

ABSTRACT

The S.A.R.A. model was applied to the Whitfield Towne Apartment complex located in the 5600 block of Whitfield Chapel Road in Lanham, Maryland. This area was notorious for its open air drug market and the fact that violent crime was an everyday occurrence in this small geographical area. The goal of this model was to reduce violent crime and enhance the quality of life for the residents of the apartment complex and surrounding community.

The first step was to build a bridge between the community and the police. Community Police Officer Corporal C.J. Baker was assigned to staff an office within the apartment complex. In the beginning the residents were hesitant to speak with her or other officials for fear of reprisals. Those who would speak would only do so in confidence. They stated that their primary concern was the fear of being shot or killed while walking out of their apartments. They had become prisoners in their own homes.

Corporal Baker developed a good and trusting relationship with the Resident Manager, Susan King. Problems and offenders were identified through a combined effort involving the police department, the management of the complex, and the residents of the community.

A security survey of the property was conducted by Corporal Baker and Ms. King. Many changes were recommended and subsequently made to make the area less conducive to the criminals. The overall appearance was even changed to help display a positive image.

It became obvious that to effectively address the violent crime, numerous resources would be needed from within the department. Therefore, contacts were made with the Criminal Investigation Division, Homicide, Robbery, Street and Major Narcotics, and the Special Operations Division. Plans were soon formulated to develop a strategy of targeting specific drug dealers and drug locations. A trespass project was formed to target repeat offenders and keep them off the property. During the implementation of the initial enforcement stages the police department instituted the Violence Abatement Program, which greatly enhanced enforcement efforts. This program, which provided additional manpower during the peak hours of criminal activity, played a major role in the overall goal to reduce violent crime within this community.

The citizens who lived in the community were responsive to the actions of the police department. A trusting relationship between the community and the police department was well on its way. The residents began to stand up and fight to retake the streets as well as their lives. Children who were not allowed to play outside due to the danger of gun battles now filled the playground of Whitfield Towne.

The cooperative efforts of the police and the community combined to eradicate violent crime and restore order to the community. These efforts were a direct result of following the S.A.R.A. Problem Solving Model.

S.A.R.A. Problem Solving Model

Whitfield Towne Apartments

Scanning:

The Whitfield Towne Apartment Complex is located in Lanham, Maryland. It is bordered to the North by the Washington Beltway, to the East and West by single family residences, and to the South by a commercial district comprised of small businesses. Immediately adjacent to the property are wooded areas and railroad tracks. This complex is unique because it has only one entrance, one exit, and more than 80 percent of the structures are blocked from public view. It consists of 324 single family units with only two of which being government subsidized. Unfortunately, the lack of federal funding worked to the property owner's disadvantage. There was no federal assistance money for many routine repairs or security improvements. Without these repairs and adequate security, open air drug activity, violent crime, and prostitution began to flourish. Consequently, the living conditions for the residents was reduced to a deplorable level.

The criminal element recognized the strategic advantages that this location provided. It was well suited to help them avoid detection from law enforcement agencies. Outsiders flocked to the area and "turf wars" erupted. The number one call for police service became the dangerous , "shots fired", call. The quality of life for the law abiding residents quickly deteriorated. These citizens became afraid to

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stand up against the criminal element even when threatened with loss of life or serious harm to themselves or their family. Those who could not afford to relocate rapidly became prisoners within their own homes. Those who had the financial capability began to move out at a rapid pace. It was easier and safer to relocate than to stand their ground and save their neighborhood.

The complex developed a notorious county wide reputation that was known not only by police officers but also by the citizens of the county. Between 1993 and 1995, this complex became the number one crime location within District II. The statistical data for violent crime rivaled its counterparts located adjacent to the Washington, D.C. border. Between January 1995 and October 1995 there were three homicides, two stabbings, and six other assaults with firearms. The violent crime was spiraling upward and gaining momentum. Both police officers and the residents of the surrounding communities referred to Whitfield Towne as the "Demilitarized Zone." The violent crimes began spilling out into the adjoining neighborhoods and the community leaders began demanding action.

