

## **Raising the Bar for Rental Properties**

In 2005, a cyclical problem around rental properties was infecting our city. It was discovered that a large amount of repeat police calls were to the same addresses involving the same people. It was affecting the quality of life in the neighborhoods and causing decent hard-working families to vacate the area allowing for more transient population to move into the downtown area. The police department reaction to these calls became too costly for the city and did nothing to improve the situation.

In 2005, our department's statistics indicated a high percentage of our police calls, approximately 46%, were to rental properties located in the downtown core area. We found that criminals, such as drug dealers, would be evicted from one property just to move to another literally across the street. The first property owner would be ridding himself of the problematic tenant, but the second property owner would be getting the problem and downtown would continue to have the criminal living there. Also included in the statistics for this area were the tertiary calls involving college-aged students. In order to address these issues we determined that education pertaining to housing laws was a priority. We also sought to improve communication amongst owners and with the police department in order to reduce police calls.

In 2006, a community survey was sent to property owners, tenants and residents residing in the core downtown area of Westfield. The survey was a way to measure respondents' perceptions of personal safety and the police services that were available to them. The results of the survey showed that respondents were concerned about being downtown in the evening and nighttime hours. We were also able to learn that 29.5% of survey respondents indicated an interest in landlord/tenant training.

Since its inception in 2006, CFMHP achieved almost instant success. In rental properties with the highest crime rates, we showed a 90% reduction in police calls for service in the first six months of the program. We saw a 15-20% reduction in calls for properties with lower crime rates. In particular, the incidents of college-related disturbances, major crimes, and visible drug dealing have declined. With the community policing efforts, we have set the table for the downtown core area to become more attractive to new businesses and efforts by the university to place more of their housing units and activities in this area.

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In 2005, a cyclical problem around rental properties was infecting our city was identified. It was discovered that a large amount of repeat police calls were to the same addresses involving the same people. It was affecting the quality of life in the neighborhoods and causing decent hard-working families to vacate the area allowing for more transient population to move into the downtown area. The police department's reaction to these calls became too costly for the city and did nothing to improve the situation.

The City of Westfield, Massachusetts has a population of nearly 45,000 people within 47.3 square miles. Approximately 7.5 square miles of our city's core downtown area is well-populated including 700 rental properties. In just one city block there are three large apartment communities housing low-income individuals and families. There are nine bars, ten package stores, and five schools. Additionally, there is an ever-increasing college-age population of renters from the local university.

Westfield is situated in the western part of the state where economic growth is slower than in other parts of the state and the downtown area is a place like many others in this country that exemplifies economic downturns with empty store fronts. The downtown corridor is a thoroughfare for not only the citizens of Westfield but for residents of the surrounding hill towns providing access to major roadways. The city is currently in the process of rehabilitating this area through federal funding by building a new bridge and improving roadways and green spaces. Over the past six years, the police department has been working to improve residents' and visitors' perceptions of actual crime in this area in order to make the area more attractive for economic expansion. This is being accomplished through the implementation of the Crime Free Multi-Housing Partnership (CFMHP).

Community policing began in Westfield in 1993. Over the years it has had its ups and downs as it has evolved. In 2005, under the direction of Sergeant Steve Dickinson the program was revamped and brought back to the grass roots of problem-solving. Currently, the Community Police Unit consists of five permanent beat officers and a supervisor. Their permanent beats cover the downtown core area. When Sergeant Dickinson took over the unit, he began by analyzing the department's statistics in order to identify the priority issues. The one concern that stood out was the number of police calls, approximately 46%, that were to rental properties. The police calls identified included drug dealing, rape, vandalism, visible alcohol and drug use.

Further research revealed that owners and managers of rental properties were evicting tenants at a high rate. Criminals, such as drug dealers, would be evicted from one property just to move to another literally across the street. The first property owner was ridding himself of the problematic tenant, but the second property owner was inheriting the problem and the downtown continued to have the criminal living there. This constant cycle of tenancy caused a host of issues including an absence of feeling of ownership of this area by its residents. Also included in the statistics for this area were tertiary calls involving college-aged students living in the downtown area. These calls were evident with numerous under-age drinking parties resulting in public urination, noise complaints and disorderly conduct. These same issues also stemmed from the downtown bars as well.

Prior to Sergeant Dickinson's arrival this cycle had continued uninterrupted for years causing quality of life to decrease and crime to increase within the downtown core area thus exemplifying the "broken windows" theory. It was a cycle that had to be broken.

