

**Abstract:**

On January 05, 1997, the Omni West Community Improvement Project was implemented. Officer Louis Ferraro was selected to spearhead this operation and was assigned to the Omni West Neighborhood. Through his efforts a virtually dead community, crime ridden, and polluted with garbage and overgrown lots was revitalized. Within a six month period, Officer Ferraro had removed the drug dealers, prostitutes, robberies, and the homeless and returned order *to* the neighborhood. He assisted in the gathering of resources to clear the streets of abandoned vehicles, clean and remove tons of trash and garbage that had been dumped throughout the neighborhood. Officer Ferraro, through persistence, convinced the citizens to take back their neighborhood. He has continued to assist and encourage the citizens of the Omni West Community to improve and maintain a beautiful and safe neighborhood.

**Scanning:**

Over the years the Omni West Community has deteriorated from a well groomed middle class residential and small business neighborhood to a deplorable area that is unsafe to live or work in. From lack of maintenance, the vacant lots had become like jungles covered by overgrowth and garbage. The community is infested by rats and the single family homes have become low income rental properties with multi-family occupancy. The streets were covered with derelict vehicles, trash and garbage. The area was being used as a dumping ground by other communities and businesses as well. Used tires, tree and grass cuttings from lawn maintenance services, plus raw garbage was being added *to the* piles from a local business. The commercial buildings were covered with graffiti and in dire need of

paint. The sidewalks were in poor condition and unsafe to walk on. The Omni West Community had become a breeding ground for crime. Drug dealers had moved into the neighborhood setting up drug operations in the low rent residences. The abandoned buildings throughout the neighborhood were being used as crack houses drawing the homeless and drug users to the area. A local market was adding to the problem by selling drug paraphernalia, pornography, alcoholic beverages and illegal cigarettes. Prostitutes roamed the streets freely night and day, using the abandoned buildings and rented rooms to commit their illegal acts. Strong-arm robberies were prevalent against unsuspecting tourists and visitors who stopped for the red traffic light on NE 14 Street and 1 Avenue, or stopped to ask directions.

Due to decreased values, the property owners did very little to improve or maintain their properties, claiming they could not afford to spend more money on property that was continually losing value and could not be sold. The community had given up; businesses that could afford to, have moved to more appealing locations, leaving the buildings unoccupied. Once vacant, the buildings were targeted by the homeless as a source of revenue by removing the contents such as copper wiring, metal pipes, electrical and plumbing fixtures, leaving an empty shell to be converted into another crack den or flop house used by the homeless. Without hope for a better community to live in and raise their families, the residents locked themselves in, exiting their residence only out of necessity. The community cries for help to save their neighborhood have slowly dwindled. Even the media has lost interest. It will take a lot more than just removing the crime to bring this community back to life.

Analysis:

On July 28, 1995, Donald H. Warsaw, Chief of Police of the Miami Police Department, implemented the Neighborhood Enhancement Team (NET) concept throughout the City of Miami. The city was divided into twelve NET service areas with a police lieutenant assigned to each. They were empowered as mini police chiefs and were expected to use their community policing skills to reduce crime and improve the quality of life throughout their NET area. Each NET commander, in conjunction with the community, prioritized crime and quality of life issues affecting their respective area.

Tourist crimes were rated number one as the most serious crime affecting the Downtown N.E.T. Service Area in 1995. From crime analysis reports of tourist robberies received each month, a crime pattern developed depicting the Omni West Community. Even though the hours changed from time to time, the modus operandi and description of suspects were the same. Young black males approach the tourist vehicles while they are stopped at the traffic light or asking directions, opening the door or breaking the window and grabbing the victim's property. The suspects flee on foot into the neighborhood.

An analysis of the past two years revealed that although numerous arrests were made of suspects involved in tourist robberies at NE 14 Street and 1 Avenue, the robberies did not decrease. Of those arrested, most of the suspects used an Overtown address or were homeless. The suspects revealed that they were drawn to the area for two reasons, the easy prey and drugs. There were between 10 and 15 robberies at and near that location each month. In 1995 and 1996 numerous strategies such as surveillance, decoys, added patrol

and mandatory watch orders have been used with little or no success in reducing the number of robberies in the Omni West area.

Because of the number of tourist crimes that have occurred in previous years, (he City of Miami was perceived as being one of the most dangerous cities in the United States to visit. This perception has harmed the city's economy, the tourist industry and the merchants who depend on tourist trade to survive.

Responses:

The plan calls for the NET service area *to* be further divided into smaller units (by neighborhood). It would require assigning an officer to the neighborhood on a permanent basis and empowering him to work with the community in making decisions that would improve the area. He will identify problems that are critically effecting, in reality and perception, the quality of life in the Omni West Community. These problems are both criminal and quality of life issues.

