

Aurora Police Department

***"C.O.P./P.O.P. Project: The Development
of the Liberty Street Task Force"***

Aurora, Illinois

The neighborhood in question had been for more than ten years, a haven for drug dealing gang members. The neighborhood is populated primarily of Hispanic-Americans, many of whom are Spanish speaking, only. The 700 block of Liberty Street consists of thirty-seven homes, with residents ranging in age from pre-teen to senior citizen. Most have resided in the neighborhood for several years.

It all began with the call of one neighborhood resident. This family was disgusted, and scared by the number of gang members that were hanging out in their neighborhood. The female called had observed drug deliveries being made, as well as the sale of drugs in the area and finally decided to call the police as this had been occurring for some time. The caller's husband originally had been against calling the police, but when the gang presence increased day after day, he decided they had to have a little faith and call the police for assistance.

It was really quite by accident that Community Outreach Specialist Cecilia Soto ended up getting involved with this family. Mrs. Lazoya had called the department, but due to her limited English speaking skills, the 9-1-1 dispatcher transferred the call to her. Mrs. Lazoya explained the extent of the problem and relayed any and all information she had such as automobile plates and descriptions. She stated that she had watched the dealing of narcotics growing day after day. The family was so scared by all the drug activity created by the presence of gangs that they resorted to sleeping in the basement. This hardworking family had been reduced to sleeping in the basement out of fear of a drive-by shooting at night. Mrs. Lazoya was asked if she and her neighbors would be willing to get involved in a Neighborhood Watch program. She explained that she had already attempted to talk to the good neighbors on her street, but that they all expressed fear of reprisals if they were to get involved with the police. It was explained to her that only through the joint efforts between her neighbors and the police could this problem be solved. Mrs. Lazoya again expressed her fear, but was willing to open her house to the police for surveillance purposes. This was an excellent step in the right direction.

Through the use of the City of Aurora's Service Request Form, the assistance of the Special Operations Group was enlisted. Investigator Sigsworth and Community Outreach Specialist Soto met with the family face to face in order to arrange a surveillance project. All things seemed to go fairly smooth when it became apparent that another surveillance project was already in full force in the neighborhood and it would be necessary to back off our project. It fell on Community Outreach Specialist Soto to explain to the family that our surveillance project would not be going through. She explained as much as she could, and assured them that we were working actively on the this problem. The family was grateful for the assistance.

The same time this was occurring, the whole neighborhood seemed to finally be up in arms over the gang and drug activity. Every night a different resident of the area would call and plead for police assistance. It was at this time that Community Outreach Specialist Soto received at least two to four calls a day over a three day period, and the amount of calls were increasing. With the growing amount of calls the desperation of the people was growing as well. You could hear in their voices as they pleaded in Spanish, "We are so afraid, what can we do?" they wanted to help, but were afraid to openly work with the police.

An analysis of calls for service revealed much of what we anticipated and included the following:

- * Drug Use and Sale
- * Property Damage
- * Shooting Incidents
- * Resident Intimidation
- * Trash
- * Graffiti

Surveys of the neighborhood revealed the residents had the same concerns as were described in the analysis of calls for service. The Survey also indicated a feeling of hopelessness and little faith in the police department. The "broken windows" theory was being proven as was evidenced by the general decay of the block. Residents were seldom seen in leisure outdoor activities and children playing outside was rarer, still. Conditions such as these demanded a non-traditional approach.

This problem was brought to the attention of Commander Michael Nila of Area Two. He was advised of the amount of phone calls being received and of the conversations with various families. It was explained to him that some of the neighborhood families were assisting the department by providing us with information, but that the residents were afraid to come out of their homes to assist. It was shortly after our conversation that a two man foot patrol team, from the Patrol Division, was assigned permanently to the 700 block of Liberty Street, on a twenty-four hour basis. On each team. Due to the amount of Hispanic residents in this block, on each team, at least one of the two officers was Spanish speaking.

