

# 1998 Herman Goldstein Award SUBMISSION



**1400 J STREET**

**A Community's Commitment**



## SUMMARY

I feel it important to begin this paper with a disclaimer: *This is not my project*

The clean up of the 1400 block of J Street was a collaborative effort between Council Member Juan Vargas<sup>1</sup> office, the San Diego Police Department, the office of the City Attorney, Alpha Project, and the citizens of Centre City East.

Centre City East is a San Diego community located just east of the downtown area. For years it had been the dumping ground for many of the City's social ills. Approximately three years ago a handful of officers, local business owners and concerned residents came together to tackle some of the area's significant problems.

One such location was 1400 J Street. Narcotics controlled the block. Buyers would roam the street at all hours looking for their next hit on the crack pipe. The majority of the activity centered around five houses located mid-block of that street.

The houses are under single ownership. A number of attempts were made to work with the owner in upgrading her property. However, it became apparent she had no interest in following up on any of our offers to assist. In response to the owner's lack of interest, abatement was considered.

However, the break through for this project came in the form of a block grant. The money would be used to clean up the property . Fifty homeless workers were each paid \$6 an hour, over a two day period, to clean up the property. Later, the crew would return to level one of the houses to the ground. In exchange, the owner agreed to maintain the property at a higher standard.

The result of this community commitment is a street free of illegal narcotics activity. Perhaps more importantly, the community felt empowered. They now believe they have the ability to confront some of the toughest issues in their neighborhood *and win!*

## KEY PLAYERS

### Council Member Juan Vargas' Office

**George Jordan, Aid**  
**Ali Cooper, Aid**

The 1400 J Street Property is located in Council Member Vargas' District George Jordan specialize in work projects. Ali Cooper is Council member Vargas' representative to the Centre City East Community.

### San Diego Police Department

#### Central Patrol

**Karen Tenney, Sergeant**

Early on a number of experienced Patrol Officers afforded invaluable information as to the narcotics activity found at 1400 J Street. Special thanks go to my immediate supervisor who provided me the freedom, showed me the patience and gave me the support to try things a little differently.

#### Drug Abatement Response Team (D.A.R.T)

**Lora Rabell, Officer**  
**Carlos Davalos, Bid Inspector**

The function of the D.A.R.T Unit is to assist Officers and Citizens alike in addressing nuisance issues in neighborhoods. The Unit works closely with the City Attorney's Office as well as Code Compliance in many of their projects.

#### Crime Analysis Unit

**Mike Frattali, Analyst**

The Unit as a whole works tirelessly to assist officers in correctly portraying crime statistics in order that they better understand a problem or trend.

### Alpha Project

**Robert "Bob" McElroy, CEO**

The Alpha Project provides jobs to homeless people. The organization operates in Centre City East. This job program includes several community services such as litter removal, graffiti control and homeless outreach services.

## **Centre City East Citizen's Patrol (CCECP)**

This Citizen's Patrol group was formed in 1995 by six very committed people who either lived or worked in the Centre City area. Today the group is 26 members strong. CCECP functions today as a steering committee tackling demanding nuisance issues in their community.

## **Office of the City Attorney**

**Makini Hammond, Attorney**

Makini Hammond is a Deputy City Attorney under the Criminal Division. The Code Enforcement Unit of the City Attorney's office is responsible for any and all abatement issues.

## **Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC)**

**Gerard E. Selby, Project Mgr**  
**Allan Mercer, Sr Project Mgr**

Created by the City Council in 1976, CCDC is a City Agency which is responsible for redeveloping downtown San Diego. CCDC is the land use authority for Centre City East. The agency deals with the issues, redevelopment plans, and concerns of this particular area.

## **Livable Neighborhoods**

The City budgets funding for the Livable Neighborhoods Program. Its purpose is to bring together residents, businesses and community organization in order to make neighborhoods safer, cleaner and make basic services available to all. Much of what they are able to accomplish is through the distribution of small neighborhood improvement grants.