Many problems were identified by apartment management, residents, police officers, and community leaders. Together with the overwhelming number of

calls for service within this small geographical area, it became obvious that the situation at Whitfield Towne was reaching a crisis level. The S.A.R.A. problem solving model was selected due to the nature of violent crimes and the fact that these crimes were filtering out into the adjoining neighborhoods.

The area became so dangerous that the standing orders at District II were that no officer was to respond within the confines of Whitfield Towne Apartments without a back up unit.

Analysis:

Although a Community Policing Office had been established within the complex in 1994, it was not staffed more than a few hours per week. Prior to the assignment of Corporal C J. Baker, two other officers had been assigned the task of cleaning up the complex. Neither officer had sufficient time to devote the effort necessary to achieve the desired result. For a number of reasons these officers were ultimately moved to other assignments. In October of 1995, Corporal Baker was transferred from the Narcotics Enforcement Division to the Community Oriented Policing Unit at District II. With her background in drug enforcement, she was well suited to be able to attack the core of the problem. She was given the authority and responsibility to address the problems at Whitfield Towne

Apartments.

Corporal Baker gathered statistical data from the Crime Analysis Unit and interviewed the individual officers assigned to patrol the area. She then met with investigators and other C.O.P.S. officers to complete her departmental perspective on the problems at the Whitfield Towne Apartments. All indications and reliable intelligence confirmed that the major cause of the violent crime within the complex was illegal drug trafficking. In order to begin to address these problems, Corporal Baker realized she would need the assistance of the apartment management, community leaders, and the good citizens living within the complex.

Armed with the department's perspective of the problem, Corporal Baker set out to obtain the perception of those citizens who worked and lived within effected area. She met with Ms. Susan King, the newly assigned Resident Manager. Very quickly Corporal Baker discovered that Ms. King would turn out to be her strongest ally in the effort to restore order to the complex. Ms. King proved to be a dedicated professional with the same goals as the department. She provided valuable intelligence information at the first and subsequent meetings. She reported that she believed that the previous resident manager was actually part of the

problem. It was suspected that the previous manager was taking money " under the table" and providing the drug traffickers with a base of operation. This cooperation by the manager included allowing questionable persons access to vacant apartments and allowing undesirable persons to move into apartments at a discounted rate.

Apparently, none of these activities were reported to the apartment complex owners who would never have allowed such enterprise. Complaints from the law-abiding residents went unanswered. The previous resident manager's cooperation with the police was also misleading or not forthcoming. Through the help of Ms. King, Corporal Baker began interviewing the residents of Whitfield Towne to obtain their perception. For fear of reprisal, many of the meetings were conducted in secret and away from the premises. A local church opened its doors to Corporal Baker and the Whitfield Towne residents for this purpose. After meeting with a great number residents, it became apparent that their primary concern was "Fear." Fear for their own lives and fear for the safety of their loved ones.

Once trust was established, the residents began providing valuable intelligence information. They identified "crews", established who were leaders, and who were soldiers. They provided names, vehicle descriptions, and locations of

drug infested apartments. They also identified the numerous prostitutes who were working out of vacant apartments.

Corporal Baker began a physical survey of the property. Prior to conducting this survey, she obtained, through Ms. King, a commitment from the property owners that they would act on all reasonable security recommendations. During the survey, it was determined that the layout of Whitfield Towne was conducive to drug activity: each building had an entrance in the front as well as an exit in the rear providing an easy escape route for the drug traffickers; the complex laundry rooms were connected in a honey comb fashion providing hiding places for the many criminals as well as another avenue for their escape; the surrounding wooded area had numerous paths and hideaways providing concealment for criminal activity; the exterior lighting was inadequate or inoperable providing many dark areas for concealing criminal activity ; and, the Community Policing Office was located in the middle of the complex away from the view of the public forcing citizens who wanted to visit the officer to run a gauntlet of drug traffickers. The environmental design of the complex gave the impression of a depressed property that further attracted the undesirables; boarded up windows adorned with graffiti, and

abandoned autos scattered through the parking lot were but a few detractors to the environmental design.

