

THE COMMUNITY POLICING SERIES

Tulsa targets drugs in public housing

by Lt. Carolyn Robison

In 1984, the Tulsa Oklahoma Police Department created a five-year Plan of Excellence that changed the department's orientation from reactive patrol to community-based policing. To meet the goals of the plan by becoming truly responsive to the needs of the community, reorganization of the field divisions became necessary. This reorganization resulted in the development and implementation of the Area Commander Plan in September, 1986. This plan restructured the patrol divisions around neighborhood boundaries so that officers could identify neighborhood problems and work with the citizens in developing solutions to those problems. In addition, the plan called for field lieutenants to be assigned by territory rather than by shift. These lieutenants, to be called Area Commanders, would have twenty-four hour responsibility for providing police services to the various neighborhoods within their section of the city.

The Tulsa Police Department has two uniform precinct stations affected by this reorganization: Uniform Division East and Uniform Division West. Uniform Division East (UDE) serves east and south Tulsa, an area primarily populated by middle- and upper-income citizens. Uniform Division West (UDW) serves north and west Tulsa, primarily populated by middle- and low-income citizens. Each of these divisions has four neighborhood areas commanded by a lieutenant charged with bringing community policing to his area.

Chief Drew Diamond, formerly the Major in charge of Uniform Division West, played a leading role in the development of the Tulsa Police Department's Plan of Excellence and the Area Commander Plan. As Major of Uniform Division West, he set the example for community policing by personally committing himself to community involvement. Following his leadership, his supervisors developed and implemented several directed-patrols that targeted the drug problem in three of the five minority public housing units within the division boundaries.

All strategies and resources were available to the officers in developing directed-patrol programs to meet the needs of "their" community or neighborhood. One particular directed-patrol program - a foot beat program in crime-ridden housing projects - won the confidence of the fearful residents and set the stage for social change. The complexity of the problems in public housing led to the development of a systematic approach which first called for winning the confidence of the minority tenants who, by tradition, mistrusted the police. The area officers felt that one-on-one contact between the residents and the police was necessary to bridge this gap. As a result, the program the officers developed combined foot patrol and mounted patrol to win the confidence of the fearful tenants and clear the way for aggressive drug enforcement and true freedom for the residents of these complexes.

Officer C.V. Miller wrote in the program statement of the directed-patrol request: "It is common knowledge on the streets that a person can drive through the large parking lots

of these complexes...and he will be approached by an individual who will attempt to sell him drugs." He goes on to say that the majority of the people in the parking lots do not live in the housing complexes and that approximately 80% of the non-residents have arrest histories for firearms and drug violations. Furthermore, the residents of the complex refuse to cooperate with the police or with the management for fear of retaliation by outsiders. The residents are, in fact, hostages within their own neighborhoods.

The final plan called for two pairs of foot patrol officers and one team of mounted officers to be present in the complexes on a rotating basis during the hours of peak activity, 7 pm to 3 am.

The objectives of the officers were:

1. to identify the residents of the complexes (the elderly, the youth, the single-parent households), determine their needs, and draw on social service agencies to meet those needs;
2. to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation between the residents and police by fostering a sense of safety and security within the neighborhood;
3. to expedite response to calls within the complexes by having officers already in the area;
4. to eliminate the street sale of drugs along with the accompanying violence and other criminal activity that is associated with drug selling and using.

In the beginning, the residents were reluctant to be seen talking to an officer. However, the mounted-patrol officers added a degree of congeniality that even the foot patrol officers found hard to equal. The horses were irresistible, particularly to children, and the residents soon discovered they could talk to a police officer without appearing to be talking to the officer - while they were petting the horses.

Then, as the officers began driving the drug dealers from the areas, the residents found ways to pass on information to the foot patrol officers, from whisperings as the officers passed darkened doorways or open windows, to telephone calls to the UDW desk officer. The networking of information among these groups set the stage for aggressive enforcement action against the criminals who were frequenting these complexes. During the seventy days of the summer months of 1987, the foot patrol officers initiated 255 arrests, served 212 warrants, issued 331 citations, handled 141 calls, and made 1,866 citizen contacts. The arrest and citation recipients were usually non-residents who had come to conduct drug transactions. As the pressure from the foot patrol increased, however, some of the street drug dealers forced their way inside apartments within the complexes.

One tactic was literally to "take over" a tenant's residence. One such tenant, a single female, beckoned one of the foot patrol officers to the back of the apartment complex where she was hiding. She told him she had been told to get out of her apartment for the evening. The ones who had thrown her out of her own apartment were now there making crack (a form of cocaine).

The officers took action, and, with the assistance of the mounted patrol for crowd control, arrested the intruders and recovered a quantity of cocaine, crack, and related

paraphernalia from her apartment. The dealers never knew how the officers found out about their operation.

Once the tenants experienced freedom from the tyranny these drug dealers brought into their lives, cooperation with the police increased. But more important, the desire for safe environment was kindled. The tenants learned they had a choice about the kind of atmosphere they wanted for themselves and their children. Their support of the police contributed to the fact that, in spite of all the negative contacts made in these complexes, not one complaint was filed against the officers during this program. Retaliation against the residents for cooperating never happened.

The criminals did try to intimidate the foot patrol officers, however. On several occasions, information was received that bogus calls would be initiated to attract the officers to a certain area where they would be ambushed. On one occasion, a call was received about a man down. When the first officer arrived, he observed a male on the ground with others standing around. The officer sensed something was not right and waited for his partner to arrive. As they approached, the man on the ground jumped to his feet and a crowd surrounded the officers, shouting obscenities at them. Other officers arrived and order was quickly restored.

On another occasion, one pair of foot patrol officers came upon a group that was encouraging one of its members to fire at the other foot officers in front of them. When they saw the officer approaching from behind, the group broke and ran, escaping apprehension.

The officers, unlike the tenants, refused to be intimidated, so the foot patrol continued, although stress levels ran high during the latter part of the summer. The officers had achieved rapport with the residents, however, and had won their support. This improved confidence level somewhat alleviated the stress, since it was the criminal element that was now on the run.

At the end of the operation, the residents were no longer reluctant to ask the police for help. In fact, the tenants now insisted that the police rid their neighborhoods of the drug problem and were willing to provide information that would allow the police to take action. Search warrants and evictions have been the current tools used in eradicating drugs from these public housing units.

The tenants also began to express their needs to the managers of the complexes and the managers now work hand in hand with the police and the residents in making the neighborhoods safe. The managers have made changes such as one-way entrances and exits, speed bumps, curfews around the recreational areas, and in some instances, the hiring of private security to control outsiders from coming in and taking advantage of the tenants.

The Tulsa Police Department has called upon social-service organizations to bring services to the tenants who lack the transportation and telephones needed to access those services themselves. And Tulsa police officers are active participants in many community organizations and boards to ensure that the needs of the low-income tenants are being properly addressed.

The progress that has been made in three of the public housing projects in Tulsa is a direct result of the efforts of those officers who worked the foot patrol project. Without creating the atmosphere of confidence and trust between the tenants and the police, without providing the tenants a taste of living in a crime-free environment, none of this social progress would have been possible. This foot patrol project is an example of community policing at its best - a combination of crime fighting and social service. It seems to be the key to changing the environment in public housing.

Carolyn Robison was the lieutenant in charge of investigative staff at Tulsa's Division North in 1988 when the article was written.

The Community Policing Series was published in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the National Center for Community Policing at Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice, with support from the C. S. Mott Foundation of Flint, Michigan. This article appeared in 1988.
