

THE SNAKE PIT

CLEANING UP A PROBLEM RESIDENCE

SACRAMENTO COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT, CALIFORNIA, 1994

- THE PROBLEM:** For several years, officers regularly responded to 6620 Fair Oaks Boulevard. The calls concerned intoxicated subjects, thefts, fights, and complaints from neighboring businesses that the occupants of this address were responsible for numerous criminal activities.
- ANALYSIS:** A ninety year old, blind woman owned property that consisted of her residence, five small rentals and four garages. The tenants in the rentals had tapped into the main residence for power; the garages were being used as dwellings: two ex-cons moved into the main residence and were selling off the woman's belongings. The tenants were stealing items from nearby businesses and were operating a perpetual yard-sale on her property. When she objected, she was threatened and a small outbuilding was burned down. The property constituted a health problem due to the trash and vermin.
- RESPONSE:** Officer Williams coordinated with a variety of agencies over a period of time. The elderly woman eventually was put in a rest home. The tenants were evicted or arrested and the buildings boarded up until a new owner razed them. Some 94,000 pounds of trash was removed from the property.
- ASSESSMENT:** The property was sold, is fenced and preparations are being made to raze the buildings. Meanwhile, Ms. Evans has moved in with her son in Redding and at last contact was in good health.
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SCANNING

For several years, officers regularly responded to 6620 Fair Oaks Boulevard in the community of Carmichael, Sacramento County. The calls concerned intoxicated subjects, thefts, fights, and complaints from neighboring businesses that the occupants of this address were responsible for numerous criminal activities. The property consisted of a main house, five rental units and four garages. Three of the garages had been boarded up and subjects were living in them. The property was known by most of the tenants and officers as "the snake pit."

When officers were dispatched to "the snake pit," they would handle the situation at hand and then move on to the next call, never realizing the full extent of the problem.

On June 6, 1993 Patrol Officer Holly Caikoski generated a contact sheet in reference to the "snake pit." Officer Caikoski had responded to the address to check on the welfare of an elderly resident and found the owner. Nellie Evans, in a poor state of health and ordered an ambulance.

Ms. Evans was removed from her house and taken to the hospital for treatment. Through further investigation, Officer Caikoski felt that the

occupants of the rental units were taking advantage of Ms. Evans.

ANALYSIS

The Sacramento Sheriffs Office had formed a four-man team known as the Anti-Crime Enforcement (ACE) Detail under the command of Sergeant Tom Carter. This was the beginning of problem-oriented policing. Each of the four officers was assigned to a sheriff's district in the northern portion of Sacramento County; however they acted as a team when attacking a problem. The ACE team received information from several sources on a contact sheet describing the problem location and complaint person.

Corporal R. D. Williams was assigned the P.O.P. project and began an investigation. The property lived up to the nickname "snake pit." There was garbage of every description scattered about, not only throughout the yards and driveway, but inside the units as well. Broken appliances, old tires, discarded clothing, and the type of garbage generally found in dumpsters was discovered. Most of these items had been taken from neighboring businesses and an attempt had been made to profit from them through a yard sale. There were a variety of containers with materials posing a health hazard.

Electricity had been turned off at all buildings except the main house. The occupants had strung extension cords from the rear of the main house along the property line to the outlying units and were stealing electricity from Ms. Evans. We found that her electric bill exceeded \$600 and the only reason SMUD (Sacramento Municipal Utilities District) had not turned the power off, was because of the victim's age and physical condition.

The owner of the property, Nellie Evans (D.O.B. 11-17-02) was nearly blind and unable to care for herself. Two ex-cons, a man and a woman had moved into the main house with her. They convinced her that they were there to take care of her. Instead, they had been steadily removing Ms. Evans personal property. Most of these items were now artifacts and although not extremely valuable, were worth quite a bit of money. The subjects were selling these items in an almost continuous yard sale.

Upon Ms. Evans return from the hospital, officers tried to convince her that she would be better off in a convalescent hospital. She adamantly refused. This had been her home for over forty years. Her husband had built the rental units and they had raised a family on this property. Her husband had passed away, the children had moved away and she was steadfast in her desire to remain in her home.