## **SCANNING**

The 1400 block of J Street has long been known as an area of glaring narcotics activity. For well over a year, the San Diego Police Department had been receiving numerous complaints from business owners and residents regarding the illegal use and sales of street narcotics in the area of 1400 J Street. The complaints from citizens stated that individuals would loiter in the area during all hours of the day and night selling and using drugs.

In watching the activity that was centered around the 1400 block of J Street, it could best be described as haunting. Not one or two, but by the dozens local drug users would slowly walk this dark street. They would move in and out of houses, around corner blocks then back again, it was a ritual that would be repeated around the clock.

Much of the problem along this street centered around five houses under common ownership, 1431-1463 J Street. These houses were located mid-block on the south side of the street. The most common complaint was the easy access by drug users and street persons onto the property. There also were allegations of drug trafficking involvement by some of the tenants who lived on the property. Since there was no on-site management monitoring any of the buildings, drug users, dealers and street persons had unrestricted and complete access to the location.

When entering the property, the first thing one noticed was the profound odor and the buzzing of flies in the still air between the buildings. The common back yard was strewn with rotting cloths, rusting appliances, empty beer bottles, food containers, bedding and some items that simply could not be described.

Dead goldfish floated belly-up in the green slime of a weed-choked pond, while diseased and starving kittens slept under the buildings. Also in the back yard was a large chicken coupe that had been converted into an additional living space. Well over two dozen chickens roamed freely throughout the grounds.

The houses themselves were in extremely poor condition. Deteriorating walls, flooring and stairwells created a hazard for anyone entering the property. Inside the buildings, there was leaking sewage where drain lines had not been repaired. There was a lack of any type of permanent heating and all fixtures throughout were in need of major repair. Illegal units were being maintained in the basements of several of the buildings. Any attempts at boarding up some of the houses had obviously failed.

The general environment of the 1400 block of J Street played a key factor in the narcotics activity. There was not a single street light on J Street. At night, the entire block was pitch black. The sidewalks were lined with overgrown trees. Thick bushes, which surrounded every house, provided ideal concealment for those who entered and exited from the property.

In short, the entire block catered to narcotic activity.

## **ANALYSIS**

The owner of all five houses is Rainey L. Tharpe. In August of 1996, Ms. Tharpe was invited to attend a Centre City East Citizen's Patrol meeting. Easy accessibility to the units for illegal drug use was discussed, as well as the appalling conditions of the property. The members of the Citizen's Patrol felt the over-all condition of the property contributed to a public nuisance in the area.

Ms. Tharpe was very hostile to the group, claiming she was not receiving any support from either the community or the Police. She explained that she had just inherited the property from her grandmother. Ms. Tharpe admitted she had not been able to keep units boarded and secured against trespassers and that she has found unauthorized persons in some of the unsecured units from time to time.

In response, I immediately made arrangements for a meeting with Ms. Tharpe, the director of Second Chance - a clean living/work program for the homeless, and the President of A.C.D.W - a well respected low income property management company. We participated in a brainstorming session to assist Ms. Tharpe. Information was passed on regarding free labor, materials at cost, low income housing loans, and management skills training. Ms. Tharpe was provided with telephone numbers of individuals and organizations that could assist her in upgrading her property.

Over the next several months, I kept in touch with those who had volunteered to assist Ms. Tharpe. She never took the initiative to contact anyone.

In addition to working with Ms. Tharpe, I began the process of evaluating the property itself. First, I determined the true ownership of the property in question. A property profile revealed that Rainey Tharpe was the co-trustee and beneficiary for her daughters of the properties 1431 through 1463 J Street. She had been the property owner/trustee since May 1996.

Crime statistics generated by the Crime Analysis Unit indicated that during the period April 1996 through April 1997, there had been approximately sixteen arrests made *on* the property with eight of those arrests being for illegal narcotics activity. The numbers surprised me. I fervently believed that these narcotics arrests did not reflect the total scope of the problem. I quickly discovered the flaw. Individuals drawn to the property to buy or to use drugs were subsequently arrested off-site for possession or being under the influence. The arrest reports would indicate the location of the arrest while not noting the location of the buy. This would prove to be a stumbling block.

