

**FIG GARDEN VILLA**  
FORMERLY  
**SEQUOIA TOWERS**

**Prepared by,  
POP Officer Steven Casto #778  
Fresno Police Department  
Fresno, CA**

## **Overview:**

Sequoia Towers was a relatively small, 93-unit, three-story apartment building inside a gated complex at 1544 E. Fedora. The complex was crime-ridden, had multiple building code-violations, and was generating high numbers of calls-for-service and complaints from field officers. The calls-for-service (CFS) were predominantly high-priority, and consisted mainly of physical disturbances, weapons-disturbances, narcotic offenses, prostitution offenses, burglary and theft. There were several reports taken by our major narcotics unit via the tip-line of multiple units involved in narcotics sales.

The onsite manager, whether inadvertently or by design, was moving white-supremacists into the building, who eventually took it over. The few law-abiding residents who remained were prisoners in their own homes and were afraid to call the police due to threats from the criminal element. The on-site manager seemed very willing to work with the POP Team, however we were receiving anonymous tips that she also was involved in narcotics sales, and that her cooperation with us was only a facade. The hallways were dark and vandalized with graffiti, and all of the fire hoses had been removed from the glass-faced boxes on the wall. The odors in the hallways were overwhelming.

Problems reached a peak in late-1999 and early-2000. Pressure was put on the apartment manager to do something to curb the problems, and she in turn hired a private security company to patrol the grounds at night. The owner of the security company called me after less than a week. He stated that his guards were being threatened with their lives every night and were afraid to go to work at the complex. He also stated that he did not feel that he could force his

guards to work under those conditions and that he would be breaking the contract with the complex after only a few nights - something that he has never had to do before with years in the private security business.

We were continuing to put pressure on the on-site manager, as well as the supervising manager with the property management company representing the owner, ultimately with threats of fines for maintaining a public nuisance (Fresno's Real Property Ordinance). The supervising manager was genuinely concerned with cleaning up the property, however she was not receiving any support from her supervisor or the owner of the property management company. In late-March 2000, the supervising manager eventually quit her job due to frustration, and was replaced. The on-site manager told us that the new supervising manager told her to stop working with the police - that her job was limited strictly to whatever projects he gave her. She was also advised not to speak to the property owner regarding the status of his property. The new supervising manager fired the maintenance personnel, and hired an individual who was just released from prison to replace them. The on-site manager was also eventually replaced. The new supervising manager was frequenting the third-floor apartments that were known to deal narcotics, and he was believed to be a methamphetamine user.

The complex became so out of control that immediate steps needed to be taken to maintain some semblance of order. We contacted our multi-agency gang-enforcement unit (MAGEC), and we were able to organize a sweep of the complex, which consisted of narcotic search warrants, probation-searches and parole-searches. A total of seven people were arrested, five guns and narcotics were seized during the sweep. The suspects that were taken into custody were some of the higher profile white supremacists in the building. Our Tactical Team was

contacted, who in turn frequented the area at night and made several more arrests in and around the complex. Our uniformed patrol was also asked to frequent the area as time permitted. These traditional means of policing were having an impact, however more needed to be done to address the problems long-term.

In April 2000, the majority of the apartments on the third floor were burnt after a 16-year old white supremacist ignited a couch in the hallway, frustrated because he and his family were being evicted. Several people were trapped in their apartments and had to be rescued by Fresno Fire Department personnel. This event was possibly the catalyst for change that we needed.

In May 2000, with scrutiny from the City at an all-time high, the owner hired a new property management company that I had worked with previously and had a good working-relationship with. I immediately contacted the new property supervisor. We agreed that an aggressive clean-up of the property was needed. A new on-site manager was selected for the property. Due to the shoddy record-keeping of the prior management, the new management did not even know who was living in the majority of the 93 units. It was discovered that several of the units were supposed to be vacant, however they had people living in them while not paying any rent. Another POP officer and I met with the management and went door-to-door to determine *who* was residing in each unit. A large number of tenants were served with 30-day notices to vacate. The units that we received no answers at were posted with 24-hour notices to enter. Several more units were vacated over the next month due to more arrests and more 30-day notices to vacate, *which* originated from providing the new management with police calls-for-service data to the problematic apartments.

After several meetings with the new management company, and in turn with the new

owner, they decided that they were going to rename the apartments Fig Garden Villa, and turn it into apartments for senior citizens.

Fresno City Code Enforcement was brought in to identify all of the building code-violations on the property, and the Fresno Fire Department was brought in to identify all of the fire code-violations. This was done in a cooperative manner with the management. Over the next couple of months, the owner, seeing the long-term benefits, renovated the property, as well as all 93 units. Through the cooperative efforts of the property management and law-enforcement, all of the white supremacists were removed from the property, with the only tenants remaining being just a handful of law-abiding citizens who were pleased to see the changes.

