

PLAYING IT S.A.F.E.

Crime Reduction in a Blighted Area

City of Waco, Texas Police Department, 2005

THE PROBLEM: There is a 45-acre tract of land within the City of Waco that includes a housing complex, convenience store, and city park that has been plagued by crime for more than a decade. The area averaged 900 calls per year for services and criminal activity ranged from drive-by shootings, capital murder, aggravated robbery, aggravated kidnapping, theft, and criminal trespass. A decade of traditional police response had created an adversarial relationship between the Police Department, property owners, and the community. The area had the reputation of being the most blighted, drug-infested, violent part of the city.

In addition, the department faced a personnel crisis due to Homeland Security issues, dignitary protection issues, and budget cuts.

ANALYSIS: Knowing that resources and personnel could not be diverted from the new tasks that challenged the Waco Police Department, personnel had to figure out how to apply proactive, problem solving efforts and how to coordinate those efforts between the department and the community.

To identify where they were, the department utilized patrol reports, citizen complaints and reported crimes. Officers met with residents and neighborhood associations and learned that this criminal activity dramatically effected the quality of life within this 45-acre track of land.

RESPONSE: The department's S.A.F.E. Unit created partnerships with the apartment complex, business owner, and the community itself focusing efforts towards collaborative long-term problem solving. The S.A.F.E. Unit went from using the nuisance abatement process as a last ditch effort to eliminating crime to a first-step measure in reducing criminal activity.

ASSESSMENT: Crime has decreased overall by 28% at the convenience store and 12% at the apartment complex. The partnerships created has helped produce an award winning "National Night Out" program consecutively for two years, a park that has been totally renovated and is now used by families, and the increase in quality of life experience by the residents of the community.

SCANNING

In the heart of Waco, Texas, there is a 45-acre tract of land that had long been a problem for the department. It includes a subsidized government housing complex; a convenience store that is the only source of food within walking distance; and a city park that has been plagued by crime.

Situated near downtown, the area averaged 900 calls for service each year for more than a decade. They ranged from drive-by shootings, capital murder, aggravated robbery, aggravated kidnapping, theft, and criminal trespass. The area had the reputation of being the most violent, drug-infested part of the city.

During the 1990s, crime got so bad that the department authorized SWAT and bike officers to work overtime at the complex on a 24-hour basis. The extra manpower was meant to support patrol's efforts and achieve zero-tolerance enforcement. But the short-term fix was an abysmal failure. Many residents felt they were under siege by the police and cooperation was minimal.

The problem carried over into the new millennium, with the department continuing to use traditional policing methods to control the situation. In particular, many of the department's specialized units were tapped for the job. Each unit followed its own law enforcement philosophy, with no cohesive departmental approach to problem solving.

Agencies across the country and WPD experienced a budget crunch because of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Homeland security suddenly became the focus and law enforcement had to spend more resources to protect their citizens against terrorist threats.

Waco's police resources were hit harder than most. McLennan County, where Waco is located, is home to President Bush's ranch in Crawford.

Since the department is the primary responder during presidential and dignitary visits, it has more of a concern about homeland security than most agencies.

Waco has been the site of presidential summits and at times, the number of dignitaries present and the types of events they participate in requires virtually every available officer. The Hilton Hotel, where dignitaries stay, is situated just three blocks from the Villages Apartments.

The pressure to juggle all those duties was intensified by the city's history. When the President located his ranch near Waco, the only thing most people associated with Waco was the 1993 raid and standoff at Mt. Carmel. Although it occurred 16 miles outside of the city limits, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians were forever linked to Waco.

That stigma caused city leaders to make it crystal clear to the department that it should do whatever it needed to protect the President. The last thing they wanted was another tragedy in another small town near here. If something happened in Crawford, which is also 16 miles from the city, they knew Waco would again get a black eye.

With the addition of those duties and no extra funds, the department decided to cut costs by disbanding most of its specialized units, with the exception of the Support, Abate, Forfeiture, and Enforcement Unit (S.A.F.E. Unit). Officers were put back into patrol. That meant less officers working on specific problem locations like The Villages. It was a blow to proactive problem solving, since the specialized units had traditionally led the way on such initiatives.

