

**"Pay Before You Pump" Program Summa.,
El Paso Police Department**

In 1997, the El Paso Police Department identified a problem with increasing larcenies, especially in the Mission Valley region. The Mission Valley Commander and his staff conducted research to determine the primary locations, peak times and specific targets of the crimes. It was discovered that thefts of gasoline from convenience stores in the area accounted for more than half of the reported incidents. There were approximately 150 gas runs each month and the numbers were rising.

In February 1998 the Mission Valley Commander invited representatives from area gasoline vendors to meet and discuss possible solutions to this problem. Most businesses were surprised to see the number of incidents and very interested in which store locations had the greatest problem. Nevertheless, the convenience store representatives were reluctant to implement a "pay before you pump" program due to fears that their customers would move their business to a competitor. They suggested that the City adopt an ordinance requiring such a policy to ensure uniform enforcement.

The Crime Prevention Officer researched the feasibility of such an ordinance with other comparable cities and is working with the City Attorneys Office to develop a draft. Since this process takes time, several other alternative strategies have been implemented:

- Quarterly meetings with the convenience store representatives to share information and to develop solutions
- Training of convenience store employees to address the issues of robbery prevention and personal safety
- A pilot program with a "pay before you pump" policy at store locations with the most thefts
- Installing cameras at the most frequently hit pumps
- A Crime Stoppers initiative with cash rewards for individuals that report gas thefts
- Using the media to provide public information about the problem

As a result of these combined efforts, the number of gas thefts has decreased steadily since May 2000. The number of incidents at the most frequently targeted locations has also dropped from a high of 50 gas thefts a month to less than 10 per month. Officers at other regional commands have begun to work with convenience stores that are having problems with gas thefts in their part of town. The groundwork has already been laid, and the program is gaining acceptance. The Mission Valley officers worked closely with the gas vendors to gain their trust and cooperation and achieve success without government regulation.

Pay Before You Pump Program

Herman Goldstein Nomination El Paso Police Department

Scanning

In the early 1990's, the El Paso Police Department began to implement community policing. The philosophy of community policing incorporates the concept of community involvement and the Department began to decentralize operations from headquarters to five Regional Command Centers located in each section of town. The officers working at each Regional Command were directed to seek input from the citizens in their respective neighborhoods to help determine the area's major needs and concerns.

Citizens Advisory Boards were established at each Regional Command, composed of volunteer members appointed by the Regional Commander from a diverse group of community representatives to serve a one-year (renewable) term. The existence of a separate Citizen's Advisory Board in each region ensured that the neighborhood residents could address the unique concerns and challenges in that part of town. Public education and crime prevention programs became an important tool in our arsenal against criminals.

The Strategic Analysis of Crime (SAC) process was implemented to promote an exchange of information and ideas within the department, and permit the evaluation of the strategies and programs utilized in crime reduction. El Paso Police Department command and supervisory staff met monthly to evaluate crime trends in their area of responsibility and jointly develop response strategies. The process entails the use of

accurate and timely intelligence, rapid deployment, effective tactics, follow-up and assessment to reduce crime.

In 1997 the SAC process helped to identify a city-wide problem with increasing larcenies, especially in the Mission Valley region. The Mission Valley commander directed his investigative staff to research and analyze these incidents to determine the primary locations, peak times and specific targets of the crimes. It was discovered that thefts of gasoline from convenience stores in the area accounted for more than half of the reported incidents. There were approximately 150 gas runs each month and the numbers were rising.

The issue was brought to the attention of Citizens Advisory Board, and the Board members recommended that the Commander arrange a meeting with the affected convenience store owners and managers to share the concerns of the department, obtain their perspective on the problem and ask for their help in developing solutions. The CAB also suggested that the convenience stores be asked to join a Business Watch program and participate in the FAX Force.