In rental properties, the communities tend to be much more transient. Most often, residents sign short-term leases for rental properties and, in many cases, owners don't require

leases and residency is based on a month-to-month agreement. This allows for an occupant to move very easily if they feel crime has reached a level they will not tolerate. It is easier to move away from crime than to confront it. It is equally important to note that the converse position is also true. When good tenants leave because of negative issues in their area, landlords are unable to maintain their own standards of screening prospective applicants. Some feel compelled to lower their requirements and take on less desirable tenants in order to pay their mortgages, thereby contributing to the transient nature of the population which has a negative impact on crime.

As this cycle continued over the years, it was discovered that the offenders were renters, family members or visitors of renters. The harm that resulted was higher crime rates and overall quality of life issues. These issues were addressed by reactively sending patrol to calls to quell disturbances, arrests for minor offences, paid details and high visibility. This became too costly for the city and did nothing to improve the situation.

Interviews with victims, neighbors, owners and managers of rental properties along with notes in reports by officers during police calls were helpful in determining the root cause of the issue.

Interestingly, the analysis revealed that the underlying root cause of the problem was not the renters, family members or visitors to the renters who were committing the crimes as perceived by the police, but the actual owners and managers of these rental properties who were absentee landlords, landlords interested only in financial gain, and the lack of proper screening and background checks on prospective tenants. Through investigation it was discovered that owners and managers of rental properties were unaware of crime prevention and existing rental

laws. The largest problem was the lack of education and communication among owners and managers of rental properties.

Concurrently, as Sergeant Dickinson took over the community policing unit, Westfield State University installed a new president who was interested in expanding the university properties into the city's downtown area. Many students were already renting in the downtown area but with the university's expansion the city experienced even more college-aged renters as well as other college-related events and activities in this area.

In 2006, the community police unit sent a survey to property owners, tenants and residents residing in the core downtown area of Westfield. The survey was a way to measure respondents' perceptions of personal safety and the police services that were available to them. The results of the survey showed that respondents were concerned about being downtown in the evening and nighttime hours. Nearly 1 in 3 survey respondents reported feeling unsafe walking at night in downtown Westfield, and 1 in 3 felt unsafe out alone at night walking in their own neighborhood. 26% of the respondents thought that crime was on the rise, and nearly 1 in 7 residents (15.3%) indicated that they had to limit, change or curtail their activities because of crime. Finally, a small percentage (7.5%) considered moving because of the crime in Westfield. It was learned that a significant 29.5% of survey respondents indicated an interest in landlord/tenant training.

As was believed, the results indicated a fear of crime by residents and business owners that was not borne out by actual crime rates. It was imperative to use education as a way of combating the inaccurate perceptions of the downtown area and to create a friendlier environment in order to attract new businesses. Education using actual statistics is a way to change perception and this can be provided in a non-threatening setting before a crime has been committed. This type of positive

interaction is the key to understanding the real risk level and how to prevent further misconceptions for both the rental property owner and for the police. By increasing positive interactions between police personnel and their community you enhance community ties and use the police as community advocates. The CFMHP is a program founded on this idea.

Armed with all of this research and information, a priority was identified to address the issues stemming from rental units and the police department formed the CFMHP in 2006. The objectives of the CFMHP are to improve the relationship between the police department and its stakeholders, to reduce crime, disorder, fear of crime and provide for an enhanced quality of life. Through this comprehensive revitalization process, partners began to share knowledge and build appreciation for mutual interests and roles in holistic community development.

In the CFMHP, there are three ways criminal activity enters a rental community: the criminal already lives there, they visit friends there, or they randomly come to the property to commit crimes. This partnership addresses all three of these possibilities.

By not renting to people with criminal predisposition or lengthy criminal histories, they not only reduce the likelihood of crime in the community from the renter themselves, they also reduce the number of visitors who come to the property with criminal intent and, by extension, reduce the fear of crime that attenuates to the unknown parties introduced into the area collaterally through contact with the renter.

For the opportunistic criminal, the use of CPTED (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) has been integral in combating crimes that might occur in the parking lots or common areas including assaults, robberies, drive-by shootings, and auto thefts. Enhanced lighting, clearing of debris, pruning of landscape, utilizing cul de sacs, and

engineering bathrooms differently are all examples of CPTED's applications to reducing crime for the opportunistic offender.