Prior to utilizing the problem solving project, high visibility patrol and selective enforcement methods were performed on a daily basis to combat this problem. The community as a whole was pleased with the Police Department's response, however, these efforts proved too futile in curtailing the drug activity. To address these problems effectively, it would take a major effort on the part of the management, police, and the community.

Response:

A wide range of response alternatives were considered in dealing with various problems and diverse units within the agency were called upon to assist. Drugs and guns remained the biggest problem, any solution had to be approached cautiously and methodically with well thought out planning. Mistakes during the enforcement stages could cause additional loss of life. Cooperation among the various units of the Police Department and the community became critical.

Corporal Baker's first step in gaining trust within the community was to establish a strong base of operation. She arranged to have the Community Policing

Satellite office moved to the front of the complex. This would be a visible deterrent to the drug traffickers and would effectively diminish their area of operation. They would be forced to conduct their illegal business in the rear of the complex.

The office also became more visible to the citizens in Whitfield Towne and the surrounding communities. Those who frequented the property to buy drugs were made aware of the police presence as soon as they turned into the property.

Communication between the residents and the police became a vital source of information. Weekly community meetings were organized and conducted at a local church. The church location was selected to assuage the fear of reprisal among the community members. At first the meetings were sparsely attended, but through daily interaction with Corporal Baker in the complex, the residents developed a trust and a dependence on her. Meeting participation grew with each passing week. As the community involvement increased, building captains were appointed. These captains were given around the clock capability to contact Corporal Baker or other members of the Community Oriented Policing Unit with intelligence information. Members of the community were encouraged to develop a zero

tolerance for all crime. They were told to call the police anytime they witnessed a violation of the law. They were assured anonymity and were taught to provide specific details when reporting offenders such as, clothing, detailed physical descriptions, and a description of exactly what criminal activity they observed.

Changes were made in the environmental design of the complex which became a deterrent for criminal activity. All decorative fencing in front of each building was removed, leaving the drug dealers no place to sit or congregate. All of the buildings which had two way access soon became one way in and one way out. The large metal doors that were in the rear of the buildings were welded shut. Steel doors were placed between laundry rooms effectively stopping the honey comb effect. All broken glass windows were replaced and the boards on the condemned apartments were painted a light color to match the overall color scheme for the rest of the buildings. The lighting throughout the complex made Whitfield Towne a brighter place at night. The hallways and railings on the balconies were painted a lighter color to take away the gloomy appearance.

As was noted earlier, the majority of the drug traffickers and buyers did not live within the complex. They came from various neighborhoods within the county

as well as Washington D.C. and Virginia. To address this problem, a strict no trespassing policy was set into place. A large "NO TRESPASSING" sign was placed at the entrance of the complex and in the hallway of each building. An additional "No Trespassing" sign was posted advising all visitors were to check in at the rental office to obtain visitor passes. A Trespassing Violation Form was developed and issued to all of those persons who were suspected of possible involvement in any criminal activity and those who had no real reason to visit the property. These forms were issued by patrol officers as well as by the Community Police Officers. The violator was asked to read the form, date it, and then sign it on the line provided. A photograph of the suspected criminal was taken and attached to the form. A Whitfield Towne Trespass Book was then compiled and a list of violators was distributed to the patrol officers assigned to that beat. This solution proved very effective. The State's Attorney's Office for Prince George's County provided additional assistance by ensuring specific prosecution for violators charged with trespassing at Whitfield Towne Apartments. Offenders were actually serving jail time after being found guilty of the offense of trespassing! Those offenders who did not take the initial warning letter seriously, were arrested the next

time they were found on the property. It did not take long before the word had spread that the police were serious. Although this type of enforcement activity may have been an inconvenience to the decent citizens, they were now willing to try anything to reclaim their neighborhood.

