

TRANSIENT PROBLEMS

AT THE

CLAIREMONT SQUARE MALL

IN

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Clairemont Town Square is a neighborhood mall covering an area of 189 acres. The shopping center, opened since 1956, is home to 75 various businesses. It is also where the first City of San Diego Community Service Center/Police Storefront opened in 1997. The mall began major renovations in 1996. They have been very successful in drawing new and profitable stores to the mall.

The Town Square has become a gathering point for the Clairemont, Bay Park and Bay Ho neighborhood residents. The coffee shops, theaters, grocery stores, and specialty shops allow community members to stay local for most of their general needs.

The Clairemont, Bay Park and Bay Ho neighborhoods are primarily comprised of middle class residents, in traditional single dwelling homes, with small pockets of average size apartment complexes. There are large areas of canyons throughout the neighborhoods that are monitored by the City Park and Recreation Department. It is in these canyons that some homeless individuals, who were raised in these neighborhoods and whose families still reside in the area, live throughout the year. Since the closest homeless shelter is ten miles away, they will often loiter in areas where they can obtain money, food, alcohol and clothing. One of their primary target areas is the Clairemont Town Square.

## **SCANNING**

A new property manager, Leslie Harris, was hired to bring new businesses to the Square. One of her first priorities was to immediately deal with the chronic alcoholics who had made Clairemont Square their home. She called the Police Department and asked for a meeting with the Community Relations Officer. She expressed her

displeasure with the loitering, panhandling, urinating in public, foul language, and general nuisance of a small group of transients. She asked that something be done about the problem.

It was also learned at this meeting that the customers were upset at the inappropriate conduct of the transients. There had been complaints to the security officers who patrol the property. Some of the business owners and managers had also complained to security about the transients.

A research of radio calls to determine the scope of the problem revealed very few reported incidents. Most of the nuisance calls were not reported to the police but were instead relayed to the security staff. Discussions with security found the staff had befriended the transients. This security staff had been working at the mall for some time and become close to the small group of constant transients. The security staff would often downplay the complaints from the business employees and customers.

The meetings with some of the business owners revealed an overwhelming frustration with the illegal and discourteous activities of the small group of transients. They would often get into confrontations with the alcoholics, creating a fear of retaliation. The security staff was of no help and most business owners believed the transients' actions were hurting their businesses.

Customers' perception of the problem varied from fear, annoyed, and indifference. Some customers said it was the same small group of transients that were causing the bulk of the problems. This group was often sleeping anywhere, drunk and urinating in public.

Patrol officers who worked the area knew most of these transients. These officers had often taken these transients to detox, arrested them for warrants, or simply chased them away from the mall. Some of the officers said they did not know it was that significant, as they had not been called that often to the Square.

It was discovered the problem was there were some transients who were engaging in the following behaviors:

Fights among themselves;

Aggressive panhandling;

Y Public drunkenness;

N( "Dumpster Diving;"

v Shoplifting;

Trespassing inside the businesses; and

Illegal lodging on mall property.

### **ANALYSIS**

The groups involved in the problem were identified as mall management, the security staff, business owners, customers, police and fire departments, and the four transients causing the disturbances.

The San Diego Police Department has a Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) that works with transients in getting assistance. The HOT personnel provided information on

the links between alcoholism and homelessness. They also gave insight into what assistance could be offered to the four individuals if they elected to seek help. There were other officers who had taken some of the four transients to detox, a place where people detained for being drunk in public to sober for four hours without arrest. Some of the officers said the transients were occasionally drunk to the point where they could not even stand up. Paramedics and fire personnel were called.

The fire department provided information on costs involved when they are sent to assist these four individuals. Fire personnel would often be out of service for long periods of time due to the excessive drinking of these transients. Each call required an engine company (five firefighters) plus paramedics (two firefighters).

The business owners, mall management, and security met with police department staff. They were asked why they did not call the police when the transients were causing problems. Some business owners had been told to call security in case involving disturbances by transients and juveniles. Most believed the security staff was handling it. Mall management was upset that the transients would not leave, even when told by the security officers. Security said the transients only caused a problem when they were drunk, which appeared to be a significant amount of time. Security believed they were addressing the problem by developing a closer relationship with the transients.

The four chronic alcoholics were interviewed. They were at the mall because goods and services available at Clairemont Square were fulfilling all of the lifestyle needs. Money was easily obtainable through panhandling. Shelter was available in numerous locations throughout the mall. Security had not objected to the transients living in an inoperable motor home in the parking lot. One of the transients had come in

possession of an old motor home that was left in the parking lot. There were no hook ups for the sewage, water, or electricity. Food was available through dumpster diving, *begging for "doggie bags" from* restaurant customers, or from stores on those occasional legitimate purchases. The transients believed they were allowed to stay in the mall as long as they were not involved in criminal behavior.

The transients had easy access to alcohol, as it was sold in several liquor and grocery stores in the mall. It was also confirmed with the transients that they would occasionally stay in the nearby canyons, thus going undetected by the local patrols.

The environment of the mall, coupled with tolerance of the mall security staff, allowed the four troubled transients to cause considerable problems in Clairemont Square. The fear they helped create, in addition to the business they were interrupting, was compelling the mall management and owners to deal with the on-going issues.

### RESPONSE

The first step was education. A training session for all mall management, including most of the business owners and security staff. The training included the definition of crime, what security is responsible for, and how to report criminal acts and disorder. The security staff was also provided with training and expectations from mall management staff.

The security team was evaluated. It was determined that the security officers would not alter their personal relationship with the four chronic alcoholics. The continued acceptance of the illegal and improper behavior of the transients, permitted by the security guards, compelled the management staff to act. The security contract was terminated and a new company was hired.

The mall management also arranged to obtain restraining orders against the four chronic alcoholic transients. The legal staff for the property did all of the research and had the new security serve the judge's orders. There was only one arrest. The transients left the mall and did not return.

### ASSESSMENT

The four individuals had not returned in the past year. Two of the transients attempted to move into a nearby mall but the quick actions of the property management company prevented the displacement. The management staff of Clairemont Square was interviewed again, along with several business owners and customers. The climate of the mall had improved greatly. The level of disorder was down tremendously and the new security staff had developed an on-going partnership with the police department. A search of the surrounding canyons did not locate any new transient camps and there have been no new radio calls of related problems in the surrounding area.

### FOLLOW-UP

This problem solving effort rested on identifying three major components. One was the ownership of the problem. It was vital for the mall management, business owners, and security to agree on the problem. More importantly, it was critical that they agree the solutions had to come from them. Second, the efforts to resolve this problem rested with focusing on the improper behaviors of the transients, not the transients themselves. Third, the degree of success had to be measured by interviews, as the number of radio calls and other recorded incidents were minimal. This effort was successful because these three components were identified and met.