The CFMHP is a unique three-phase certification program for rental properties of all sizes. This program is relatively inexpensive to implement. It was originally funded using community policing grants. There is virtually no cost to the participants. The first phase is an eight-hour program giving an overview of a myriad of issues taught by local attorneys, judges, our police officers and city fire fighters, the city's health inspectors, building inspectors and other agencies relevant to rental property management. This police-sponsored program is designed to be very easy, yet extremely effective, at reducing criminal activity in rental properties. The second phase is an inspection of the property to assess physical security and to confirm the building owner's compliance in the use of crime prevention elements to their buildings such as adequate lighting, alarm systems and general appearance of the property. The third and final phase is a social event organized by the building owner and involving the police department and residents at the rental property. It is during this phase where the community police officers discuss crime prevention tips with the tenants, general safety principles and give crime statistics in the area based on actual data and not on media sound bytes.

Participation in the CFMHP is offered to all owners and managers of rental property in the city in order to educate them on laws pertaining to landlord and tenant issues such as how to properly screen tenants, housing court procedures and legal updates. The goal is to engage and build a relationship with the property owners in order to help them to understand the benefits of the program.



A difficulty encountered during this response implementation was owners and managers who were reluctant to join. In these cases, enforcement of certain laws, city ordinances, and building and health codes got the owners' attention and help them to get into compliance.

Another objective of this partnership is to establish communication sources and which has been done through e-mail lists and by creating a common Google for rental property owners and managers. These methods of communication serve to update owners regularly with housing and crime-free related information, informing them of upcoming meetings and topics, and to inform owners of any police-related issues that have recently occurred on their properties. The Google page is also for the owners and managers to communicate with each other any problems or questions they may have or for advertising rentals they have available.

Monthly meetings were established with owners and managers to provide training and education as well as legal updates bringing in special speakers such as attorneys that deal with housing law and rental properties. The goal of these get-togethers is for both groups to establish a better appreciation for each others' issues and to provide collective guardianship for rental properties who heretofore believed they were going it alone. Our community policing officers also attend the meetings in order to have a presence and get to know the property owners in their areas. These officers are educated in housing laws and trained in other issues surrounding rental properties. The group has grown since its inception, and as of May 2011, there was a record number of attendees. In this particular meeting, a scholar in housing issues spoke, and the attendees brought in their leases and applications to review and discuss with one another and the speaker in order to come up with the perfect documents tailored to their individual needs.

Additionally, CFMHP focuses its efforts on attracting owners and manager of rental properties to the program by offering incentives. The types of economic activity that were

spurred by the program specifically is the collaboration initiated with local insurance providers to offer discounted rates to our membership as long as they maintained membership and completed all phases of the program. The department is currently working with the mayor and state representative to have the program recognized by the State of Massachusetts so that the City of Westfield can give tax incentives to those properties that qualify through maintaining membership and completing requirements of our program.

Implementation of this partnership started with attacking the problem at the source, after analyzing the known data: rental property owners and managers. This has been done by utilizing community-oriented policing tactics and a problem-solving philosophy that emphasizes community partnerships and diversity with reverence for the law and protecting the rights of all those we encounter.

Since the inception of the CFMHP the most impressive tangible achievement has been its almost instant success. In rental properties with the highest crime rates we showed a 90% reduction in police calls for service in a six month period. In addition, the city saw a 15-20% reduction in calls for properties with lower crimes rates. In particular, the types of crime that declined were quality of life issues such as bar disturbances, college-related disturbances, noise complaints, loitering and visible drug and alcohol consumption. The crime rate in the downtown core area of Westfield compared with other parts of the city, which are primarily residential and in some areas rural, was the highest for the entire city for a variety of reasons.

The police department is most proud of crime reductions statistics as a result of work with owners and property managers such as DOMUS Incorporated. Over time there has been an increase in quality of life in the downtown core area of Westfield as property owners have joined the CFMHP or have had to partner with the police department because of issues they have had

on their properties. Crime has declined in our target area by 50% among rental properties within our program. For example, a DOMUS property, The Meadows Apartments once a local bar and rooming house, showed a significant 69% decline in calls for service after becoming a membership of CFMHP (see attached graph and photos). Also, after being involved with CFMHP a prominent rental property owner who has 24 properties within the downtown core area has seen a 28% reduction in police calls for service to his properties.

