

Summary of the Gaston County Police  
K-9 Units  
Hillway Community Project

The neighborhood known as the Hillway community of Gaston County, North Carolina, had in the past developed into an area known for illegal activity. Drug distribution of cocaine and marijuana was wide spread as was the problems of prostitution and gambling. Crimes of violence such as assaults and robberies were also becoming all too commonplace in the neighborhood. All of these problems had caused the neighborhood to slip into a condition which most would call unbearable. The houses, in their run down condition, were inviting to the types of activities that had begun to characterize the Hillway community.

The drugs, prostitution and gambling were not only a problem for local law enforcement but also for the property owners who rented out these houses and trailers as a source of income. The problem however was most apparent for those residents who lived in the neighborhood and were not involved in the illegal activities.

The Gaston County Police Department in an effort to combat this problem had to increase it's patrol coverage in that area and undertake extensive undercover narcotics and vice operations, consuming great amounts of it's resources in man power and money. The property owners, who merely rented the properties and did not actually live in the neighborhood itself, had in part allowed the houses under their control to fall far below acceptable living

conditions, this for them became a problem because they felt like nothing could be done and they became complacent to merely break even. Several of the owners expressed the concern of why should they invest more of their money onto a neighborhood where property was most likely going to be destroyed or vandalized. But several neighbors did come forward and expressed an interest in improving the conditions of the neighborhood and returning it to the quiet mountain neighborhood it used to be. The residents in the area who were not involved in the illegal activities lived in constant fear. Fear that they would be robbed or assaulted, that their homes would be broken into and their possessions stolen, or just fear that a stray bullet meant for someone else would find its way into their home injuring or killing themselves instead.

In the past the police response had been the same conventional and traditional methods of increased patrol coverage and vice and narcotic enforcement. Just in the past few years the special Investigation unit had conducted several large scale vice and narcotics investigations which were very successful, these investigations resulted in large numbers of persons involved in the illegal activities being arrested and charged. Time and time again, the persons which were arrested were the same ones they had arrested on a previous investigation, indicating that

little change had occurred in the community. Also typical of these traditional style operations, once the investigations were conducted, police involvement would all but cease in the community until the problem would escalate again. Then a new round of investigations would be necessary, bringing the cycle full circle.

Information was an invaluable asset in the solution to the problem of the Hillway community. Traditional information such as names, photographs and criminal histories of those persons suspected of being involved in the illegal activities were collected. Property information such as tax and ownership records were gathered to show who were the legal owners of the houses where the illegal activities were occurring. Letters, sent certified mail, were sent to the property owners informing them that illegal activities were occurring on their property, these letters informed the owners to take steps to eliminate those activities, or civil action against them would be initiated by Gaston County.

The information gathered was done with little difficulty. The information concerning suspects was available from past enforcement actions, and what was not available in that form was obtained from cooperating residents.

The property owners cooperated by assisting in the identification of persons who were staying in their houses.

When the project was assigned to the K-9 Unit to handle, it was established that the goal would be to eliminate the large amount of illegal activity occurring in the neighborhood and assist in the improving of the conditions in the area. These conditions had become inviting to those types of behavior which now infested the neighborhood. We beleived that this would reestablish a sense of pride for the neighborhood, pride that had not been felt in a long time.

To reach these goals the K-9 Unit used traditional enforcement strategies, but this time efforts would not discontinue after the intial enforcement was completed. The K-9 Unit would in addition to using those strategies employe ones not associated with the criminal aspect of the project, but geared more towards civil solutions. These efforts sought to improve the conditions that created the need for police action in the first place.

When as much information as possible was gathered concerning the area, a series of enforcement actions such as license and drug check points, covert survelliance operations and several drug and vice searches were conducted. One such operation was conducetd on August 5th and 6th 1994. The operation consisted of a two man

surveillance team and an outer perimeter of patrol vehicles. Video was taken of the individuals driving up and drug deals taking place. The perimeter vehicles were then notified and the suspects vehicles were stopped and searched. The operation resulted in fourteen drug arrests for marijuana and crack cocaine, and the arrest of three persons for outstanding warrants, officers also encountered ten weapons, indicating that a large portion of those frequenting the area were armed.

