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Herman Goldstein Excellence in Problem-Solving Award Submission
Austin Police Department, Austin, Texas



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Austin Police Department, Austin, Texas
Edward Sector Officers
Police Neighborhood Center
Mobile Police Substation

Problem: Deteriorating neighborhood near the inner-city: drug-dealers had taken over the neighborhood park; junked and abandoned vehicles on many properties; overgrown vacant lots; occupied properties with large accumulations of debris in yards. As a result, residents were afraid to use the park or to walk the streets of their neighborhood.

The St. Johns Neighborhood in northeast Austin is a microcosm of the problems faced by officers all over Austin and perhaps over the nation in cities of a similar size. The ethnic mix of the neighborhood was determined by census data to be approximately 1/3 white, 1/3 African-American, and 1/3 Hispanic. This brings together in a 45-block area all of the customs, ideals, and ills of three often disparate sections of our population and emphasizes the unique approach needed to begin effective change.

Beginning in early 1993, the Austin Police Department recognized the need to better serve the St. Johns area. This area has been long overlooked by the city and has been underserved in social, health, and police services. After several months of effort, office space in a nearly vacant strip center adjacent to St. Johns was obtained rent-free for three years to be used as a Neighborhood Police Center. The storefront was opened October 1, 1993 and intensive efforts began to inform the residents of a new police presence in their area. Officer Robert Simmons was assigned to the Center.

As the neighborhood became more aware of options available to them, the demand for services rose. The Austin Police Department decided to utilize the department's newest program and equipment to augment the efforts in St. Johns; the Mobile Neighborhood Center. The Mobile Police Substation is an innovative approach of the Austin Police Department designed to take police and other city services into the neighborhoods in a non-threatening, positive, proactive way. The vehicle, purchased with

funds provided by a Community Development Block Grant, is 33 feet long and 8 feet wide. It is equipped with a cellular phone, small galley with microwave, coffeemaker and refrigerator, restroom, conference room, and fully equipped office space. The substation, under the supervision of Sr. Sgt. Michael McDonald who also supervises the Neighborhood Centers, is staffed by a team of three - Senior Police Officer Bruce Thompson, Victim Services Counselor Chris Banbury, and Lolita Slagle, City Services Coordinator. Each brings specialized skills to the team; however, it is a cross-functional team - each working on all areas of projects together except those that are strictly law enforcement related.

The Mobile Team moved into the area in early March, 1994 and parked beside Buttermilk Park one of the biggest problem areas. The team began by distributing flyers in both English and Spanish to all households in the area announcing their arrival and inviting residents to an open house on the Mobile Substation. Next, a door-to-door survey, also in English and Spanish, was undertaken to ask residents what they saw as the biggest problem in the neighborhood. Drugs and drug-related activity ranked highest in concern.

During this same time period, Sr. Sgt. Ray Sanders, supervisor of the patrol officers working in the St. Johns area, began to meet with his officers to work on solutions to the many recurring problems his officers were addressing in the area. A Problem Oriented Policing Project (POP Project) was formally begun. Recognizing the need for coordination and cooperation, Sgt. Sanders assigned two officers full time to this task. Officer Eric Oakmon and Officer Melissa McGrath began devoting their time to this area. Officer Alvin Thompson was assigned to assist with photographing the area. These officers met with their counterparts in the Neighborhood Center, the Mobile Substation, and with a newly reactivated St. Johns Neighborhood Association made up of neighborhood leaders to begin the process for involving the neighborhood in working toward solutions.

A brain-storming session with the officers and support staff working in St. Johns and the neighborhood residents was planned and held by Sgt. Sanders and his officers. An outside facilitator was engaged to keep the meeting running smoothly. This two hour session brought many problems to light and many suggestions for change. It quickly became apparent that a timely and highly visible impact was needed to convince the neighborhood that the efforts were sincere.

Project goals developed from the brainstorming session are as follows:

To help make St. Johns a better place to live:

- * by assisting the neighborhood association in becoming self-reliant
- * by targeting crime
- * by coordinating area cleanups
- * by continuing to analyze the situation, and
- * by committing to a continued presence in the area.