During the implementation of the trespass enforcement, the Community Police Officers and other patrol officers began surveillance operations by utilizing vacant apartments. The officers who were in these apartments would observe subjects buying and selling drugs. This intelligence information was given to uniformed officers who were staged nearby but out of sight. Once a deal was observed, stops were initiated on the buyers, drugs were recovered, and arrests were made. Through this method of operation, confidential sources were developed that resulted in the apprehension of numerous dealers. These operations also had a significant impact on deterring potential buyers from frequenting the location.

Additionally, other units within the police department were called upon to assist with the enforcement efforts. The Narcotics Enforcement Division and the Special Operations Division played significant roles in addressing the problem.

Acting on information provided by Corporal Baker, these units targeted specific drug traffickers and crews. Members of the Narcotics Division infiltrated some of the groups within the complex and began to buy drugs from the dealers. After a deal was made, members of the Special Operations Division would come in and make the arrest. In any instances when a vehicle was involved, it was seized for forfeiture. All money and drugs were routinely seized for forfeiture.

The Community Oriented Policing Unit began setting up check points at the entrance to the complex during the peak hours of operation for the drug traffickers. Again, this operation was designed to deter the drug traffickers' clientele. The operation not only served as a deterrent to drug purchasers, it yielded numerous arrests for weapon's violations and help identify individuals who were wanted on open warrants.

The Vehicle Audit Unit was also a big help in utilizing this model. Trashed and abandoned automobiles were scattered throughout the complex. These vehicles detracted from the overall appearance of the property and gave the appearance that the complex was a depressed property. These vehicles were identified, tagged, and reported to Vehicle Audit by Corporal Baker. Once the report was received by

Vehicle audit, the car were quickly removed.

In June of 1996 the Police Department obtained additional money to pay overtime for officers to attack violent crime. Violent crime areas were identified by mapping all reported violent crime in a given area. The Whitfield Towne Apartment complex was designated as one of the District II Violence Abatement Areas. This designation allowed Whitfield Towne to become part of the violence abatement program. This operation provided additional uniformed patrols twice a week during peak hours of criminal activity. This additional patrol was the turning point in successfully reclaiming Whitfield Towne Apartments.

Throughout this time period, The Resident Manager, Ms. Susan King, remained actively involved. Subsequently, she became the community leader for the complex in which she worked and lived. Although, Ms. King received numerous threats on her life, she continued to fight the battles. She made it clear to all new residents that any type of drug activity would not be tolerated and any allegation of involvement would cost them their place to live. She was in favor of the trespass program in which she was very much involved. She signed all the forms and also

she attended court on every notice. Because of the courage and commitment demonstrated by Ms. King, this model became a reality and the Whitfield Towne operation eventually ended up a success story.

By June of 1996, a short nine months after the beginning of the problem solving model, an amazing yet unexpected turn of events occurred. The combination of the community involvement and the persistent enforcement efforts by the various units within the police department, resulted in the undesirable element who were residing within the apartment complex begin to move out almost overnight. There were a total of 40 move outs in the middle of the night. Of the 40 people who vacated the property, all had been identified as having some involvement in the sale or use of illegal narcotics. All had been the target of some type of selective enforcement. The remaining residents were ready to claim a well deserved victory.

During the enforcement stages of this model, the environmental design was also a strong consideration. Contact was made with the Environmental Design Agency, which is a non-profit organization, that became interested in the efforts and concerns of the Whitfield Towne Apartment Complex and offered to help improve

the Whitfield Towne image. One part of the complex, which was known as an area to just "hang out", was the children's playground. This playground had been destroyed remaining inoperable for many years. The swing set had no swings, the teeter totter had no seats, and anything else that was left standing was covered in rust. The owners of the apartment complex, along with the police department, the Environmental Design Agency, and the residents of the community worked together to rebuild the playground. A community that was once torn apart by violent crime had come together to rebuild for the future.