After serious consideration, Officer Louis Ferraro was selected to spearhead the Omni West Improvement Project. Officer Ferraro was assigned permanently to the Omni West neighborhood so that he would have the time, opportunity, and stability to develop a working partnership with the community. N.E.T. policing maintains a strong law enforcement focus, Officer Ferraro is obligated to answer calls for service and make arrests in the traditional way, but additionally, he will also focus on proactive problem solving to prevent problems before they occur or escalate. The success or failure of the Omni

West Community Improvement Project depends on the Officer Ferraro's ability to solve problems rather than just the number of arrests made, summons issued, or the number of police officers assigned to an area. Both quantitative and qualitative measures are necessary.

Officer Ferraro will provide full-service policing, both proactive and reactive, by involving the community directly as partners in the process of identifying, prioritizing, and solving problems including crime, fear of crime, illicit drugs, social and physical disorder, and neighborhood decay.

Through empowering Officer Ferraro to participate in community-based problem solving he is allowed the liberty and freedom *to* make decisions and act, tailoring his response *to* the needs and resources of the community. This new relationship, based on mutual trust and respect, also suggests that the police can serve as a catalyst, challenging people to accept their share of the responsibility for the overall quality of life in the community. This type of policing means that citizens will be asked to handle more of their minor concerns themselves, but in exchange, this will free police to work with the people on developing immediate as well as long-term solutions for community concerns in ways that encourage mutual accountability and respect.

#### Assessment:

The Omni West Community Improvement Project was implemented January 05, 1997, and encompasses a 16 block area. Through innovative law enforcement, we hope to afford all of our citizens in the project area the opportunity to enjoy safe productive lives

for themselves, their families and their neighborhoods. We will supplement our efforts with crime prevention, education, and community involvement.

The Project has been divided into 4 phases:

Phase I:

Phase I consisted of identifying the project area, locating and observing the problem spots, contacting the residents, business owners/managers and soliciting community involvement to remove crime from the neighborhood and improve the quality of life; identifying and incarcerating drug dealers and drug users, prostitutes, robbers and thieves; removing the opportunity for crime and offering assistance to homeless persons in the project area with the help of the Homeless Assistance Center (HAC) at 1550 N. Miami Avenue.

A strong message was sent to the community that there would be a zero tolerance for crime in the targeted area. In the first 24 days of the implementation of the West Omni Improvement Project, over sixty arrests were made by Officer Ferraro ranging from drinking in public to robbery. Three businesses were put on notice that they were either part of "the solution" or part of "the problem". The owner/manager of the business located at 1336 NE 1 Avenue, failed to take Officer Ferraro serious and was brought before the Nuisance Abatement Board for numerous violations. The store owner and manager were assessed a fine of \$250.00, and were required to remove the pay telephone outside the store, paint the exterior of the business, clean the parking lot daily, and post signs notifying patrons that it is unlawful to consume alcohol within 100 feet of the premises. The 24 hour walk-up window, which was used primarily for alcohol sales, was closed permanently and the store itself, which used to be open 24 hours daily, is now

required to close at 10:00 P.M. This in itself has helped that come tremendously, eliminating the drug transactions outside the store. No loitering in the parking lot is permitted. This has virtually eliminated all prostitution and robberies at this location. The store is on probation and the business can be ordered "closed" for one (1) year. This has given the business owner a greater incentive to be part of the solution.

The project area was also inundated by homeless persons camping and sleeping on the streets in the vacant lots. A coordinated effort between Officer Ferraro, and the Homeless Assistance Center have removed the homeless from the streets and vacant lots and placed 28 homeless persons in shelters.

In less than 60 days after the implementation of the community project abandoned vehicles had been removed from the vacant lots and the grass was being cut by the owners or by the City of Miami Public Works Department. Five public telephones that were being used for drug transactions had been removed. Numerous business owners painted and improved their building and cleaned their parking lot. The criminal element had been removed or had voluntarily left the project area and the children were once again playing ball in the neighborhood streets. Officer Ferraro has gotten to know most of the citizens in the neighborhood on a first name basis. Officer Ferraro has accepted ownership in the community and has built a close working relationship with the citizens he serves. Through his efforts the citizens<sup>1</sup> confidence level in the police has greatly improved.

Phase II:

At our last meeting on June 11, 1997, thirty-one residents met at NE Miami Place and 16 Street. It was explained that in addition to the problems presently being addressed, the City Commission has approved money to repair and replace damaged sidewalks throughout the neighborhood. Problems such as lighting, trimming of trees, and overgrown lots are being dealt with by the City of Miami Public Works Department. Additionally, unsafe structures in the neighborhood are being demolished, thus removing potential crack houses.