Cpl. Williams continued to monitor the situation and make regular trips to the property, running record checks, and arresting occupants on warrants, drugs and other charges.

Cpl. Williams was advised that Ms. Evans was once again in the hospital with a slight case of pneumonia and malnutrition. Cpl. Williams contacted a friend of Ms. Evans and was advised that the persons who were living in the so-called rental units were not paying rent.

RESPONSE

Due to the unhealthy living conditions, rodent infestation and hazardous conditions, several different agencies were contacted and on June 15 1993, the ACE team was assisted in diagnosing the problem and possible solutions by:

- Jewelyn Williams, Zoning Enforcement
- Mark Prior, Vehicle Abatement
- Gene Petrie, County Code Enforcement

After examining the scene, we agreed that other departments could assist us. Sgt. Tom Carter contacted the following agencies that then had a representative respond to the scene:

- Elizabeth Frawley, County Counsel
- Douglas Wolfe, SMUD Field Supervisor
- M-von Flexer, Planning
- Richard Maddox, Zoning Supervisor

Cpl. Williams took photographs and videotaped the scene. The residents were advised that they had one week to vacate. Most of the occupants agreed to leave, (some had fled upon our arrival) and only a few were going to fight eviction. One person, who presented a handwritten rent receipt, withdrew it when she was asked how a 92-year-old blind woman could write her a receipt.

The property was posted with notices of substandard living conditions and the date to be vacated. Vehicles were tagged and notices placed on them of expired registrations and inoperative conditions requiring immediate repair.

Cpl. Williams again contacted the friend of Nellie Evans and received more information regarding the situation. It seems that the occupants had not been paying any rent for some time and when Ms. Evans made the remark that she would have to make them leave and replace them with paying tenants. She was told not to even try. She was told that if the occupants were evicted, the place would bum to the ground. A small-detached garage mysteriously caught fire and burned completely to the ground. After that Ms. Evans was afraid to do or say anything.

RESPONSE

On August 18, 1993 the ACE team, led by Sergeant Tom Carter arrived at 6620 Fair Oaks Boulevard accompanied by the following agencies:

- Vehicle Abatement
- Sacramento Municipal Utility District
Supervisor
- Zoning Enforcement County Code
Enforcement
- County Building Inspectors
- Sacramento Sheriff's Work Project
Supervisor

- Sacramento Sheriff's Work Project Crew
- Sacramento County Waste Disposal Crew
and Equipment
- Hazardous Materials supervisor

We arrived at the property at about 0800 hours and remained until late afternoon. During that time, vehicles were towed away, and electric meters and overhead wiring were removed. Camera crews from all of the local television stations filmed the project and it was presented on the evening news. A member of the Board of Supervisors, Muriel Johnson, heard about the project and stopped by to see the extent of the problem.

The work crew under the direction of Sacramento Deputy George McKinney, entered the buildings and removed all of the loose items in the units, which were now unoccupied. The waste disposal crew later advised us that they had collected and hauled away 94,000 pounds of garbage. Some of that garbage came from the Goodwill night drop that was located nearby.

The building inspectors posted the property as unsafe to occupy. The county waste crew, not entirely satisfied the cleanup was complete, (They had to leave at 1600.) returned the next morning and removed the smaller items and some shrubs that would have prevented passing patrol units from viewing the driveways and buildings.

ASSESSMENT

Ms. Evans, who finally agreed to enter a convalescent hospital, said: "I feel better than I have in years. I am eating better and am around people my own age and enjoying life. I do not want to go home. I do not know how to express my feelings about these people who took advantage of me under the guise of being my friends. They are beneath my contempt."

Cpl. Williams continued to monitor the vacated property, arresting and evicting trespassers who occasionally would attempt to reestablish residency.

The property was recently sold, is fenced and preparations are being made to raze the buildings.

Meanwhile, Ms. Evans has moved in with her son in Redding and at last contact was in good health.

Corporal Williams has videotapes of the property before, during and after the cleanup as well as still photos and videotapes of the local news coverage.