Collaboration with the owners and managers of rental properties significantly contributed to these reductions by simply opening the lines of communication between the police department and owners and managers of rental properties. Community police officers sit on the executive boards of the homeless shelter and other related establishments as liaisons in an effort to open lines of communication and dispel preconceived notions. There are community police offices situated in buildings such as the DOMUS Meadow Apartments and others in order to have a better presence in the community.

In the spring of 2010, a follow-up survey was conducted in the same downtown core area. This was to measure the effectiveness of the CFMHP program. There were some positive results from this second survey as 91.7 % of the respondents felt that the Westfield Police Department has been responsive to their needs. The most impressive result was that 31.1% knew who their community policing officer was which was up 10.5% from our results in 2006.

Interestingly, even though actual crime rates have decreased during the time period between 2006 and 2010, for a variety of reasons, there were no changes in respondent's perception of crime in this city; 19% of the respondents did not feel safe in their homes at night, walking day or night downtown, or walking in their neighborhood. With the work that the police department has accomplished over the last five years with the CFMHP, our assumption was that

perceptions should have changed for the better, but there was a 9% decrease in people's perception of crime either staying the same or increasing. Only 9% of respondents felt crime has actually decreased over the past year. There was a 3.7% increase in people who felt they limited, curtailed or changed their activities due to the concern over crime or considered moving because of it. Their three biggest concerns were children being exposed to drugs, child safety and loitering. Overall 78% of people feel that the Westfield Police Department provides excellent and good services to the community, showing a decrease of 3.6% from the 2006 survey. Therefore, the goal over the next two years is to address the discrepancy between the two surveys and work to correct citizen's perceptions of crime and their relationship to the police department.

In response to the new results of the 2010 surveys, five community police officers went door-to-door to make contact with every resident, approximately 2500, within their respective community policing beats. As a result, e-mail addresses and phone contacts were obtained or, in the case of owners already involved in our program, updated. Contacts were divided into three categories: rental property owners, owner-occupied properties and businesses. The purpose of this endeavor was to make initial contact with those residents and businesses who we had never before encountered in our daily work, to identify the rental properties, to identify owners for any future issues on their properties and to invite new owners into our program. The goal is to continue this practice on a bi-annual basis in order to stay updated on identification of these properties, their owners and to initiate contact with new owners and adapt to changing community concerns.

During this contact neighborhoods will be appraised of the actual decrease in crime and quality of life issues. We also want to support our goal in maintaining a proactive and cordial relationship with property owners in non-threatening settings.

With the community policing efforts, the table is set for the downtown core area to become more attractive to new businesses and the efforts by the university to place more of their housing units and activities in this area. Westfield State University (WSU) has a vested interest and an administration willing to work with local groups to improve quality of life and the aesthetic appearance of the downtown city area. Many of their college students reside in the core downtown area as most of the rental properties are located. The university has also invested in real estate downtown and has continued to accumulate buildings for housing for their students as well for student activities such as an art gallery. They also realize that by investing in the downtown area they are making the University more attractive to potential students. The administration is particularly proactive and interested in collaborating with our police department by ensuring safe housing for students as well as reprimanding students who contribute to criminal activity in the downtown area such as noise disturbances. They also assist by offering their public safety officers for patrol and to answer non-emergency calls to the downtown campus buildings and parking lots. We are collaborating with campus housing to make sure the properties listed for rent are in compliance with our program.

In conjunction with CFMHP the police department has supported the efforts of the Westfield Business Improvement District (BID) project as they have worked to beautify the downtown area with new sidewalks and lamp posts as well as with events and other efforts to attract new businesses to fill empty storefronts. Their efforts, in turn, should also help to change the perception of criminal activity in the area and help it to become more attractive to a better

quality tenant for the rental units. The effort of the CFMHP is important to their success as both surveys in 2006 and 2010 indicate the residents and property and business owners' perception of crime in our city.

As a result of our partnership's planning and implementation efforts the CFMHP has been a great success in the downtown core area of Westfield. This was accomplished by establishing communication between the police department and the owners and managers of rental properties. Utilizing the internet, creating an email base and developing a web page have been a means of communicating and posting legal updates and events for our participants. Monthly meetings were established to provide education pertaining to rental laws and to form important relationships with property owners. The department hopes to take this program city-wide building off of the accomplishments in the downtown core area.