A neighborhood clean-up already planned by the Neighborhood Center, was re-focused on the park and was determined to be the most visible and productive start. Flyers were produced, volunteers were recruited, and plans were finalized. The mounted patrol officers, walking beat, and the bicycle unit officers were assigned to the Mobile Substation to work several days helping get the word out to residents. Officer Melissa McGrath attended show-up for all officers working in the St. Johns area asking for volunteers to help with the clean-up. Sgt. Sanders assigned Officer Roman Lopez, II, Spanish-speaking officer to work on the project as needed. Photographs were taken of all properties in the area. This was a graphic symbol of the outward signs of neighborhood decline.

Focusing on the eyesore and health hazards associated with accumulated debris and inoperable vehicles, the officers and staff once again went door-to-door passing out flyers about the clean-up and asking residents to allow inoperable vehicles to be towed

away. Those located on the city streets and rights-of-way were tagged and towed in accordance with city ordinances. In the days prior to the scheduled clean-up, over 100 vehicles were removed from the area including an 18-wheeler that had been on a vacant lot for over two years. Those residents who were elderly or disabled were contacted and assistance was volunteered in getting unwanted items hauled to the curb on the day of the clean-up.

In order to emphasize the need for neighborhood involvement and to lend a festive air, a bar-b-que was planned following the clean-up. Donations of food, drinks, paper products, ice, and give-away items were obtained. A local restaurant owner volunteered his portable bar-b-que pit and his services to fix the meal. The pastor of a near-by church promised the help of his youth group, the Rites of Passage, to help on the big day. The wife of one of the officers recruited her accounting class from Concordia Lutheran College to assist. Pledges from Sigma Chi Fraternity volunteered their services. The Criminal Justice Council, led by Natacha Pelez-Wagner, agreed to bring community restitution program participants. The word spread, and officers and their families volunteered in addition to the staff already working full-time on the effort. The neighborhood residents were enthusiastic supporters and partners. The Mobile Police Substation became the hub of the activity. Each day the officers, neighborhood association residents, and city staff gathered to continue the planning and expand the plans.

Buttermilk Park and the immediate area around the park had become a symbol of the problems in the entire area. Due to gang activity, graffiti, drug-dealing, and violence in the area, the park was all but deserted. The Parks and Recreation Department was contacted by the Mobile Substation Team and the Parks Supervisor, Bunny Bennett, assigned her crews to work on the clean-up. Plans for upgrading the park facilities were begun. With the help of parks crews, graffiti was painted over, picnic tables were

repaired, and a drinking fountain was re-installed near the restroom facilities. A totally unused tennis court is being converted to two basketball courts - a prime request of the neighborhood. Grant funds had been obtained by the Parks Department for a new play scape in the park. After working with the officers in the area, the Parks Department has agreed to revise their plans and meet some requests from the neighborhood. An example besides the basketball courts, is to cover the one existing slab now used for basketball thus providing a shaded area for large gatherings. Parks crews also cleaned park property adjacent to the park proper that had been allowed to revert to a natural state. While cleaning this area, a transient camp was found in the center of the lots which had previously been invisible from the surrounding streets.

Surrounded on two sides by the park was one of the most notorious spots for drug dealing in the city. Three vacant lots had become completely overgrown and were homebase for drug dealers. The debris on the lot included three inoperable vehicles, a barrel used for fires in cold weather and miscellaneous trash. Prior to the day of the clean-up some work was required on these lots. To the surprise of all involved, it was learned that the lots had been deeded to the city by a former owner. The city had not formally accepted the lots, but the former owner was not available. The city's Solid Waste Services division sent a crew to remove the largest park of the debris. Officer Bruce Thompson arranged for prisoners from the County Jail to do other some preliminary work removing accumulated branches and general trash.

The day of the clean-up arrived. Over 250 people showed up to participate, including our Assistant Chief of Police, Ruben Lopez! It was an outstanding success. Residents were amazed at the outpouring of support and the tremendous work put forth. Volunteers criss-crossed the streets knocking on the door of any residence with debris in the yard and asking if they could help move it to the curb. The youth from the Rites of Passage donned gloves and picked up litter in the creekbeds and vacant lots. The lots

adjacent to the park that had already had preparatory work were tackled by a large crew. By the end of the morning a mountain of brush, trash, and the remains of an old shed were curbside on these lots. Local television crews were present to record the action, but unfortunately, the print media did not cover the activity. However, a subsequent clean-up in July was covered by the local daily which mentioned the clean-up in April. A copy of that article is attached. As the clean-up activity began to wind down, the bar-b-que was ready. Officers and support staff served the all of the volunteers and the festive atmosphere increased.