In November 1996, I approached Officer Lora Rabell of the Drug Abatement Response Team (D.A.R.T.) and described the conditions of the houses found along the 1400 block of J Street. Officer Rabell contacted Code Compliance to inform them of San Diego Police Department's interest in the property.

In January 1997, Carlos Davalos of Code Compliance, inspected all five houses. A Notice of Violation was drafted in February. The findings, which consisted of four pages of violations, were sent to Makini Hammond of the City Attorney's Office, Officer Rabell, Ms. Tharpe, and to me.

On February 21, 1997, I contacted Ms. Tharpe by telephone. She was aware of the inspections by both Code Compliance and the City Attorney's Office. Her comments included: "I refuse to manage the property," "I almost took out a loan, but why should I put myself in debt for people who want to take my property?" and "I will never sell those houses."

I mailed Ms. Tharpe a pamphlet describing San Diego Police Department's free property management class. In addition, a letter of authorization was requested by Ms. Tharpe, and sent her for signature, giving officers full access to her property in order to enforce the law. The letter was never returned.

Due to the lack of cooperation from the owner, blatant narcotics activity in and around the property, and health and safety issues found at the location, I opened the 1400 J Street property as a P.O.P. (Problem Oriented Policing) project. My original goal was to abate all five houses.

Once I formally opened the project, I set up a meeting for Makini Hammond, of the City Attorney's office, to meet with Narcotics Detectives, Patrol Officers, and D.A.R.T. staff. We attempted to fully describe the narcotics activity in and around Rainey Tharpe's property. We discussed the narcotics traffic that occurs between the five houses and the 'J Street Homotel' located at 1479 J Street. We also reviewed the Activity Study compiled by the Crime Analysis Unit on narcotics activity around the 1400 block of J Street.

In the spring, after reviewing the materials presented, Ms. Hammond felt that there was not sufficient documentation directly linking narcotics activity to the property to warrant notifying Rainey Tharpe of the intent to abate. Ms. Hammond, along with Officer Rabell, did offer to meet with the Tharpes about the nuisances that existed on their property in the hope that the Tharpes would apply any recommendations made.

These formal office hearings gave us the time and opportunity to look for other options to address the 1400 J Street concerns. The abatement procedure, by its very nature is a slow and arduous task. It requires an extraordinary amount of specific documentation directly linking illegal activity and/or code violation to a particular property. It is important to remember that we are discussing exercising the City's power to take away someone's property without their consent. In other words, door "A" was not available to us so we, as a community, set out to find a door "B".

## ***RESPONSE***

During the last week in April, 1997, while on patrol, I responded to a radio call of a possible overdose in the back lot of the 1400 J Street property. I found a black female dead of a heroin overdose behind a set of dumpsters at an open lot directly adjacent to the property. Most heroin overdosed die in the same manner - the fetal position. It was apparent that she had been moved because she was laying flat on her back.

I was later told by a Citizen Informant (CI) that the dead woman had purchased the heroin out of 1431 J Street and had died behind 1439 J Street. One of the tenants, aware of the attention the property was receiving, paid the CI and another "local" ten dollars each to move the dead woman off the property and call 911. I mention this incident because I believe it was the event that solidified the community's commitment to make the owner responsible for the activities found on the property.

In mid-May, a unique opportunity presented itself in the form of a block grant. Gerard Selby of the Centre City Development Corporation (CCDC), discovered that there was block grant money still available in the Livable Neighborhoods budget. By this time, the 1400 J Street property had become the central topic at most local community and agency meetings: there was no question in anyone's mind where the money could be best used.

A meeting was held on June 5<sup>th</sup> at the Tharpe's property to discuss the application process and how best to distribute the grant. Present were:

Bob McElroy	- Alpha Project
George Jordan / AN Cooper	- Council Member Juan Vargas <sup>1</sup> Office
Gerald Selby / Al Mercer	- Centre City Development Corp
Cynthia Hanna / Lora Rabell	- San Diego Police Department
Rainey and James Tharpe	- Property Owners

A verbal agreement was reached with James Tharpe, Rainey's husband, that the grant would be used to help clean up their property. In exchange, the Tharpes would commit to taking responsibility for the conditions of their property; maintaining it at a higher standard. It was agreed that Bob McElroy would apply for the grant, with George Jordan volunteering to handle the logistics of a full scale clean up. The block grant totaled \$15,000. \$10,000 would be earmarked solely for the 1400 J Street property. The remainder would be used for general clean up of the surrounding neighborhood.