The FAX Force is a crime prevention tool that has been utilized by the El Paso Police Department since 1996. Its purpose is to provide timely crime prevention information to the public. It incorporates Crime Analysis information and Crime Prevention tips on a single page which is faxed from the Regional Command to interested businesses, civic groups and citizens in the area. FAX numbers are collected from Citizens Advisory Boards, Neighborhood and Business Watch meetings and put on a mailing list. Subscribers also use the program to report non-emergency crimes to the Regional Command.

Analysis

Before scheduling a meeting, *more* detailed information was collected, including the addresses of the store locations that were hit most frequently, the actual pumps experiencing the greatest number of thefts, the peak times of the reported incidents. Not surprisingly, the pumps that were out of direct sight of the store clerks were the most frequently abused, and more than 50% of the thefts occurred after dark. Some store locations reported more than 30 incidents per month. Armed with this information, in February 1998 the Mission Valley Commander invited representatives from Circle K, Good Times Stores, Howdy's, Diamond Shamrock, Sam's Club, 7-11, Chevron, Exxon and other local gasoline vendors to meet.

The main emphasis of this meeting was to call attention to the increasing number of thefts involving gas runs and to encourage the vendors to become a part of the solution. The EPPD was concerned not only with the thefts themselves but also with the possibility of clerks being victimized as a result of the thefts, by confronting subjects or running after subjects, placing themselves in danger. Most store managers stated that they did enforce a non-confrontation policy with their employees. The attendees were given opportunity to share their perspective. The business representatives felt that the police response could be improved by having a higher presence of marked units in the vicinity of the most-targeted stores.

They were surprised to see the large numbers of actual incidents and very interested in which store locations had the greatest problem. Nevertheless, the convenience store representatives were reluctant to implement a mandatory "pay before you pump" program due to fears that their customers would take their business to a

competitor. They stated that voluntary enforcement of such a policy would not be feasible and asked if the City could enact an ordinance requiring this action.

El Paso has a low per capita median income, and many citizens pay cash or write checks for gas rather than using credit or debit cards. The convenience store representatives felt that these customers were more likely to purchase food and other items if they came in to pay after they had pumped their gas instead of before. (An exception was Sam's Club, where only members can purchase gas and the pumps all require payment prior to pumping. As a result, they had not experienced any gas runs at all. The representative from Sam's Club also stated that they have installed video cameras at all their pumps and recommended that the other stores do the same.)

The businesses were advised that the Department was prepared to offer a training program for their employees which would address the issues of robbery prevention, shoplifting, personal safety, credit card fraud and recognition of proper identification. Also addressed would be target hardening issues such as using pre-pay on gasoline sales, especially after dark and at those pumps which were out of sight of the store clerks. The use of the FAX Force was adopted by most of the businesses as a crime prevention and information tool.

Other remedies were discussed, but education of the convenience store staff on how to control the problem was the most widely accepted idea. The possibility that some of the incidents could be attributed to a type of employee theft was also introduced. Some managers believed that their clerks could be allowing their friends to fill up and drive off without paying.

The officers asked for any other suggestions on how to address the problem. The business representatives asked the Crime Prevention Officer to research the possibility of a mandatory "Pay Before You Pump" city ordinance, which would require that all vendors adopt the same policy.

Response

A multi-faceted response was implemented to address this problem. First, quarterly meetings were instituted with the convenience store representatives to gain their trust and cooperation, to keep them informed of the number and locations of gas thefts and the success of various attempts to reduce the problem, and to seek their continuing input on various solutions. The FAX Force was utilized to keep the businesses informed between meetings.

A pilot program was attempted, with each chain selecting one store location that had significant problems with gas runs. A "pay before you pump" policy was implemented at these stores. Unfortunately, the various chains were not consistent in their enforcement of the policy. Some only enforced it at night. Some only enforced it at certain pumps -- usually the ones out of direct view of the store clerks. As a result, the success of this pilot was not very significant. At the start of the year 2000, there were still approximately 200 gas runs per month in the Mission Valley region.