ANALYSIS

In its evaluation, S.A.F.E. used crime analysis techniques to determine which locations had the worst nuisance activity and the highest

drain on police resources. Criteria used included the number of calls for service, number of cases assigned, and types of crimes worked at these locations. S.A.F.E. Unit officers met with neighborhood associations, neighborhood residents, and patrol officers. In addition, the department looked at past actions taken to solve the problems so it could learn from its mistakes.

What the S.A.F.E. Unit found was:

- ◆ A lack of a partnership with available guardians at these locations.
- ◆ A lack of ownership responsibility.
- ◆ A decline in quality of life and a corresponding increase in neighborhood decay.
- ◆ Targeted zero-tolerance enforcement did not work because there were no partnerships to maintain the crime reduction efforts.
- ◆ Internal resistance to change could torpedo these efforts.

This criminal activity at The Villages Apartments had a severe negative impact on the resident's quality of life. For example, soda machines were removed because the companies refused to service them due to the vandalism and theft problems. Children were not allowed on the playground because of a high risk of injury from broken equipment and the ground being littered with broken liquor bottles and drug needles. Pizza restaurants wouldn't deliver to the complex, and outside contractors wouldn't come onto the property for fear of injury or loss of equipment. They would experience crimes such as being robbed or having their tools and equipment stolen off their trucks while they were doing repairs within the complex.

When the officers were redirected to other areas of the city, crime returned. There was no buy-in from residents or management to continue crime reduction efforts. The department then attempted to use a civil remedy to shut down the complex, filing an abatement lawsuit with the Attorney General

of Texas. This resulted in minor improvements but no long-term, lasting effects. We found resistance from the local judge not wanting to displace 250 low-income families from their homes. The nuisance abatement case was put on hold for a year to allow the apartment management to make promised security improvements. Apartment management made some improvements, but crime remained a constant.

To add to the problems in the area, The Villages is located across the street from Dewey Park, a large city park. Individuals would often gather at the park to gamble, drink alcohol, deal and use drugs. Although the park is large with a youth center, a community center, and a lot of green space, there was very little recreational activity. The North Side Posse, a local gang had tagged the buildings causing Parks and Recreation department to expend funds to remove the graffiti on a regular basis. The criminal element had taken over the park. The park served no purpose but to provide green space and a haven for the criminals.

Located on the opposite side of The Villages from the park is the Stop N Shop #3. A convenience store the tenants rely on for food, telephone use, and minor first-aid needs. The store became a neighborhood gathering spot that was also dominated by criminals. Shootings and other assaults, gunfights, and constant drug problems plagued the location.

The problem was further compounded by the fact that victims were reluctant to call police. For some, the hesitancy stemmed from a fear of retaliation. They knew that even if the offender was arrested, he or she would likely be out of jail and back on the streets soon. Other victims didn't have any faith in the justice system. They had the perception that it wouldn't do any good to call the police, so they didn't.

On the other end of the spectrum, the department mistakenly believed the problem

was being solved with arrests. When people said they wanted safer neighborhoods, officers' knee-jerk reaction was to think they were providing that each and every time they took someone to jail. Police Officers were comfortable working on that one angle of the crime triangle (offender) and felt they were keeping crime down. However, perceptions in the community still were such that neighbors saw these locations as an environment that contributed to criminal activity and decay of their community. The traditional approach wasn't addressing the root cause of the crime problem or stopping the decay of neighborhood.

Once the department realized it could no longer rely on traditional policing methods, the S.A.F.E. Unit began to examine how it could shift the department's focus. The result was a process in which the unit created policies, procedures, goals, and refocused the department as a whole to apply problem-solving solutions to the targeted location.

One major problem, though, was the internal resistance given by many of the patrol officers and detectives. They felt the concept of problem oriented policing would not solve the crime problems and would create more work for them.