On June 11 and 12, less than a month after finding the grant, *fifty* homeless workers from the Alpha Project took on the 1400 J Street property. Members of the clean up crew, each being paid \$6 an hour, attacked the property with trash bags, rakes, hedge clippers, shovels, sledge hammers and even a chain saw.

Two storage sheds that were filled with debris were cleaned out, then leveled.

Shrubbery was either trimmed back severely or taken out all together. The massive entanglement that was the chicken coup was turned into neat piles of wood and wire.

Everything from soiled mattresses pads to rusty appliances was carried off. And finally, the gold fish pond was filled in with a truck load of donated sand.

In two days, four 40-cubic yard trash bins the City had delivered to the clean up site had been filled. The result was a striking improvement. The undertaking was documented by all local news stations as well as a detailed article in the Union Tribune.

The clean up effort conducted on the Tharpe's property, which the Mayor of San Diego participated in, was almost unprecedented. The Tharpes were the recipient of a substantial amount of good will in this regard. We had hoped that they would appreciate the effort made on their behalf and view the clean up as an investment in their property.... an investment they would take advantage of by keeping the property drug-free.

Unfortunately, property that is neglected for any period of time will fall back to "the streets". Such was the case with 1400 J Street. It took less than two weeks for the narcotics activity to return. Boards were removed and the house were once again the center of narcotics activity.

The Tharpes argued that they had not been able to keep the property to Code Compliance standards due to lack of support from the Police Department. The Tharpes also stated that they did not have the funds to maintain the property to a level that would deter drug activity.

In July, 1997, the City Attorney's Office continued their attempts to get the Tharpes to voluntarily comply. A three page letter was sent listing specific recommendations for action to be taken by the Tharpes. It was made clear that formal legal action would be taken if the Tharpes continued to allow the property to be a site where illegal narcotics activity occurred. There was no response from the Tharpes.

In August, the members of the Centre City East Citizen's Patrol formally requested that the Code Enforcement Unit of the City Attorney's Office initiate abatement procedures. In response, Makini Hammond sent out requests for declarations to Police Officers, business owners and local residents believed to have knowledge of the drug activity found along 1400 J Street.

Still of concern was the issue linking the narcotics activity directly to the houses. The Department's Crime Analysis Unit came to our rescue. Analyst Mike Fratalli ran the crime statistics for a two block radius around the 1400 J Street property. The numbers were staggering!

For February 1996 to January 1997, they were as follows:

<b>Arrests</b>	Total	336
	Narcotics	159
<b>Crime Cases</b>	Total	88
<b>Field Interviews</b>	Total	741
	Narcotics	189
<b>Calls for Police Service</b>	Total	1626
	Narcotics	97
<b>Out of Service Time</b>	1,551 Hours	

D.A.R.T. staff took that information and made copies of **every** arrest and crime case for a one year period. This mammoth effort resulted in two thick binders of reports that were handed directly over to the City Attorney's office.

By this time, the Tharpes had gotten wind that the procedures for abatement had begun. Both Bob McElroy and I started to get a number of informal calls from James Tharpe requesting assistance. A deal would be struck.

Of all the houses on the property, the 1439 J Street residence had received the highest number of Code Violations. It was agreed that the cost of refurbishing this building did not warrant the attempt due to its poor condition. Thirty Day Eviction Notices were to be issued immediately to all remaining tenants. Bob McElroy negotiated with James Tharpe to demolish the house in exchange for one of the remaining houses to be turned over to the Alpha Project. This house would be used as a clean/sober transitional housing venture. Once the property was reclaimed, the Tharpes would install a fence surrounding the entire perimeter.

On October 27, 1997, 1439 J Street was bulldozed to the ground. Again, the venture was a joint effort between Council Member Juan Vargas' Office, The San Diego Police Department, The Alpha Project and the citizen's of Centre City East. A local radio talk show host was at the location broadcasting live throughout the day. Workers who helped demolish the house recalled for the listening audience how they had bought and used rock cocaine at the property. One worker stated: "Tearing this dump down is closure for me and my battle with crack."

