



Problem Oriented Policing Project

Richard G. Overman
Chief of Police

Edward J. Flynn
Detective

Abstract

Merritt Park is a city-owned facility located in the southwest corridor of the city of Delray Beach. The park was built in the early 1960's to provide neighborhood recreation for children residing in the immediate area. The neighborhood surrounding Merritt Park has experienced a major transition from resident/owner to rental property over the past ten years. This transition brought a lack of ownership to the neighborhood accounting for an increase in property, persons and narcotic-related crimes.

On several occasions the Police Department attempted to combat the rising crime rate through the use of special enforcement teams, drug sweeps and surveillance teams. These efforts met with limited success, only to see the criminal element return to the park once the police moved on.

In late 1995 Merritt Park had become an area of criminal opportunity. Calls for police service were at an all time high with little or no relief in sight. Seeing a need for change, Detective Edward J. Flynn began a problem oriented policing project to combat the rising crime rate in the neighborhood surrounding Merritt Park.

Merritt Park Neighborhood.
Problem Oriented Policing Plan



Delray Beach Police Department

300 West Atlantic Avenue • Delray Beach, Florida 33444-3695
(561) 243-7888 Fax (561) 243-7816



Problem Identification:

Merritt Park is a neighborhood park with two ball fields and bathrooms encompassed by a chain link fence. The Merritt Park neighborhood encompasses an area one block to the west, three blocks to the east and three blocks to the north. It is a multi-ethnic neighborhood comprised of white Americans, African-Americans, Haitians and Mexican/American individuals. There are three daycare centers within one block of the area. The neighborhood consists of both low income and middle income residences.

Merritt Park has long been regarded as an area of concern, because of drug activity and other associated crimes. In the past, when citizen complaints became vocal enough, a short-term police response would be initiated. These responses involved high profile patrolling, buy/bust operations and undercover video buys of narcotics. These responses would result in short-term suppression of criminal activity, with the problems always returning at a later date. In recent years, the problem evolved to a point where several groups of ten to twelve black mates (ages thirteen to thirty-five) continuously occupied the north end of the park along the roadway. Several subjects would act as "lookouts"; some were "drug runners"; others were "enforcers" for the drug dealers. Their consistent presence at the park caused a feeling of fear and intimidation throughout the neighborhood. Vehicle and pedestrian traffic of those

looking to purchase illegal narcotics (i.e., crack cocaine, marijuana, etc.) continued to increase. Calls for service from residents living near the park to the Delray Beach Police Department also continued increasing.

As a result of this fear and intimidation, most residents retreated into their homes and locked their doors, becoming extremely frustrated over the deteriorating condition of the neighborhood and quality of life.

Analysis:

During November, 1995, Detective Edward Flynn adopted the Merritt Park neighborhood as a Problem Oriented Policing Project. He had our Crime Analyst conduct a computer recap and received a print out of all police activity in the area. He received data for January 1995 through October 1995. A review of this data found 1,076 documented calls for police service. These police service calls varied as follows:

- 60 Business Alarms
- 15 Warrant Arrests
- 15 Burglaries
- 14Vandafism
- 21 Domestic Violence
- 15 Drug Related
- 195 Traffic (Accidents, Arrests)
- 10 Violent Felonies
- 741 Miscellaneous

, Of the 741 miscellaneous calls for police service, approximately 600 calls were for high profile police presence in an attempt to impede drug activity. The vast majority of drug activity occurred, but was not limited to the early afternoon to late night hours. Although drug related calls were low, associated calls (such as traffic, warrant arrests,

vandalism, burglary and alarm calls) were unusually high for a neighborhood area. Merritt Park had become a well known area among the drug using population. Subjects arrested and questioned stated they visited the area because of its easy access both by foot and vehicle. Residents making complaints advised that the sellers must be making a lot of money because of the heavy volume of traffic.

A review of the area showed the park was bordered on four sides by through streets. This traffic layout made the area accessible from two main thoroughfares affording for easy in/easy out driving. Pedestrian traffic was continuous from east to west.

The identified drug dealers' favored the northeast corner of the park where there was a large shade tree. This location allowed for clear visibility in all four directions, while using the park's public bathroom for security. The drug dealers could stand on public property in large groups while lookouts circled the area on bicycle. The majority of drug dealers did not live in the area and only came to the park to sell drugs. Several of the main participants were known felons with violent criminal histories. This information permeated throughout the neighborhood causing fear among the citizens. The citizens in the area saw retreat as their only option.

At Detective Flynn's request a representative from the City Engineering Department prepared a map of the area. Upon reviewing the map, it was found that on the north end of the park none of the residential properties faced the road. Their frontage was along the streets on the east and west sides of the park. It was determined that the street on the north side of the park could be converted to a parking

lot enclosed by a fence with gates that would be under the control of the Parks and Recreation Department. This change would eliminate one thru street and the favorite location for drug sales. At the same time it would provide a controlled parking area for the park.