This project not only addressed the drug dealers but it also addressed the users and prostitutes who were the customers. During traffic stops or encounters on the street, officers would take photographs of these persons and would inform them that the photographs would be kept on file and used to monitor their return in the area. The prostitutes working the area were bringing their customers, usually truck drivers off a nearby stretch of interstate highway, into the area.

With the cash from this activity they would obtain their drugs and walk back to the interstate, to wait for their next customer. It was not unusual to see large tractor trailers parked in the area, or circling through the neighborhood. K-9 officers who stopped these trucks would obtain from the drivers information concerning their employer. Drivers were told that if they were encountered in the community again, their employers

would be called to confirm their approved presence in this high crime area. The fear that their employer would learn of their activities proved successful. No trucks were encountered twice, and the overall number of trucks seen in the neighborhood rapidly decreased.

The tactics of using photographs and the promise of notification of employers quickly reduced the number of customers coming into the area to gamble or purchase drugs.

Once the illegal activity was curtailed, the second phase of the project could begin. Correspondence was maintained with the property owners during the entire phase of the enforcement action. Property owners had evicted or otherwise removed most of the persons who were involved in these illegal activities. Inspections by the Code Enforcement and Solid Waste departments of Gaston County were conducted and the property owners notified of the violations. These violations ranged from the fitness of the dwellings to inadequate or inoperable condition of heating, plumbing or electrical equipment in the dwellings. State and local Health Department officials also conducted inspections for water and septic conditions in the area. Duke power and Cablevision were contacted and several dangerous illegal hookups were corrected.

Success in the early stages of the investigation must be credited to the assistance obtained from the Internal Revenue Service, State Alcohol Licensing Board and the Tax and Planning offices of Gaston County. Information from these agencies aided the K-9 units development of a successful project.

The property owners signed forms authorizing the police to arrest persons who had no legal right to be on the property. A list of these properties was distributed to the patrol division denying the criminal element a chance to return.

We are now at the one year anniversary for the conception of the Hillway community project and it is pleasing to say that it has been a success. Since the completion of the criminal enforcement phase, no additional operations other than regular patrol have been necessary, a first for this community in many years. Drugs are no longer sold in the neighborhood and prostitutes are no longer walking the streets. The crimes of violence associated with these behaviors have left with the drugs and drug dealers.

The success however can not be solely credited to the criminal enforcement of the police. Much of the credit belongs to the property owners and residents who fought to make the improvements.



Almost immediately after receiving the list of violations from county agencies, the property owners began extensive repairs to the property. Most of the houses have since been completely renovated, from the ground up with new siding and roofs. Paved driveways and flowers have appeared where once muddy pulloffs existed for the purpose of drug dealing.

The goal of installing a renewed sense of pride and security has been met. The residents have formed a community watch program and proudly display signs leading into the neighborhood stating that it is a drug free neighborhood. In October of 1994, the residents of Hillway hosted a cookout for the Police Department. At this cookout a certificate of appreciation was presented to the Gaston County police Department for the services which we had rendered.

Those houses that once were dilapidated, vacant and housed criminal activity, now house families where the sound of children playing can be heard instead of gunfire. Traditional methods of law enforcement alone could not have accomplished this goal, but when used in conjunction with other problem solving efforts they can be quite effective.

It has been the experience of The K^9 Unit and the Gaston County Police Department that traditional enforcement efforts are most effective when coordinated with a multiagency , community oriented approach to law enforcement. It is clear however at least to the K-9 Unit of the Gaston County Police Department, that other methods of law enforcement such as those involving community policing can be just as rewarding

## Supporting Documents

1. Various newspaper articles:
  - a. Newspaper article titled " Neighborhood fights off drugs "
  - b. Newspaper article titled " Police: Club root of neighborhood's drug problems "
  - c. Newspaper article titled " Residents thank police "
2. Photographs taken of area before and after project
3. Certificate of Appreciation given to the Gaston County Police Department by the residents of the Hillway Community.

## Attachments

1. Example of the correspondence with property owners informing them of illegal activity occurring on their property.
2. Example of the form <sup>authorizing</sup> used ~~to allow~~ the County Police to arrest those persons found on property who are not there legally.
3. Examples of the letters sent to the property owners by the Gaston County Code Enforcement informing them of violations.
4. Memo sent out to patrol division informing them of the standing trespass agreements signed by the property owners.