Acting on the suggestion made by the gasoline vendors, the Mission Valley Crime Prevention Officer asked the Planning and Research Division of the EPPD to survey other comparable cities to see if there was a mandatory "Pay Before You Pump" ordinance already in existence. Nothing similar had been attempted in the other

municipalities surveyed, but several cities stated that the stores in their area had implemented this policy on their own to avoid financial losses. This information was taken back to a quarterly meeting and the businesses requested that the city continue to pursue this idea. The Crime Prevention Officer then met with the City Attorneys Office to explain the problem and to request that a draft ordinance be prepared. While this proposal and the process to obtain approval will likely take several months, it has the support of several City Council members.

Training was conducted with store employees to protect them and make them aware of counter measures to reduce thefts. Employee theft was identified as a significant problem at some stores - clerks would allow their friends to fill up and drive off without paying. To help resolve this issue, a few stores installed cameras at the gas pumps. Gas runs did decline dramatically at those pumps, but most businesses felt it would be too costly to use cameras at every pump. Some stores tried dummy cameras at some pumps in conjunction with real cameras at other pumps, with moderate success.

Throughout 1999 and 2000, other regional commanders identified gas thefts as a growing problem in their area of town, and officers from these regional commands began to regularly attend the meetings in preparation of implementing a program in their area.

The most recent initiative to reduce the number of gas thefts involves the use of Crime Stoppers. Stickers reading "WITNESS A GAS THEFT Call Crime Stoppers at 566-TIPS. Remain anonymous and receive cash rewards" will be distributed to the stores in the Mission Valley area and placed on all gas pumps for a test period of three months (April — July 2001.) This information will be forwarded to Law Enforcement personnel

for review. If the information leads to an arrest or citation, the caller will receive a \$50 award.

Crime Stoppers will forward all workable leads to detectives at the Mission Valley Regional Command. A data bank will be established to track all information, which will assist in identifying repeat offenders, peak locations and times of offenses. If the detectives are able to identify a suspect, a photo line-up will be made and presented to the convenience store clerk for identification. If the clerk can identify the suspect, a citation will be issued or an arrest made. If the Crime Stoppers caller wishes to give up the anonymity to identify the suspect, a photo line up will be presented to the caller. At no point will the callers be required to identify themselves unless they choose to do so. Employees of the convenience stores are not eligible to participate in this program.

At their regular meeting in March 2001 the convenience store representatives were informed that the Crime Stoppers program had been approved and would be implemented soon. One representative suggested that the stickers be printed in both English and Spanish, since El Paso has a predominantly Hispanic population. This idea was agreed upon by all present. The media was invited to this meeting to help release information to the public and a press conference will be scheduled prior to implementation of the program in the near future.

The operations director of Transmountain Oil (which owns the Howdy's Food Marts in El Paso) informed the group that the Texas State Legislature is looking at a proposal that would revoke a person's driver's license if they were caught stealing gasoline. The problem has reached epidemic levels across Texas. The Texas Petroleum Marketing and Convenience Store Association recently reported that gas runs cost the

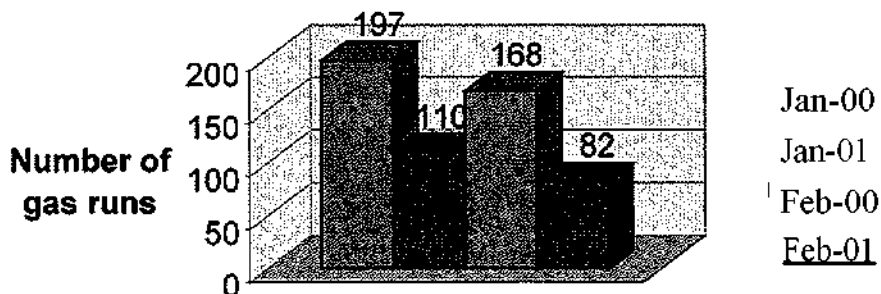
industry over \$30 million a year statewide. Many cities are looking for a remedy. If this legislation passes, it would be a good fit with the Crime Stoppers program.