Police departments need to recognize the majority of police calls are from rental properties and that a program like CFMHP can take a proactive step towards reducing those calls and, at the same time, creating partnerships with the community and residents they would find similar successes as we have. The CFMHP is a universal program that can be applied anywhere but it takes a devoted staff to make it work. The key is to focus on rental property owners and building relationships, strengthening the social contract, in a non-threatening setting where we can work cooperatively together to reduce crime and improve quality of life issues. Landlords and owners are in the business for one reason and that is for profit. Increasing the value of a property increases profit; the landlords are able to attract and rent to higher-paying and law-abiding tenants.

The Westfield Police Department's CFMHP program advances the constructive engagement between all stakeholders and their ability to impact neighborhood well-being

because it approaches crime on many fronts. Neither the police nor the property owners can solve crime problems alone. By working together the end result can be a very successful approach to crime and crime prevention. With this partnership, the capacity of the Westfield Police Department has been increased and the implementation of community policing strategies can be undertaken city-wide strengthening partnerships on a much broader scope for a safer community while enhancing Westfield Police Department's capacity to prevent, solve and control crime.

**Agency and officer Information:**

Westfield Police Department

Community Police Division

Westfield, Massachusetts

**Key Project Team Members:**

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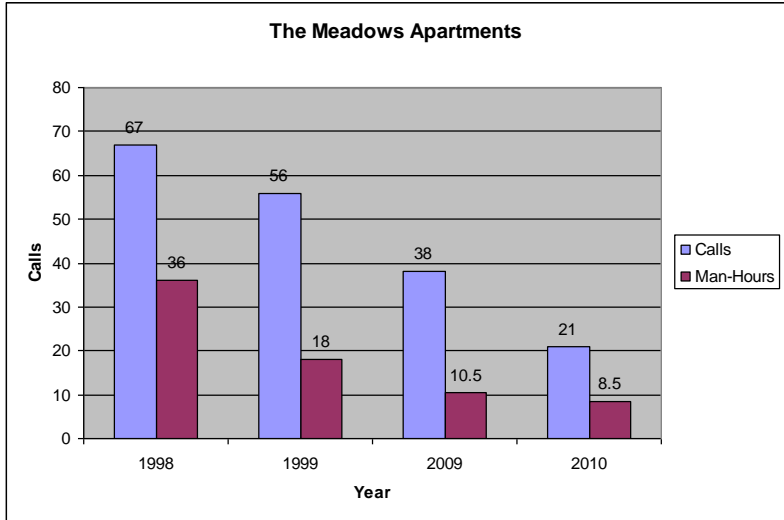
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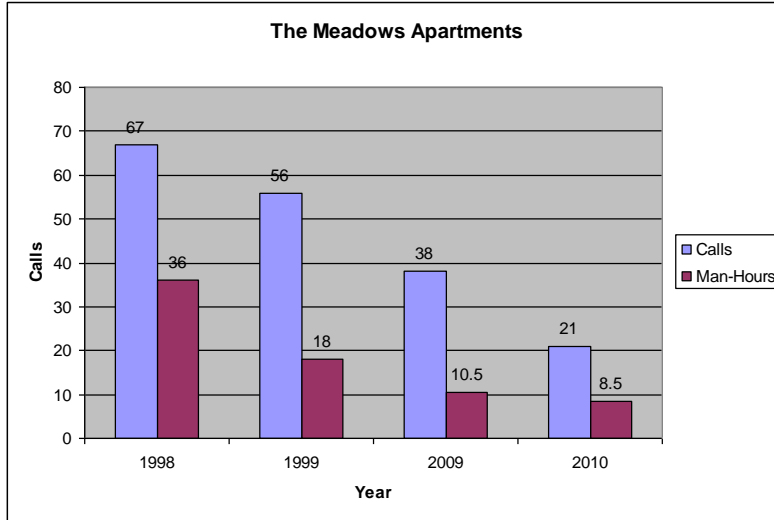






101 Meadow Street prior to Domus Incorporated renovations







Domus Incorporated renovations to 101 Meadow Street  
The Meadows Apartments



An example of an empty apartment at 101 Meadow St. prior to Domus Incorporated Renovations



An example of an empty renovated apartment by Domus incorporated



101 Meadow Street parking lot prior to the Domus Incorporated renovation



The Meadows Apartments 2011

Potential renovation property for Domus Incorporated  
Vacant Mosely School







Westfield Crime-Free Multi-Housing Partnership meeting