Fig Garden Villa had a grand opening celebration in September 2000. The media was invited, as well as members of law-enforcement and the Fresno Fire Department. The complex had studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments available, with all utilities included in the rent, making the apartments attractive to senior citizens on a fixed income. The apartments are very close to shopping and public transportation; also an ideal situation for seniors.

CFS to the complex were at an all-time low, and were not the high-priority calls that were generated in the past. The few CFS that were generated, were mainly from only two apartments, whose tenants were appropriately dealt with by the new management. It did not take long to refill the building with new tenants, and as of late February 2000, there were no vacancies in the building.

Regular meetings were held with property management to educate them on the importance of properly screening applicants to ensure that they rent to quality tenants. Also discussed were various ways to maintain quality tenants, and in turn keep their police CFS low.

Several programs were developed and implemented in the complex. The SALT (Seniors And Law-enforcement Together) Group meets on the first Thursday of each month, and educates seniors on how to protect themselves from things like phone and mail fraud, as well as provides them with information on how to contact many of the resources needed by seniors.

Neighborhood Watch meets once a month. A Crime Prevention Officer speaks to the tenants and educates them on ways to prevent crime, as well as answer any questions the tenants may have.

Every third Friday is the Fig Garden Cafe for a Day, where the Fresno County Library brings the Mobile Bookmobile and provides tenants with library cards, and food and refreshments are provided for the tenants in the lobby area. Water aerobics are offered for the tenants in the heated complex swimming pool. A courtesy vacuum day is offered once a month for any senior who would like their apartment vacuumed free of charge. Potlucks are held once, every other month, in the lobby. Presently, we are attempting to implement additional programs such as Meals-on-Wheels, a mobile immunization program and a senior lunch program through the Parks & Recreation Dept.

## S A R A

### **Scanning:**

- Crime analysis: high calls-for-service (CFS) to the complex
- Field officer complaints: heavy gang, narcotic, prostitution activity
- Citizen complaints: heavy gang, narcotic, prostitution activity, blighted conditions
- Security company complaints: unsafe for guards to patrol grounds
- City code-enforcement complaints: multiple building code violations

### **Analysis:**

- Crime analysis (see CFS chart)
  - I ran CFS to the complex back to 1995. Most CFS were high-priority (requiring multiple police units), and mainly consisted of assaults, larceny, narcotics and prostitution.  
CFS were extremely high for a relatively small number of rental units. CFS peaked in 1999, with 336 CFS received that year. 2000 was on pace to exceed 1999 numbers.
- Officer complaints
  - Frequently dispatched to the complex  
Complex was occupied by white supremacists
  - Multiple units dealing narcotics  
Prostitutes frequenting the complex from nearby Blackstone Ave. (major street and known area of prostitution)  
Criminal element was unified. Network of people would advise others when police were approaching. Multiple 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> story windows overlooking all four sides of the complex.
- Citizen complaints
  - Suspected narcotics sales/use
  - Public intoxication
  - Prostitutes loitering in the area
  - Complex was a terrible eyesore detracting from the community
- Security complaints
  - Guards were being threatened with their lives by suspected white supremacists/narcotics dealers
  - Guards afraid to go to work
  - Liability placed on security company for ordering guards into the complex
- Code enforcement complaints
  - Multiple building/fire code complaints throughout building
  - Mainly caused by tenants of building doing vandalisms throughout the hallways of the building, especially to promote criminal activity and obscurity

### Management

- Allowed criminal element to move into the building  
On-site manager appeared helpful, however is possibly playing both sides  
Appeared to be attempting to keep property owner in the dark as to the status of his property

### Property

- 93 units on three stories
- Fenced/gated (criminals on wrong side of fence)  
Adjacent to Blackstone Ave. (major commercial thoroughfare with prostitution problem)
- Poorly lit

### **Goals:**

- Remove criminal element from complex to restore order to the community
  - Arrest
  - Displacement
- Reduce CFS to the complex
  - Especially high-priority, multiple officer calls
- Bring complex up to code standards

### **Response:**

#### (Initial)

- Utilize traditional policing (search warrants/parole-probation searches/surveillance/patrol) to maintain some semblance of order while other plans are developed. Remove key players through incarceration. Allows nearby concerned citizens to at least feel safer in knowing that the police are present and doing something.
- Notify property owner of the status of his property and determine whether he's a victim of poor property management or an adversarial slum-lord.
- Notify property owner of his obligations under the Real Property Ordinance/Public Nuisance laws.

(Response was interrupted by the fire and replacement of the management company, and a new response was needed)

- Contact new property management company
    - Determine future of complex
    - Determine who was residing in the complex
- Fire/Building inspections to bring complex into compliance



**Assessment:**

- All gang members removed from complex.
  - a Long-term incarceration
  - Evictions
  - Displacements
- CFS reduced by -90% from their peak.
- \_ CFS now low-priority and medical-aid calls.
- Property was completely brought up to code standards and beautified.