RESPONSE

To solve the problem, the department reallocated officers and dissolved all but one specialized unit. The WPD chose to retain and re-focus its one remaining problem solving unit. Formerly called the Neighborhood Policing Unit, it was renamed the S.A.F.E. Unit (Support, Abate, Forfeiture, Enforce Unit) and given a new mission.

The crux of that mission was to focus on crime reduction using problem solving methods at locations that have been a drain on police services by focusing on the root causes of criminal activity, i.e., not only the suspect, but also the location and victim. For too long,

the department had been focused on just one side of the crime triangle (created by Rana Sampson and John Eck, 1991) — removing the offender. It now wanted to address the other two sides of the crime triangle.

To support the new policy, the S.A.F.E. Unit realized that some techniques used in the past could still be effective if they were used in a different manner. While the nuisance abatement lawsuit filed against the owners of The Villages did not serve the initial purpose of eliminating crime at this location, it did serve notice to them that something had to be done. Expectations were changed because the lawsuit placed responsibility on the apartment owner's shoulders making them accountable for continued criminal activity occurring on their property.

The S.A.F.E. Unit decided to use the tool of nuisance abatement as a crime reduction technique by initiating contact with the owners of the problem locations whenever a nuisance crime occurred on their property. The department went from using the nuisance abatement process as a last ditch effort of eliminating crime to a first step measure in reducing criminal activity.

The unit created a database that extracted crime codes to search for nuisance crimes. Where there was no database before, this tool allowed the S.A.F.E. Unit to better analyze department reports. This allowed S.A.F.E. Unit officers to determine if the property owners or other guardians assisted in reporting this criminal activity to the police (making them part of the solution) or were unaware of the criminal activity (making them part of the problem.)

With this information, the unit developed an action plan to reduce crime and improve quality of life at the problem locations. This plan served to remove all excuses for non-compliance from the property owner by enhancing enforcement and introducing education efforts. It also vowed to support the

owners in cleaning up the locations by providing guardians a list of recommendations and resources they could use to take action. Unit officers began by sending letters the owners and management notifying them of the nuisance crimes occurring on their property that they may have been unaware of and secured their commitment to take action on individual nuisance crimes.

The Unit developed a nuisance notification letter that contained two lists of nuisance crimes. The first list applies to all locations.

Nuisance Crimes

◆ Prostitution	◆ Illegal Gambling
◆ Discharge of a Firearm	◆ Organized Criminal Activity
◆ Commercial of Obscenity	◆ Obscenity Crimes
◆ Manufacture, Sale, or Use of Narcotics	

The second list applies to just apartment complexes, condominiums, hotels or motels:

Nuisance Crimes – Multi-Housing

◆ Aggravated Assault	◆ Robbery or Aggravated Robbery
◆ Unlawfully Carrying a Weapon	◆ Murder or Capital Murder
◆ Commercial of Obscenity	◆ Obscenity Crimes
◆ Sexual or Aggravated Sexual Assault	

- ◆ If there are no further nuisance crimes after the first letter, no follow-up is conducted. The case file is closed. However, if a second nuisance crime is committed at the location within a twelve-month period, a second nuisance notification letter is sent and the case file is reopened.
- ◆ If there is still no compliance after the third letter, S.A.F.E. Unit officers arrange an inspection of the location. The S.A.F.E. Unit will partner with other agencies that exert some form of control over that location.
- ◆ After the inspection, the S.A.F.E. Unit schedules accord meeting with the property owner. This meeting explains the

problems generated at the location by all agencies.

- It explains the consequences if the guardian doesn't comply and there are further nuisance crimes reported at that location. It continues to offer support for that property owner by providing a list of recommendations that the S.A.F.E. Unit has identified through past experiences.
- Most importantly, it puts the property owners on notice of the precise action that the S.A.F.E. Unit will take if further criminal nuisance activity occur at the property.
- ◆ If nuisance crimes continue to occur at the location, the S.A.F.E. Unit then files civil suit against the property to abate the nuisance activity.

We knew that local judges were uncomfortable using the nuisance abatement statutes against the apartment complexes because they were reluctant to displace hundreds of low-income tenants (voters) if the apartments were shut down and boarded up. We had to find an alternative to nuisance abatement for apartment communities.