During this time a Career Criminal Program was being initiated at the Defray Beach Police Department. One of the subjects identified was a known leader in this area and was targeted by the Career Criminal Program for enforcement.

It was also discovered that the Merritt Park neighborhood had no Homeowners' Association, showing a lack of ownership by the residents in the area.

From these observations it was determined that the Merritt Park problem could be attacked from three sides of the Crime Triangle.

Action Plan Implementation:

In November, 1995, Detective Flynn made contact with City of DeTray Beach Neighborhood Program Specialist Jennifer Hofmeister. Detective Flynn discussed the prospects of starting a Merritt Park Homeowners Association using the park as a focal point. Ms. Hofmeister was enthusiastic about starting the Association.

Ms. Hofmeister and Detective Flynn then met with Mr. Joseph Weldon, Director of Parks and Recreation, to discuss the possibility of a street closure on the north side of Merritt Park and turning the area into a parking lot. Mr. Weldon was open to the improvements but voiced some concerns due to budget constraints.

In early December, 1995, Detective Flynn met with Mr. Charles Ridley and Mr. Benjamin Bryant, leaders of MAD DADS (Men Against Destruction Defending Against

Drugs and Social Disorder). MAD DADS is comprised of men who either live in or have ties to low income or problem areas of Delray Beach. Their goal is to be actively involved in their neighborhoods while working with young people. They act as role models for children and assist parents improve their parenting skills. MAD DADS' mission is to help individuals take responsibility for their actions, while requiring them to take an active role in the improvement of their neighborhoods. They have been very effective working with the Delray Beach Police Department in building a rapport with the community. Mr. Ridley and Mr. Bryant expressed their interest in starting a Merritt Park Homeowners' Association. After several meetings it was determined that the initial phase would begin with a neighborhood walk through to speak with residents.

On December 7, 1995, Mr. Weldon and Detective Flynn met with City Manager David Harden along with members of the Design Services Management Group (DSMG). A presentation was made outlining a plan for street closure, park redesign, formation of a Homeowners' Association, police enforcement and criminal tracking. Mr. Harden was receptive to the plan and requested plans, designs and cost estimates for the project prepared for his review.

In January, 1996, Delray Beach Police Chief Richard Overman ordered the formation of a special task force to attack illegal drug activity in specific areas of the city, including Merritt Park. This task force was headed by Sergeant Jeffrey Rancour and consisted of four police officers. The task force was temporary and at the conclusion of this operation, would be disbanded with the officers returning to their previous assignments. The task force could be reformed at any time if necessary.

Contact with Sergeant Rancour and Sergeant Michael Swigert, of the TACT Team, helped to coordinate activities and information exchange.

On January 27, 1996 the first neighborhood walk through was conducted. The overall plan for redesign along with a police "crack down" on drug dealers motivated the residents contacted. The idea of forming a neighborhood association was also discussed. Overall, there was an abundance of enthusiasm about making improvements to the Merritt Park neighborhood. There were some residents who showed a guarded interest and wanted to "wait and see" if the City would follow through on the overall plan.

On March 4, 1996, the first official meeting of the Merritt Park Homeowners' Association was held at the Delray Beach Police Department. Several guest speakers informed interested residents of positive experiences being made by Homeowners' Associations throughout the City. Task Force members informed residents about the progress being made in the Merritt Park area while allowing for a dialogue to be opened with residents voicing their problems and concerns. This meeting proved to be the foundation for an open, positive relationship between the Delray Beach Police Department and the citizens living in the Merritt Park area. Those who attended agreed to participate in a second neighborhood walk through scheduled for March 23, 1996. The purpose for the second neighborhood walk through was to have neighbors meet neighbors while soliciting more involvement.

The monthly Association meeting eventually turned into weekly "walk arounds". The Homeowners' Association's presence on the streets surrounding Merritt Park made

life even more uncomfortable for criminal activity, while helping to unite a diverse neighborhood.

On August 29, 1996, approximately fifty residents attended the Merritt Park Homeowners' Association meeting and they elected their first president. The Association immediately began a dialogue with City Hall while becoming very active in the future plans for their neighborhood.

During October, 1996, the final phase of Detective Flynn's plan was implemented. Construction was started and completed on the street closure and park redesign. This was completed in December, 1996. Two basketball hoops, which were added to the plan, were mounted on each end of the parking lot. A chain link fence with the gates allowed for control and monitoring of pedestrian and vehicle traffic in the park area.

Conclusion:

The overall feelings of the residents living within the Merritt Park neighborhood have gone from one of fear and apathy to a newfound feeling of pride and cooperation. Merritt Park is now being used by neighborhood children without the fear of violence.