In the following days, the Solid Waste Services division managed by Steve Miller and Ray King devoted their crews to removing the accumulated debris. It took more than 40 work hours to load and remove the items placed at the curbsides.

Determined to build on this foundation, work was begun with the Parks Department to keep the park in the hands of the people. Each summer, the Parks Department runs a summer day program in all area parks for children six to twelve years old. For the past several years, the program in Buttermilk Park had grown smaller and smaller with only a handful of participants for the reasons detailed above. This program became an important next step for our project. Flyers were produced and distributed to every household and to all area businesses. The Mobile Substation continued to be in place at the park each day. The Parks Department agreed to send their most qualified program leaders to Buttermilk Park. The parks maintenance crews continued to give extra attention to the area. No lunches are provided in this program. However, working with the Summer Lunch Program, another area of the Parks Department, a summer intern of the Health Department, Shelley Hagan, arranged for the children to receive lunch daily.

When the program finally got underway, there were between 30 and 35 children enrolled and attending each day! Parents who stayed anxiously near the park the first day

or two are now confident they can leave their children in safety. No greater success could be envisioned for this first effort than to provide a safe haven for our inner city youth.

There are also other successes stemming from an improved rapport with the community. Neighborhood residents report feeling freer to walk the streets of the area; this is an observable difference over the past few months. As officers drive the area it is evident that attitudes toward them have improved and there is more acceptance of them as allies rather than adversaries. This is evidenced by the waves and smiles as officers patrol and particularly as they get out of their patrol cars and speak to residents on the street. Calls for service have increased which we feel is evidence of acceptance; previously residents reported fear of calling the police because of possible reprisal and distrust of the officers. Several known drug dealers have moved from the area. The city's Neighborhood Housing Division is working on building or moving low-income housing into the area. Some apartment complexes adjacent to the area have begun clean-up and renovation. Area merchants have reported that the increased police presence has brought about a decrease in problems for their businesses.

This successful cooperative effort effectively laid the ground work for many other projects planned for the future. Plans include an Adopt-A-Park program for the Neighborhood Association at Buttermilk Park, Adopt-A-Block for officers to work residents block-by-block to address problems and devise solutions, graffiti abatement, painting of residences, continued police presence at Neighborhood Association meetings and working with members to increase membership, continuing to work with other city departments to provide additional programs and facilities based on needs identified by the community. These efforts continue and will continue for some months to come, as we work with the neighborhood residents to continue their task and strive to become a self-reliant and safe neighborhood for all families.

Nominated for the Herman Goldstein Excellence in Problem-Solving Award are the following team members who guided this project, worked side-by-side with area residents, city departments, and citizen volunteers. The nominees are Sr. Sgt. Ray Sanders, Officer Eric Oakmon, Officer Melissa McGrath, Officer Alvin Thompson, Sr. Police Officer Bruce Thompson, and City Services Coordinator Lolita Slagle. Each of these individuals was an integral part of the process which led to the successful completion of the first phase of the work planned for the St. Johns area of Austin, Texas. Sgt. Sanders together with Officers Oakmon, McGrath, and Thompson, conceived the plan for involving the sector officers in helping the neighborhood and in meeting with the neighborhood prior to beginning any work. Officer Thompson provided direction and shared his previous experience in working with neighborhoods and is personally responsible for much of the cooperation of the city Parks Department. Ms. Slagle coordinated efforts among city departments and other governmental agencies and also produced all flyers and other written materials for the project. In addition, all of those named above spent many hours walking door-to-door encouraging neighborhood residents to participate and learning about their concerns. The success must be shared equally with all of the other officers and civilians who worked and continue to work on this project; however, the success hinged on the leadership of this core team.

Attachments:

- Newspaper article
- Flyers
- Photographs of the area