After doing research, the department identified the Crime Free Multi-Housing Program (C.F.M.H.) as a useful tool to assist with this problem. Originally developed by Tim Zehring of the Mesa, AZ Police Department in 1992, the C.F.M.H. Program wasn't new to law enforcement. But it was new in Texas and was adapted and expanded to better fit with state laws and City needs. The primary expansion was the offering of local arrest information on all tenant applicants of apartments that have volunteered to meet the stringent requirements of the C.F.M.H. Program as a first step in crime reduction. This offering proved to be most successful in the creation and development of partnerships with local apartment communities.

Education of WPD Officers:

S.A.F.E. Unit introduced this new approach on the basis that the beat officer or detective would not have to do additional work. The database would take the work product of beat officers and investigators and extract nuisance information. The creation of a system that worked well without causing the officer to do more work, made it more palatable for the officers. They started bringing information to the attention of the S.A.F.E. Unit.

The Villages Apartments:

Within weeks of the nuisance lawsuit being placed on hold, the manager was fired. The owners then brought in a retired Sergeant Major from the Army with no previous experience in rental property. WPD had great reservations about the company hiring someone without experience; however, all fears would be immediately put to rest. S.A.F.E. Unit officers met with the management company and their new manager, Curt Moore, explained the new approach we wanted to take and offered support in reducing crime and increasing the quality of life in the neighborhood. Both the WPD and the management company approached this proposed partnership with trepidation, neither believing the other would carry out what was discussed. After the first nuisance crime occurred on the property, the S.A.F.E. Unit sent a nuisance notification letter to The Villages management and received an unexpected response. Mr. Moore called the Unit and thanked them for sending the letter. He further explained that he called the tenant into his office, showed the tenant the letter, and the tenant voluntarily evicted herself.

Mr. Moore and his staff attended the first C.F.M.H. seminar and immediately began incorporating the requirements of the program. The S.A.F.E. Unit recommended several Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (C.P.T.E.D.) techniques to The Villages and required the following steps be taken to become members of the C.F.M.H. program:

- ◆ Modify their landscaping
- ◆ Replace the entire lighting systems
- ◆ Change their signage
- ◆ Put up stronger fences and change entry and exit points creating a more controlled access
- ◆ Use three-inch screws in their door facings

Although it took several months for the apartment complex to meet the C.P.T.E.D. requirements, the S.A.F.E. Unit and the management continued to forge their partnership. When The Villages completed the required C.P.T.E.D. modifications, WPD and the apartment complex entered into a partnership that allowed the complex to use the C.F.M.H. application addendum and lease agreement. The application addendum requires applicants to provide additional information relating to drug and other illegal activity. The lease addendum is a zero-tolerance on crime document that residents must agree to before moving into the complex. With the partnership formalized, the S.A.F.E. Unit began notifying the management of all calls for service and criminal activity occurring on the property so that they can take action against the violating tenant. Crime prevention techniques were given to all of the tenants, which fostered open communications between the WPD and tenants.

The Villages became the first Crime-Free Multi-Housing partner within Waco.

Dewey Park:

The WPD began the task of removing the criminal element from Dewey Park. An enterprising Patrol Sergeant came up with a unique response to a problem that had been plaguing the park for years. Drug dealers set-up shop on a footbridge on Ninth Street, at the very edge of Dewey Park. The location had the only shade from the hot Texas sun, easily accessible to the street, and perfect for dealing drugs. Traditional methods did not work as patrol cars could easily be seen from a distance allowing the dealers to flee.

Undercover buys were ineffective because when one was arrested, another would quickly take their place creating a revolving door effect for the drug dealers. To solve this problem, WPD officers cleared the area and then covered the footbridge with corn syrup. This tactic attracted Texas Fire Ants to the footbridge and prohibiting the drug dealers from staying on the footbridge, thus switching the tactical advantage from the drug dealers to the WPD.

