particular problem. Officers often attended community meetings but the response to most of the problems identified at those sessions was an enforcement strategy, developed by command personnel, in which officers were deployed for a short time to impact a narrowly defined problem.

When the department decided that it needed much stronger involvement in neighborhoods, the decision was made to begin implementing community policing gradually throughout the city's nine patrol districts. Then Chief of Police, D. R. Stone, selected the Charlie One District as the first site for community policing. Charlie One had a mix of neighborhoods but was dominated by inner city neighborhoods characterized by poverty, unemployment, substandard housing, low educational levels, and high crime, including open street sales of drugs. It was Chief Stone's belief that if community policing could work here, it could work anywhere in the city.

Officers in Charlie One were asked to volunteer to become community policing coordinators and to accept the challenge of getting to know residents in an assigned neighborhood, identifying their problems, and forming partnerships with the residents to develop innovative long term solutions to those problems.

For Charlotte police officers, the role of community policing coordinator demanded an unprecedented level of commitment to a community, ownership of its problems, and accountability for its success or failure. Officers now had the time and the empowerment to be problem solvers and were expected to impact the quality of life in their assigned neighborhoods. For most citizens, community policing would also be a stretch since it would require them to put a tremendous amount of faith in police and demand that they become active participants in guiding their own fate instead of the passive recipients of city services.

For many officers the task of community coordinator seemed daunting but fourteen Charlie One officers volunteered to pioneer community policing in Charlotte. One officer who accepted the challenge was Cynthia Johnson, a petite young lady who had been a police officer for six years. All of her police experience was in the Charlie One District and Officer Johnson was well aware of the problems in one of her assigned areas, the Village Townhouse Apartments.

SCANNING

Even the residents of Village Townhouse Apartments characterized the complex as "God forsaken." The complex is low income housing situated in the larger neighborhood of Northwood Park.

In 1992, of the 62 heads of household at Village Townhouse Apartments, 60 were single mothers, many without a high school education, most jobless and on public assistance. The children in the complex had little exposure to positive role models and regularly came into contact with drug dealers and other negative influences. The children had no meaningful activity through which they could develop skills and responsibility and, in most cases, parents took a very limited role in the active raising of their children.

The children developed a pattern of truancy followed by dropping out of school and becoming involved in criminal activity. Parents passed on their lack of self-esteem to their children and it was apparent that without meaningful intervention, poverty of spirit would defeat the residents of Village Townhouses.

The introduction of crack cocaine in Charlotte in 1989 compounded problems in Village Townhouses and drug related murders and assaults became a common occurrence. A 12-year-old boy was arrested for possession of 43 bags of crack cocaine and a handgun. He attempted to flee from police on foot and ran through Village Townhouses, brandishing his firearm. A 23-year-old man was shot and killed outside an apartment in the complex. On May 31, 1990, a police operation in the complex yielded 20 drug arrests, 5 of which were juveniles under the age of 16; the youngest arrestee was thirteen.

The residents of Northwood Park became fearful of the Village Townhouse community and the drug dealers, vandalism, and sounds of gunfire that characterized the complex. Many of the Northwood Park residents were intimidated to the point of fencing in their property with barbed wire, further isolating the Village Townhouse Apartments.

ANALYSIS

Previous efforts at organizing the Village Townhouse community had essentially been unsuccessful. In 1986, residents organized to seek repair of the deteriorating apartments and, after having no success with the management company, involved the City of Charlotte which cited the owners for housing code violations and made the repairs under a law that allowed them to bill the owners of the property. A state of disrepair quickly returned to Village Townhouses and the property was finally taken into receivership by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

When Officer Johnson was initially assigned to Village Townhouses, residents lived in fear and lacked the cohesiveness needed to effect lasting community change. Efforts to physically clean up the complex were short lived because no effort was made to do anything with the people. Even the police response to crime had been traditional enforcement efforts in which residents were the passive recipients of a predetermined package of patrols and undercover drug operations.

RESPONSE

Cynthia Johnson was already familiar with the plight of the neighborhood so she immediately began the process of building the residents' trust. She did this by providing a day-to-day police presence and becoming a familiar face seen under non-threatening circumstances. She went door-to-door introducing herself and gradually, through her presence and determination, became a part of the life of the community. She demonstrated strong leadership and a willingness to be there for the residents and began earning their trust. The "system" had failed many of these residents so their trust was a gift not easily won. As the residents become aware that Officer Johnson refused to give up on their neighborhood, they were more willing to begin supplying her with the information she needed to make a difference.

Cynthia Johnson was aware early on that the way to save the community was to save the

children. She realized that the youth of the community must get an education and that many of them had no real direction or commitment from their parents to remain in school. She realized that helping children stay in school would keep them off the streets and out of trouble and would hopefully provide the impetus for parental involvement, thus building strength and commitment for change within the community.

As officer Johnson considered her plan of action, she contacted Cathy Smith, an assistant principal with Statesville Road Elementary School. They began planning an after school tutoring program where children could get help with homework and building skills in a safe and convenient learning environment.

Officer Johnson approached the management of Village Townhouse Apartments and secured a two-story apartment. On the first level, she established a police office from which she operated. On the second level, she began establishing a warm and safe environment conducive to learning. She began soliciting donations of books, desks, and supplies and even approached a carpet company to get carpet squares so that the youngest participants in the tutoring program could sit on the floor for reading groups. Officer Johnson, along with Cathy Smith, began soliciting tutors for the children and was able to get teachers from Statesville Road Elementary School, two students from Johnson C. Smith University, and students from West Charlotte High School.