Assessment:

The results of this model were overwhelming. Although no one expected to see a change overnight, it did occur almost that quickly. As a result of the S.A.R.A. operation, the total number of police calls for service within the apartment complex and the immediate surrounding area were decreased by 27%. Almost two years after the implementation of this model, there have been no homicides, no shootings, and no other violent crimes at Whitfield Towne. Isolated minor incidents occurring within the complex are dealt with promptly and the community still provides valuable assistance in keeping their neighborhood safe.

During the initial implementation of the enforcement effort, Whitfield Towne almost 50% of the apartments were vacant. As the overall environmental changes began to take place and crime was reduced, middle class working families began to move in. Whitfield Towne was once again considered a place to raise a family. Today, there is a waiting list of applicants for apartments.

Prior to the application of this model, children were not allowed to play outside due to the danger of being struck by a stray bullet. Today, the parking lots are clean and safe and the new playground flourishes with the sounds of children having fun. Children are a big part of any community. Whitfield Towne is no exception.

The greatest success came in the form of community involvement. In August 1996, which was considered the year of change, the residents ended the summer by celebrating "National Night Out". Various businesses throughout the area donated food and drinks. The event began early with a cookout in the playground area and ended with a candlelight march through the complex. The residents no longer lived in fear. Two hundred and fifty people attended this

celebration including Chief of Police John S. Farrell, County Executive Wayne Curry, Commander of District II, Major Richard Welsh, and the entire District II Community Policing Unit. Everyone was there to congratulate the community on their victory.

A significant change had taken place and the message was clearly sent to the criminal element. The dealers, buyers, prostitutes, and robbers found that they had lost the war and the community had reclaimed their streets. This change was the result of the community and the police department working together hand in hand.

There was an initial concern about the displacement of the problem into the surrounding community. It was already clear that crime was spilling into the adjacent community because of the increase in calls for police service. This concern was addressed by implementing similar problem solving techniques in the neighboring community before the criminal element could take hold.

The success of this model has drawn media and national attention. Reporter Leo Alexander, News Channel 4 (NBC), conducted a feature story on the success of this crime prevention model at Whitfield Towne. In his assessment of the success,

he attributed most of the success to the hard work of Corporal Baker and Ms. King. This feature story was broadcast at several different times on the Washington D.C. News Channel.

Corporal Baker was also contacted by The Enterprise Foundation to discuss a research project on housing and crime prevention. She met with Ms. Linda Schaffer on January 21, 1998. Ms. Schaffer stated that the foundation was planning to supply the Internet with examples of success stories such as Whitfield Towne. Corporal Baker and Ms. Susan King were also invited to be guest speakers at a seminar in Washington D.C. This seminar, called Circling the Wagons, was organized by the Neighborhood Design Center. It was attended by professionals from across the nation. Corporal Baker spoke on the importance of crime prevention through environmental design. Once again Whitfield Towne was a prime example of a success story.

The evaluation on this model was conducted by the Prince George's County Police Command Staff, officials and supervisors within the Community Policing Units in the Washington Metropolitan area, the media, and members of the effected

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and surrounding communities. Every goal set within this model was achieved.

Agency and Officer Information

1. This project was started by Corporal Carol Baker as part of her normal duties as a community policing officer. She was assisted by other members of her squad who are also full time community police officers.
2. All officers who are assigned to community policing receive training in the S.A.R.A. problem solving model and are provided examples of successes other officers have had.
3. No additional incentives are provided outside the normal departmental guidelines of evaluations and commendations.
4. Problem solving models are taught during the community policing training.
5. The model is flexible enough to adapt to this problem.
6. The department had some overtime expenditures during this operation. The current maintenance requires very little expenditures.
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