At the request of WPD and neighborhood association, the city adopted an ordinance prohibiting consumption of alcohol in the park. WPD enforced curfew laws. The city installed a children’s water spray area to enhance a family environment, cleaned up the park, built a new jogging path, installed new lighting, built new basketball and volleyball courts, and remodeled the existing youth center creating a drug-free, gun-free zone. The City partnered with Girl Scouts and Camp Fire USA making the activity center available for meetings and activities and easily accessible to youth from The Villages who may otherwise not be able to participate. This made the park more attractive to neighborhood residents and less attractive to criminals.

Stop N Shop #3:

Two nuisance abatement letters were sent to the owner of this store notifying him of the nuisance crimes that occurred on his property and encouraging him to take action, and offering support of the S.A.F.E. Unit. The owner then requested a C.P.T.E.D. survey and although only some of the survey recommendations were completed, it compelled the owner to take a more active role in monitoring the store parking lot. Some of the recommendations from the survey included:

- ◆ Hiring a security guard to patrol the parking lot to prevent drug dealers from congregating on the lot.

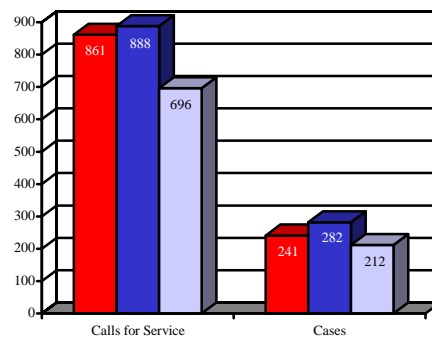
- ◆ Removing the pay telephones from the parking lot to eliminate the excuses target offenders use for being on the lot.
- ◆ Posting criminal trespass signs.
- ◆ Authorizing the WPD to enforce criminal trespass laws on the property.

The property owner refused to hire a security guard or remove the pay telephones. He began taking an active role in removing the offenders from the parking lot. The owner began walking out onto the lot with a whistle and bullhorn and publicly demanding that people vacate the lot. He also began notifying officers when suspected drug dealers came onto the lot.

ASSESSMENT

The Villages:

After an initial spike of 3% for calls for service and a 17% increase in reported crime in the first year, The Villages now boasts an overall decrease of 19% for calls for service, and a 12% decrease in reported crime. This initial spike can be attributed to the newfound trust the residents, management and police have in each other. Although anecdotal, residents enjoyed a renewed sense of pride and began to assume responsibility and ownership of the property as a whole.



Through the partnership, participation in the C.F.M.H. Program, and following the C.P.T.E.D. recommendations, The Villages have enjoyed the biggest fiscal savings in years. For example, they saved approximately \$3,000 per month by replacing the old, broken

lights with a more efficient and effective system. They reduced maintenance and repair costs. This is validated by no longer having to replace broken windows, repair holes in apartment walls, or replace doors where before, it was necessary to replace an average of four doors per month.

For thirty-one months, The Villages has been at 100% occupancy with a waiting list. This is the first time in over ten years they have been able to maintain this occupancy level.

The Villages poured these savings to upgrade living conditions that directly impact the tenant's quality of life.

- ◆ Started a total remodeling program (paint, flooring, cabinets and countertops) for each apartment.
- ◆ Re-roofed all of the buildings in the complex.
- ◆ Installed new security mailboxes.
- ◆ Resurfaced all of the parking lots.
- ◆ Installed new playground equipment and created two new play areas with savings from maintenance.
- ◆ Removed old landscaping with landscaping that meet C.P.T.E.D. criteria such as planting pyrocanthia, a thorny ornamental bush, to establish access control around the perimeter of the apartment community and enhance the aesthetics of the grounds throughout the entire apartment community.
- ◆ Installed a state-of-the-art digital surveillance system with 39 cameras, controlled by computer and accessed via the Internet, which allows the WPD, the owners and management of The Villages to interface and view activities within the apartment community. The Villages also directed some of these cameras to view activity at The Stop N Shop and Dewey Park, assisting WPD with crime control at these locations. It should be noted that two days after installation, officers accessed the system and witnessed a burglary in progress, responded to the

crime, and made two arrests. Because of the quick response, the suspects were apprehended before they could make entry into the apartment.

