

**Savannah Police Department  
Savannah, Georgia  
Problem Oriented Policing  
Project #9108201**

Initiating Officer: Corporal Richard Zapal, Savannah Police Department, Savannah, Ga.  
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THE PROBLEM: During the summer of 1991, a local VFW hall would sponsor, what became known as, "VFW Disco Night". Disco night, which was every Tuesday, attracted large crowds of young people; some too young to legally gain admittance and some even young enough to violate the city's curfew ordinance. The chronic problems, which usually stemmed from the outside crowd always seemed to escalate at about midnight. This was doubly bad for the police department as it always coincided with shift change.

The VFW hall was much too small to accommodate all the people that attended disco night, even if they all had been of age. Therefore, the majority of the participants loitered outside the hall, in the parking lot, in the parking lots of other businesses, on private residents porches and yards and in the public streets. The excessive noise, trespassing and traffic problems

were, for the most part, the least troublesome problems. What focused direct police attention on the area were the fights, the drug activity, the serious injury assaults, cuttings, shootings and gang activity. The Tuesday night activities at the VFW hall grew progressively worse throughout the summer. Each Tuesday night the midnight shift officers, who were just beginning their tour of duty, would dreadfully anticipate the call that would send them into near riot conditions at the VFW hall. Conditions deteriorated so quickly that it became common for officers to arrive at the scene and immediately become the target of hostile gunfire. Another favorite tactic of the shooters was to open fire on or in the middle of a crowd, creating panic and a great deal of danger for responding police officers. Responding police officers would instantly find themselves in the midst of a hostile crowd that was on the verge of panic. As this tactic effectively neutralized the officers and prevented them from taking any type of control or law enforcement action, the shooters could not and were not identified or arrested. Activity outside the VFW hall eventually and inevitably led to tragedy when a man was shot to death as a result of an argument. The crowd was in such a frenzy following the killing, it attacked police officers and television news crews. The entire event known as disco night had grown out of control and

was a danger to participants, local residents, passers by and the police. The VFW had provided two uniformed security guards, but they proved to be as inept as they were uncertified and therefore illegal.

## **FOR WHOM WAS IT A PROBLEM:**

The local residents.

The local merchants.

Victims of assaults.

The Savannah Police Department.

Innocent bystanders.

## **WHO WAS AFFECTED BY THE PROBLEM AND HOW WERE THEY AFFECTED:**

**THE LOCAL RESIDENTS:** A reduction of the quality of life in their neighborhoods as a result of the increase in crime, drug activity, assaults, shootings, theft, noise and litter.

**LOCAL MERCHANTS:** Damaged or vandalized property or their property was littered with trash and alcoholic beverage containers.

**VICTIMS OF ASSAULT:** Although this is self-explanatory, the victims would be physically and emotionally scarred for life.

THE POLICE: As the crowds, disorderly conduct and violence escalated, the police department was required to commit an ever increasing amount of manpower and resources, both of which are limited, to control the situation. This drain on manpower and resources was beginning to reduce police services to the remainder of the city, not to mention the dangerous conditions it placed the officers in.

### **HOW DID THE DEPARTMENT HANDLE IT IN THE PAST:**

As the violence and disorderly behavior increased, the police department increased the amount of responding units as well as the numbers of arrests. This did not solve the problem and, in fact, sometimes made the problem worse. The general hostility of the crowd gradually shifted towards the police and led to rock and bottle throwing with the police as targets.

### **WHAT INFORMATION WAS COLLECTED ABOUT THE PROBLEM:**

Corporal Zapal, the officer who initiated the POP project, contacted several agencies and sources for information:

Savannah City Marshalls: Cpl Zapal ensured that the VFW hall had a city business license, a liquor license and a license for consumption of alcohol on

premises, which were all in order.

Savannah Fire Department: Cpl Zapal learned where to obtain occupancy limits as well as other information derived from state fire codes that pertained to establishments such as the VFW hall.

City of Savannah Ordinances: Discovered an ordinance, in the business license section, that allows police officers to inspect any business inside the city limits at any time that the business is open.

CHATHAM COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE K-9 UNIT: Learned the capabilities and legal limitations of using drug dogs for detection inside and outside the VFW hall.

STATE LAW: Determined that the security guards employed by the VFW hall were working in violation of state law, as they were not certified.

## **WERE THERE ANY DIFFICULTIES IN GETTING THE INFORMATION:**

The information was easy to obtain and was there simply for the asking.

## **WHAT WAS THE GOAL OF THE PROBLEM SOLVING EFFORT:**

The goal of the problem solving effort was to eliminate the problem. This

would include closing down the VFW hall if necessary. By eliminating the root cause, the collateral problems would also be solved. The neighborhood would be returned to the local residents and merchants and the danger to innocent bystanders and police officers would be eradicated.

## **WHAT STRATEGIES WERE DEVELOPED TO REACH THAT**

### **GOAL:**

Cpl Zapal spoke with the watch commander. Captain Smith, who agreed with the general strategies. The units assembled, at Cpl Zapal's request, on the next available Tuesday night. The captain, the lieutenant, two sergeants, Cpl Zapal, two adjacent beat officers, ten undercover drug agents and the Sheriff's Departments first line drug dog and handler arrived at the VFW hall just prior to the first anticipated call for service at the VFW hall. Cpt Smith and Cpl Zapal entered the bar and announced to the VFW personnel and the patrons that the police department was conducting a business inspection. When the inspection was concluded, the night's efforts yielded a quantity of drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, crack cocaine and a suspect wanted on a murder warrant. The final chore was to speak with the VFW officials and inform them that the police department was considering a notification of the National VFW Officials as to the activities that occur during an event

sponsored by and tied to the VFW. This brought about an immediate response from the local VFW officials, who immediately cancelled all future disco nights.

## **WHAT AGENCIES HELPED THE POLICE DEPARTMENT IN**

### **ACHIEVING THE GOAL:**

The City of Savannah's Marshall's Office

The City of Savannah's Department of Revenue

The City of Savannah's Department of Inspections

The Savannah Fire Department

The Chatham County Sheriffs Office

### **WAS THE GOAL ACCOMPLISHED:**

The goal was accomplished as there has not been another "VFW Disco Night" since this POP project was initiated and completed. Tuesday nights pass without incident in this neighborhood and the quality of life for the citizens has returned to normal. The police no longer have to respond in to an uncertain and dangerous situation. Proof that the goal was accomplished was captured by computer aided dispatch records that stored calls for service at all locations. The calls for service listed below are for the exact location of

the VFW Hall and the immediate area surrounding the hall:

CALLS FOR SERVICE

1990        56    (the year preceeding the POP project)

1991        15    (the year of the POP project)

1992        6     (the year after the POP project)

Obviously, the POP project accomplished the goals set by Cpl Zapal, in that it reduced the calls for service to the VFW Hall, solved a chronic problem by identifying and eliminating the root causes and fostered a relationship between a police officer and the community he serves.