Recently, a home in the neighborhood was burglarized. Officer Ferraro heard about it and met with the homeowner. Three days later, while he was having lunch, a witness called him on his cellular phone to advise that he was observing a burglary in progress on NE 17 Street. Officer Ferraro responded and the two offenders were arrested and charged with burglary. They were also identified, by another witness, as the two burglars that had committed the previous burglary three days earlier. The community has begun to work together and they are establishing lines of communication with the police.

Phase m consists of planning, organizing and executing a mass cleanup in the targeted area. A planning committee was formed from community volunteers, the Miami Police Department and the Downtown N.E.T. Service Area to identify project goals and locate needed resources to accomplish the neighborhood cleanup on July 13, 1997. The project goals are:

- a. Clean up and mow grass along sidewalks and right-of-ways.
- b. Clean up and mow vacant lots.
- c. Trim trees in project area.

- d. Sod areas that are lacking sod or in need of repair.
- e. To plant plants and flowers along NE 14 Street, from Miami Avenue to Biscayne Blvd.
- f. Pressure clean sidewalks in project area.
- g. To promote community involvement and form partnerships with police,
- h. To have a good time doing so!

It should be noted that all resources were obtained, including 200 volunteers from the Army National Guard, and equipment such as lawnmowers, rakes, shovels and saws from Home Depot and Sears. All resources have been donated to the Omni West Community Improvement Project.

The clean-up was a complete success. The community plus volunteers from the Homeless Assistance Center, the United States Air Force and Coast Guard and numerous other civic associations participated in the neighborhood clean-up. Overgrown lots were cut, trash and debris picked up, trees trimmed and plants planted along NE 14 Street. This plan of action will be continued through the remainder of the Downtown N.E.T. Service Area, and other N.E.T. commanders were very impressed and expressed a desire to implement this plan in their NET areas.

#### Phase IV:

Phase IV is to form and organize a "Maintenance Plan" to be coordinated and maintained by the community. To paint and improve buildings and homes in the area, possibly with an art deco look. To work hand in hand with the community, the police and N.E.T. to rebuild and maintain a safe and beautiful neighborhood.

The community has contacted the owners of the vacant lots and requested to be allowed to use the properties to plant gardens and grow their own vegetables. The community is also thinking of building a park for the children.

This program is being completed at no cost additional to the City of Miami or the community. All equipment used in this project has been donated. This wUI include the equipment for the gardens and for the playground.

A lot of hard work has gone into this project from the private sector as well as by the Neighborhood Enhancement Team. In keeping with the city's philosophy of the N.E.T. concept, Officer Ferraro has done an outstanding job in promoting the N.E.T. Program. The police and the private sector are working harmoniously to accomplish the *Omni West* Community Improvement Project.

Due to the efforts of Officer Ferraro, the neighborhood is a safer place to live. Parents feel comfortable allowing their children to play in ~~the~~ neighborhood. Business owners and managers are working more closely with the police to reduce criminal activity and improve the quality of life in and around their businesses. The neighborhood in general is a much cleaner and more attractive place for all to work and live. The community itself, because of this effort, has begun to work together to overcome cultural differences and language barriers between each other and the police.

Agency and Officer information:

This project was initiated by the City of Miami Police Downtown N.E.T. Service Area and implemented by Officer Ferraro. This plan of action will be used in the remaining neighborhoods in the Downtown N.E.T. Service Area. It appears that a similar plan of action will be implemented by other police N.E.T. commanders in their N.E.T. areas.

The Miami Police Department has been involved in problem solving policing for several years. Officer Ferraro is very familiar with this type of policing. He was empowered to work with the community and make decisions that affected the target area. He was allowed to adjust hours and days off as needed to complete assignments in the community.

The Omni West Community improvement Project was the first of its kind to be implemented by the Downtown N.E.T. Service Area. There were no written guidelines or manuals to follow.

The major problem noted in the project was not only the broken window effect, but that the citizens had given up and accepted the crime and **filth** as a way of life. Their attitudes had to be changed. This was done by proving to the community that the Miami Police Department was dedicated to improving and maintaining a clean and safe Omni West Community.

All resources used in this project have been donated to the community by the private sector. Very little cost was incurred by the City of Miami or the Miami Police Department.

Contact information:

Name: Officer Louis Ferraro

Position/Rank: Police Officer

Address: Miami Police Department, 400 NW 2 Avenue

City/State: Miami, Florida 33128

Phone: 1(305)579-6592

Fax: 1(305) 579-6400