A representative from Good Time Stores stated that their chain had voluntarily implemented a "Pay Before You Pump" policy at all stores in a particular district as a pilot program. The policy was enforced 24 hours at all pumps, with impressive results and the chain was considering enacting the policy throughout the city.

Assessment

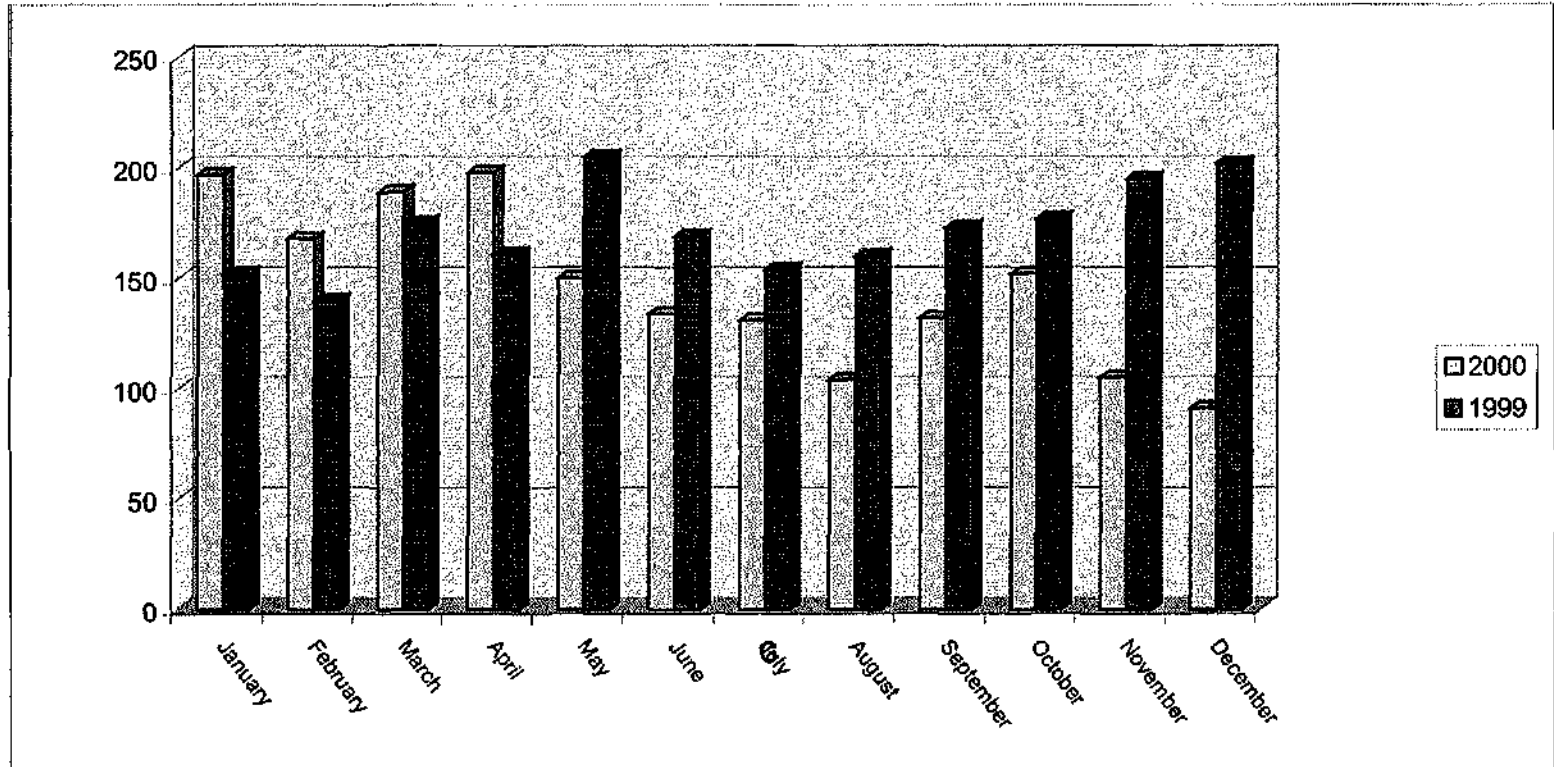
In the Mission Valley area, there was a 44% reduction in gas runs in January 2001 as compared to January 2000, and a 51% reduction in gas runs for the month of February 2001, compared to February 2000. Since May 2000, the number of gas thefts has decreased steadily. The number of incidents at the most frequently hit stores has also dropped from more than 30 times a month to less than 10 times a month. Clearly, the combined effort is beginning to pay off.