But what is most evident is the increase in the quality of life experienced by the residents of this community

- ◆ Pizza deliveries have resumed to the community.
- ◆ They have outside contractors working on the property, increasing the speed of the remodeling and repairs.
- ◆ Children are now playing outside on the playgrounds.
- ◆ The apartment management is involved in the neighborhood association. Mr. Moore is now a board member of the association.
- ◆ The Villages and Dewey Park are now host annual national night parties winning "National Night Out" award for community participation from the City of Waco for both 2003 and 2004.

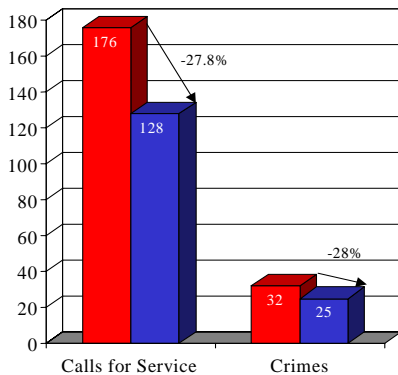
Dewey Park:

The community center hosts after hours tutoring, neighborhood association meetings and mentoring programs such as 100 Black Men which focuses on providing African American youth with positive role models. Bookings of the community center have increased at least 20% since renovations in the park took place. Most notably, zero funds have been spent on graffiti removal, a milestone in itself.

Families now use the park for picnics, parties, reunions, and family play. People that enjoy the park now are eager to notify police when they see someone drinking, gambling or engaging in other illegal activities. This fosters a greater open communication between the community and the WPD.

Stop N Shop #3:

While the owner's compliance is not 100%, a somewhat passive compliance has resulted in a 27.8% decrease in Calls for Service and a 28% decrease in crime over the past year.



CONCLUSION

The reality of crime reduction is not the arrests, zero tolerance enforcement, or meetings with the neighborhoods or individuals, but the partnerships, whether forced or cooperative. The actions of the property owners and guardians of individuals and locations determine police response. That response is tailored to the specific crime and quality of life issues that effect the individuals and locations. These elements are the backbone of the Waco Police Department and of its S.A.F.E. Unit. It became our baseline for reducing calls for service, cases, and increasing the quality of life for our community.

AGENCY INFORMATION

1. Although the initiative began on the unit level, it spread to officers and investigators.
2. The entire police department received training in problem oriented policing. Department heads of the City of Waco received problem solving training. Problem oriented policing is currently taught in each recruit academy.
3. No additional incentives were given to police officers engaging in problem oriented policing.

4. Officers used the following resources:
 - a. Goldstein, Herman. 1990 *Problem Oriented Policing*
 - b. Moore, Mark. 2002 *Recognizing Value in Policing*
 - c. Sampson, Rana and Scott, Michael. 2001 *Tackling Crime and Other Public Safety Problems*
 - d. Sampson, Rana. 2001 *Drug Dealing in Privately Owned Apartment Complexes*
 - e. Harocoops, Alex and Hough, Mike. 2002 *Drug Dealing in Open Air Markets*
 - f. Scott, Michael. 2003 *The Benefits and Consequences of Police Crackdowns*
5. The issues and problems identified that the traditional police response was not working. The department, and its partners had to challenge and overcome our way of doing business as usual. The community and department had to overcome its mutual distrust of each other to find a solution.
6. Prior to the beginning of the initiative, overtime was expended, however, since the beginning of this project, no additional funds have been spent. S.A.F.E. Unit officers and others worked during their normal business hours, adjusting their hours to fit the demand of the project. It should be noted that the City of Waco Parks and Recreation Department have budgeted and spent approximately \$376,770 for improvements to Dewey Park. The Villages Apartments has not gone over budget in any renovations or improvements they have made.
7. Project Contact Person
Name: Jared Abbe
Position/Rank: Sgt., S.A.F.E. Unit
Address: 721 N. 4th Street
City/State: Waco, Texas
Zip: 76701
Phone: 254-750-3605
Fax: 254-750-3616
Email: jareda@ci.waco.tx.us