One week later, Francis Clark, a long time trusted employee of the Alpha Project moved into 1451 J Street. With just \$500 in his pocket, he worked to turn a house that was once used for prostitution, into a home. The following month, Mr. Clark and James Tharpe poured the cement that would hold the post for a full length chain link fence.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The results of what was accomplished at the 1400 J Street property had a direct influence on other concerns in the neighborhood. For example:

S The 'J Street Homotel'<sup>1</sup> is a licensed transient hotel located at 1479 J Street. The hotel was managed by an individual who referred to himself as "The Indian". He would regularly boast to Police Officers that he was going to take 'baby' - a six round pearled handled unregistered revolver - and "take care of all the dealers" on the street. Yet the building which he managed was packed with what he claimed he detested. I spoke with the owner of the hotel on a number of occasions. He was very cooperative and agreed that situation could be greatly improved with a different manager.

In June of 1997, the manger was replaced. The new manger, Danny McCray, approached his responsibilities with enthusiasm. Within his first week, Mr. McCray attended a Landlord Training Program sponsored by the San Diego Police Department. This free, one evening, program provides tools to make properties safe and attractive to honest renters and unattractive to dishonest ones.

Within 90 days, Mr. McCray had removed all 'questionable' tenants from the hotel. The "DRUG FREE ZONE"<sup>1</sup> placard that hangs outside the manger's office now had meaning.

/ Next came the issue of lighting. Centre City Development Corporation, among other responsibilities, was tasked by the City to provide much needed lighting to the Centre City East community. The agency is on a five year plan to install new, high density lighting for a 12 square block area. This undertaking has a very strict installation plan which, by all account, is extremely difficult to alter. The 1400 block of J Street was scheduled for lighting some time in the year 1999.

Members of the Centre City East Citizen's Patrol raised the issue of priority, in terms of lighting, with anyone who would listen. It was campaigned that a 'need' factor be calculated into the schedule. After approximately four months of informal discussion with Council Member Juan Vargas<sup>1</sup> office and CCDC, I received a call in June from Al Mercer, senior project manager of CCDC. He said that there had been a change in priorities. I was told to call DBX Electronics and "let them know were you want the lights"!

The streets were dug up and electrical lines laid down during the summer months. By fall, old style cast iron lamp posts with high density lanterns were set into place. On January 1,1998 the next three streets in Centre City East were lit up. This included the 1400 block of J Street.

/ Located between the 1400 J Street property and the J Street Homotel is an 'L' shaped vacant lot. This is where the heroin overdose, discussed earlier, was found. On March 20, 1998, a groundbreaking ceremony took place to convert the lot into a community garden.

The garden is a project of the Children's Mobilization Team. This group is a collaboration that includes volunteers from several local active community groups and county Department of Social Services representatives. The organization has leased the 1,200-square foot lot from a private owner. Council Member Juan Vargas directed money from the federal government to pay for the project. Several local businesses and nonprofit agencies have also made contributions.