Gas Thefts Comparison Mission Valley Regional Command



Mission Valley Regional Command Gas Thefts

1999 - 2000 Comparison



The other regional commands have begun to work with convenience stores that are experiencing gas thefts in their part of town. The groundwork of collaboration has already been laid, and the program is gaining acceptance. Without state legislation or a city ordinance to require uniform enforcement of the "Pay Before You Pump" policy, the Mission Valley officers had to work closely with the gas vendors to gain their trust and cooperation.

The program has been difficult to implement because the convenience store representatives had a perception that this type action that would drive customers to competitors. The businesses were willing to put up with the nuisance of gas runs until they realized how many were actually occurring on a monthly basis and how much money was being lost. A few stores were willing to implement a pilot program at the pumps most likely to be hit. When it was demonstrated that a "pay before you pump" policy actually reduced the gas thefts dramatically, those stores became more willing to enforce the policy at other pumps as well.

The locations that have implemented the "pay before you pump" program have seen a significant drop in the number of gas runs. Gas runs statistics are monitored closely and are published in the monthly Fax Force newsletter. The store managers have begun to buy into the program, but still want the city to pursue a "Pay Before You Pump" ordinance requiring all vendors to comply.

Public awareness of the problem has increased due to the number of public meetings and attention by the media, bringing greater public acceptance of the procedure. The addition of the Crime Stoppers sticker is expected to be another tool in attracting public attention and acceptance.

Legal remedies, both at the municipal and state level, continue to be pursued, and if adopted could eliminate gas thefts altogether, but in the meantime, the officers of the El Paso Police Department have achieved notable success in addressing this widespread community problem.

Agency and Officer Information

1. This initiative was adopted by the officers of the Mission Valley Regional Command Center as a pilot project for the whole city. The Commander and the Crime Prevention Officer had primary responsibility for implementing the program.
2. All officers in the El Paso Police Department receive community policing and problem-solving training as a part of their academy training. In addition, all supervisory staff and officers in certain positions, including crime prevention and community services, are mandated to receive ongoing annual training.
3. The incentive to engage in this initiative came from the department's desire to reduce the overall rate of larcenies occurring in the city and specifically the number of gas runs.
4. Several past problem-solving initiatives have been executed successfully in El Paso through use of our regional Citizens Advisory Boards to help identify neighborhood problems and public meetings with affected residents and businesses to gather and share information and develop solutions. Use of the Fax Force and the media to inform the general public of developing problems and new programs to address those problems has been instrumental in obtaining support.
5. The convenience store representatives had an initial perspective that gas runs were not a significant problem compared to the anticipated loss of revenues from customers shopping elsewhere if required to "pay before they pumped" their gas. The businesses wanted to City to take full responsibility for solving the problem by passing an ordinance that would enforce this policy citywide. The City's Legal Department thought this was an issue that the businesses should address themselves since the thefts were costing them money. The El Paso Police officers were able to convince all parties to cooperate and participate in several different approaches to address the problem.
6. In addition to the Mission Valley staff, as the program continues other regional command officers have been encouraged to attend the meetings to adapt the

program to their area needs. The assistance of Crime Stoppers (which utilizes private funding and donations to pay the cash rewards) and the participation of convenience store personnel in our training and enforcement efforts is responsible for helping to reduce this problem in our city.

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