In November, 1996, the criminal activity data for Merritt Park outlining a time frame from January, 1996, through October, 1996, was obtained. The data indicated overall calls for police service had been reduced from the previous 1,076 to 148 calls. This data represents a decrease in police service calls of approximately 87%. The most drastic reduction was for traffic related calls (195 to 0) and in miscellaneous calls (741 to 43). It should be noted that only 20 of the 148 calls for police service occurred

after the August 29, 1996, election of the Merritt Park Homeowners' Association President. Future data will determine if this is relevant. It should also be noted that all police service calls occurred prior to the construction of the parking lot on the north end of the park.

This project is being called a success! The Delray Beach Police Department and City Hall followed through on promises for a crack down on crime and park improvement. This helped to build confidence within the community. The residents have responded by getting together in groups and continuing their walk throughs, creating a presence unlike anything the police had been able to do before. All these actions have shown the criminal element that past activities will no longer be tolerated. As a result, "packs" of drug dealers have moved out of the area and the park is now being used by the community for its intended purpose. The Merritt Park Homeowners' Association is now a strong voice in City government and a bond has formed with the police department.

This Problem-Oriented Policing project was all accomplished through the dedication and leadership of Detective Flynn. He provided and represents a major victory for the cause of community policing, as this was done while Detective Flynn worked out of the Crimes Against Persons Section of the Detective Division.

Agency and Officer Information:

Problem-oriented policing (P.O.P.) has been adopted at all levels of the Delray Beach Police Department. Since 1991, Chief Richard Overman's goal has focused on

bringing the philosophies of community policing and problem-oriented policing to the Delray Beach Police Department.

All officers have received extensive training and instruction in the philosophies of community policing and problem-oriented policing by such noted experts as Chief Reuben M. Greenberg of the Charleston, South Carolina Police Department, Ms. Rana Sampson, Director of Public Safety, University of San Diego and Edwin J. Delattre.

The incentives given to officers engaged in P.O.P. projects are the freedom and ability to complete their projects. Officers requiring schedule changes, additional manpower and equipment only need to consult with their supervisors and voice their needs. Efforts will be made at all levels of the Police Department to assist the officers in obtaining their stated goals and objectives. All P.O.P. projects are required to use the SARA model and are reviewed by staff. These projects, either accepted or rejected, are kept in a central file for review by other members of the department.

The Merritt Park Problem-Oriented Policing project identified several different problems. They were as follows:

- The accessibility of the park from two main thoroughfares.
- An environmental condition favorable to the drug dealers and their clients.
- Cost of redesign of the park and roadways.
- Apathy by resident living in the area of Merritt Park.
- Numerous subjects congregating in the park and on surrounding roadways.
- Limited police response to the stated problems.

The cost of redesigning Merritt Park and the associated roadways cost the City of Delray Beach fifty-thousand dollars. The additional manpower needed for the enforcement teams was made available through reassignments and shift adjustments. Overall cost to the City of Delray Beach was minimal compared to the overall quality of life issues facing the residents of Merritt Park.

Project Coordinator's Biography

EDWARD J. FLYNN
City of Delray Beach Police Department
Criminal Investigations Division
Crimes Against Persons Unit

Detective Flynn has been a police officer with the City of Delray Beach since October 1986. Detective Flynn's first assignment was as a Road Patrol Officer where he received seven letters of commendation along with several letters of appreciation from citizens and other agencies.

Detective Flynn was then transferred to the Tact Team where his duties included investigating subjects involved in narcotics, gambling, prostitution, robbery and burglary, execution of search warrants and other situations where a high profile presence was required.

In July 1990, Detective Flynn was assigned to the Criminal Investigations Section, Crimes Against Property Unit, where he investigated burglary, fraud, arson and other associated crimes.

In April 1992, Detective Flynn was transferred to the Criminal Investigations Section, Crimes Against Persons Unit, where his duties involved the investigation of rape, robbery, homicide and other associated crimes.

During his tenure in the Criminal Investigations Section, Detective Flynn has been named Officer of the Month three times, he has received four letters of commendation, and was named Officer of the Year by both the Elk's Club and Victim Services of Palm Beach County. As a result of his efforts in the Merritt

Park Project, Detective Flynn received the Chiefs Achievement Award and was nominated for the Palm Beach Post's Officer of the Year for Palm Beach County. Detective Flynn has been married to his wife Susan for seventeen years. They have three boys (ages sixteen, fourteen and nine) who are extremely active in sports. Detective Flynn has a very close relationship with his sons and has either been head coach or assistant coach on the teams they have played on. He is currently an executive board member of the Acreage Athletic League and a member of the Wellington High School Football Boosters.