Concurrently, a task force was created to problem solve and to organize the citizens to work with the police to take back their neighborhood from the Latin Kings. The task force was made up of the Area Two Commander, the Area Two Lieutenant, the Special Operations Group Lieutenant, an Area Two Sergeant from 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. shift, two officers from each shift, two Community Policing officers, two Special Operations Group officers and Community Outreach Specialist Soto, a civilian.

First, officers vent into the neighborhood and surveyed all thirty-seven homes on the 700 blocks of Liberty to determine what the resident's problems and perceived problems were. While the surveying of the neighborhood was being done, the officers assigned to the area were taking a zero tolerance approach to gang and criminal activity. Gang members were swept out of the neighborhood two and three times per shift.

One house was responsible for many of the problems in the neighborhood so officers sought an inspection of the property by the Inspections and Permits Department of the City of Aurora. There were numerous violations listed for the property and the owners were taken to housing court. Community Policing officers testified at various hearings against the homeowners and a nuisance abatement letter was sent. The pressure for compliance was placed on the homeowner.

Various families were called several weeks into the project to see what their perception was. They were extremely pleased and grateful for the police presence in the area. For many it was the first time that they were able to sleep without fear. The task force's consensus was that eventually residents would have to be weaned of our presence twenty-four hours a day and that residents would have to take a more active role in keeping the neighborhood safe.

At this point the neighbors were beginning to feel a sense of trust in the police department. The task force felt it was time to have a neighborhood motivation talk. Fliers were printed in both Spanish and English and were passed out twice before the meeting date. On the night of the meeting, which was held only one block away at the local grade school, all of the task force officers were present patrolling the neighborhood. Extra Special Operations Group officers swept the area of any gang presence and remained in the neighborhood throughout the meeting. The fire department's special light truck was used to light up the street as a deterrent to any criminal element and to build confidence and trust. Numerous Community Policing officers along with two Civilian Community Outreach Specialists went to every house to remind the residents a half hour before the meeting.

The meeting was a success. Close to one hundred percent of the neighborhood residents were in attendance. Ruby Neuberger of the Gang Intervention Unit Volunteers explained the group's initiative and provided a sheet for any volunteers that were interested in being active in giving kids an alternative activity to gang participation. Sgt. Dave Torres gave a culturally-sensitive talk about the importance of getting involved with each other regardless of race or language barrier in order to assist each other in deterring crime.

The next step was to establish a Neighborhood Watch. Fliers in Spanish and English were distributed. The night of the Neighborhood Watch meeting and throughout the entire process, police officers were assisted by Social Work Interns for Aurora University, City Inspections Department, the Aurora Fire Department, and the police department's Community Outreach Specialists. Thirty-three of the thirty-seven homes on the block were represented at the meeting, including two of the "problem" houses. The watch was formed with well over eighty percent participants.

An analysis of calls for service indicates a seventy-one percent reduction. One sergeant reports the change in the neighborhood was so rapid and so drastic that he experiences an eerie feeling when he drives down that street because of the *lack* of criminal activity. The gang presence in this neighborhood has been, for all practical purposes, eliminated, exceeding by far our goal of fifty percent reduction. Surveys of the neighborhood completed several months later indicate a community which now has a positive attitude toward its police department. We found the biggest hurdle to overcome was the mistrust the community had of the department. Perhaps the single most important approach taken was having bilingual officers and outreach specialists making one-to-one contacts with the citizens.

Since we realize that the problem was displaced, we have continued to follow that core group of problem persons to their new locations. We have noted the problem is smaller each time it is displaced, and perhaps just as important, more readily identified.

The Neighborhood Watch left in place of the high impact policing and multi-faceted approach is being recruited now by an extremely active citizen patrol group in the immediate area. Since the department has daily contact with that group, monitoring 700 block of Liberty will be an ongoing endeavor.

Throughout this entire process there existed three constants. These three persons are the nominees for the Herman Goldstein Award and are:

Cecilia Soto, Community Outreach Specialist

Harold Carter, Community Policing Officer

Doug Sibon, Community Policing Officer