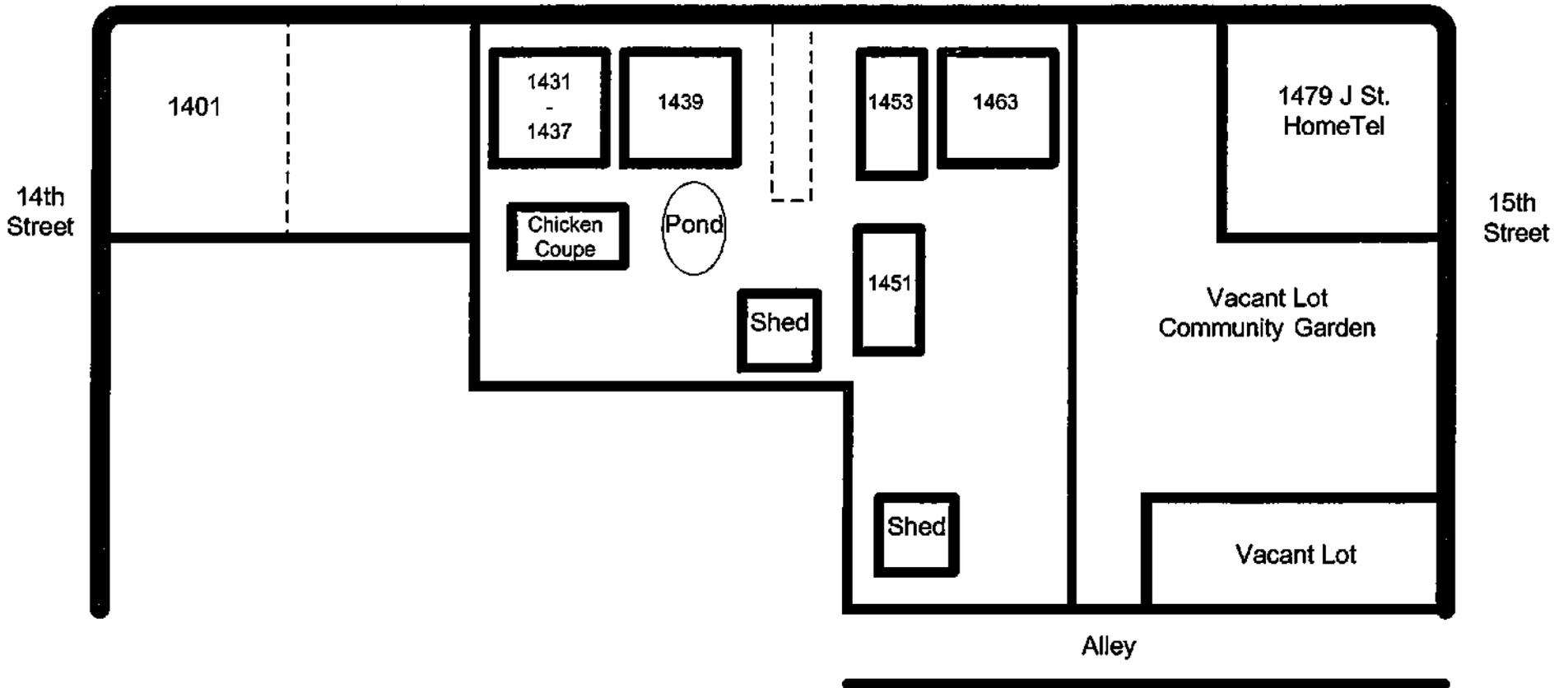
On the day of the ground breaking/clean up, workers cleared a mountain of garbage and drug paraphernalia to include: 26 40-gallon bags of trash, battered mattresses and furniture, 500 used syringes, and 50 crack pipes.

It will be open within the next few months to as many as 75 urban farmers; downtown residents selected on a first-come, first served basis. It is intended for them to grow flowers and vegetables for their own use.

As for those aimless people who were continuously searching for their next hit on the crack pipe, they are long gone. Today one can look down 1400 J Street, even during the during the small hours of the morning, and be struck by the fact the streets are clear. Why? There is no reason for them to be there. *There are no drugs.*

# Centre City East

J Street



Not To Scale

**LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITY  
14TH AND J INTERSECTION: 2 BLOCK RADIUS**

<b>ARRESTS</b>	<b>Year 1 (1)</b>	<b>Year 2 (2)</b>
TOTAL	458	336
NARCOTICS	228	159

<b>CRIME CASES</b>		
TOTAL	100	88
NARCOTICS	n/a	n/a

<b>FIELD INTERVIEWS</b>		
TOTAL	886	741
NARCOTICS	350	189

<b>CALLS FOR POLICE SERVICE</b>		
TOTAL CALLS FOR SERVICE	1715	1626
OUT OF SERVICE TIME (Hours)	1509	

**Area:** 1300-1550 blocks of Island, J and K Streets;  
300-500 blocks of 13th, 14th, and 15th Streets.

**(1)** February, 1995 through January, 1996

**(2)** February, 1996 through January, 1997

Prepared by: SDPD Crime Analysis Unit