The doors for the tutoring program finally opened with the fanfare of a ribbon cutting attended by Mayor Richard Vinroot, Chief Stone, Cathy Smith and Officer Johnson. On four days of each week, children would get off the school bus at Village Townhouses and, instead of going home would go into the tutoring center. At first many of the children were lured by the offer of the afternoon snacks but, before long, they began interacting with their tutors and basking in the glow of the attention and positive reinforcement they received.

Each child was required to work on something; if he didn't have homework, he was expected to

be involved in a reading group. In addition to help with homework and skill building, Officer Johnson and the volunteer tutors helped the children address behavior problems that affected their ability to learn. They helped them improve their manners and taught them life skills such as looking someone in the eye when you talk to them.

These children soon saw their grades improve and would come to the tutoring program in the afternoons-with positive comments on their homework and perfect scores on spelling tests. Teachers reported that their behavior had improved. Their pride in their accomplishments was evident but there was already a missing link. Some of the children would cry when it was time to leave their tutoring program and go home. It was obvious to Officer Johnson that many of the parents considered the tutoring program a babysitting service and that there was still no meaningful level of parental involvement in the lives of these children. Officer Johnson, believing that peaceful communities lead to peaceful families, brought in Glenda Manning, a Parent Coordinator from the school system.

Officer Johnson, Cathy Smith, and Ms. Manning developed a unique plan to expand the tutoring program with a Family Empowerment series, designed to teach parenting skills, self-esteem, empowerment and other means by which these parents could become a part of the solution to their children's problems. Ms. Manning reports that Officer Johnson would break into tears when she talked of the lack of parental involvement in the program and how those tears led to her commitment to build the community, even if it had to be one family at a time.

Officer Johnson solicited the help of Joann Thompson, a Village Townhouse resident who was regarded as a peer leader. Ms. Thompson enthusiastically supported the Family Empowerment series and became a part of the planning process. She found that many of the parents didn't realize they were supposed to help with their children's schoolwork or have any active involvement with the tutoring program. Ms. Thompson was so impressed with Officer Johnson's overwhelming concern for the neighborhood's children that she went door to

door building support for the program, reminding parents of the every Tuesday session, and encouraging them not to let other problems get in the way of attending the sessions.

Officer Johnson and Glenda Manning named these sessions "Terrific Tuesday." and created a warm and supportive environment in which the residents could get to know each other and discover the interests and concerns they have in common. Throughout the ten sessions of the Family Empowerment Program, parents learned the significance of the home as a center for instruction and learning and recognized their responsibility as master teachers of their children. They learned that they represent their families and that the family should be a source of pride. Residents learned how to read to their children by reading to each other. Officer Johnson assisted in putting together a lending library of books including *My Mommy Loves Me*, which quickly became a favorite throughout the complex.

Throughout these sessions, the parents learned to work together toward common goals. They expressed their feelings and were joined in their efforts by Officer Johnson, herself a single parent. They got to know the officer as a person and, by the end of the program, if a parent was absent. Officer Johnson was likely to know the reason. Twenty-six parents ultimately completed the course; two thirds of those who finished had perfect attendance.

In the past, the parents from Village Townhouses had not been involved in school activities. Once they had completed the Family Empowerment program, they attended a series of workshops at Plaza Road Elementary School. Village Townhouses had the largest number of parents in the program, all of which came to the workshop in a Police Department van arranged by Officer Johnson.

Officer Johnson next suggested to the group that they apply for a Neighborhood Matching Grant from the City of Charlotte to get a computer and printer for the tutoring center. The residents wanted to do so and agreed to meet the requirement of organizing a community association. With the help of Officer Johnson,

Cathy Smith, Glenda Manning and Joann Thompson, they held two additional classes on team building and how to conduct meetings. The first scheduled meeting of this proposed community association was held at East Stonewall AME Zion Church, which is within walking distance of the complex. Officer Johnson had arranged for the church's pastor, Derrick Anderson, to conduct the meeting and, with his help, the new community association elected officers.

ASSESSMENT

Village Townhouses, with the help of Cynthia Johnson, is no longer a place where despair takes center stage. The parents have now taken over the tutoring center and are working with their own children on a daily basis. They received the grant for the computer and printer and now hold fundraisers to purchase additional resources for the tutoring center. The children go to school receptive to learning and both their grades and behavior have improved. Many of the parents are now pursuing their high school diplomas and are taking courses at Central Piedmont Community College and other area schools as preparation for entering the work force.

Drug activity has diminished at Village Townhouses and most categories of crime have decreased dramatically. There has not been a homicide since August 1992, one month after community policing began. There was one robbery in 1993 and none so far in 1994. There

were two residential burglaries in 1993 and none in 1994. Vandalism has decreased. Crime in the adjacent Northwood Park neighborhood has also decreased.

Officer Cynthia Johnson remains an active presence in Village Townhouses. She continues to support residents and to link them with the resources they need to help themselves. She sees the development of the community as an ongoing process and residents say, "With Officer Johnson, something always is next."

Village Townhouses has indeed come a long way. After the residents held their first community meeting at East Stonewall AME Zion Church, they wanted to cement their newly formed partnership with the church by attending worship services. One Sunday morning, the mothers from Village Townhouses proudly marched into the church accompanied by their children in their Sunday best. Bringing up the rear was Officer Cynthia Johnson whom many of the residents almost didn't recognize out of her blue uniform.

The Village Townhouse residents who marched into that church feel empowered and have come a long way from the sense of hopelessness they felt two years ago. For Cynthia Johnson, that walk down the church aisle is equally significant. It symbolizes what a police officer can accomplish armed with problem-solving skills, a sense of ownership in a community, and the willingness to give of her to get the job done.