**Opinions:**

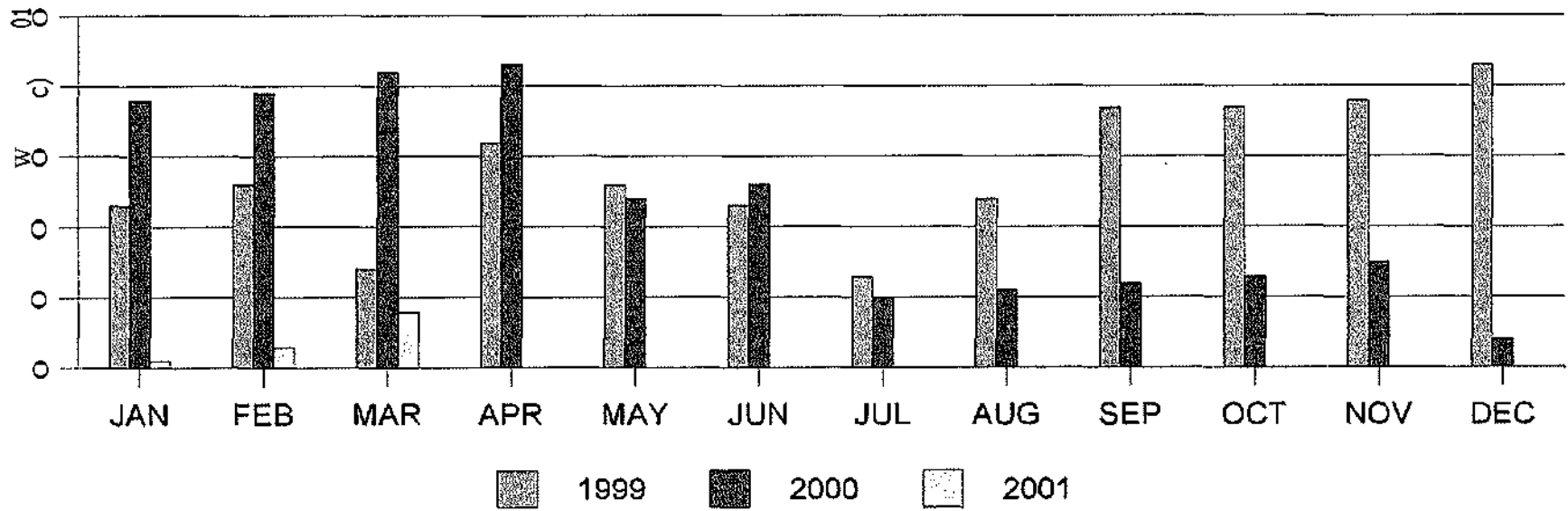
This POP project started as an apartment building that was overrun with white supremacist gang members, was full of people dealing narcotics, was used as a place of prostitution, and was rampant with various other crimes. The management of the complex was unconcerned, and very much a part of the problem. The management would try to work with police just enough to delay being cited under the City's Real Property Ordinance. The major catalyst for change came when management finally started the eviction process on the tenants of a problem-apartment, whose son, angered with the eviction, intentionally started a major fire on the third floor. Heavy scrutiny was placed on the out-of-town property owner, who came to realize the magnitude of the problems occurring on his property. The property owner hired a new management company with a good track record of working closely with the police.

A new approach was now needed to address the problems with the complex. After several meetings, the owner decided to completely change direction with the complex, and turn it into a community for seniors. The complex was renovated, brought up to code, and transformed from an eyesore to a nice apartment complex. Several programs were implemented to maintain our progress (see page five). Some were existing programs, and some were created specifically for the residents of the complex. More programs are in the process of being developed and implemented, all in an effort to ensure that the property never regresses into what it once was.

As of this writing, the complex has become eligible for a Safe Neighborhood Apartment Partnership (SNAP) Award of Excellence, a prestigious award presented to apartment complexes that are committed to the community and meet strict criteria.

Officer Steven Casto #778	Sergeant Walter Boston #S90	Officer Valerie Dunn #721
Fresno Police Department	Fresno Police Department	Fresno Police Department
NW POP Team	NW POP Team	NE NPO Team
3789 N. Hughes	3789 N. Hughes	2323 Mariposa Mall
Fresno, CA 93705	Fresno, CA 93705	Fresno, CA 93721
(559) 228-6109/8 Office/Fax	(559) 228-6109/8 Office/Fax	(559) 222-0443 Office
(559) 498-2198 Voice Mail	(559) 498-2243 Voice Mail	(559) 498-2117 Voice Mail
<a href="mailto:steven.castona.ci.fresno.ca.us">steven.castona.ci.fresno.ca.us</a>	<a href="mailto:walter.bostona.ci.fresno.ca.us">walter.bostona.ci.fresno.ca.us</a>	<a href="mailto:valerie.dunn(a.ci.fresno.ca.us">valerie.dunn(a.ci.fresno.ca.us</a>

# Sequoia Towers Calls for Service



# Sequoia Towers

## Crime Cases Writer

