

Police Executive Research Forum

Nomination for the Herman Goldstein Excellence in
Problem-Solving Award

Submission from the Asheville Police Department

Problem-Solving Efforts at 177 Flint Street

The Asheville Police Department is an agency committed to the philosophy of Community Oriented Policing or Problem-Solving Policing. This is easy for an agency to proclaim but there must be hard proof of attempts to carry out the philosophy. The department is in its third year of formal adherence to the philosophy. All employees are encouraged and trained to conduct police business according to the philosophy.

↳ Which one - COP or POP?

A specialized team of officers is assigned the responsibility of conducting Problem-Oriented methods of solving citizen concerns. This team, which is the subject of the nomination, is called the Police and Community Together Team or PACT. The implication of the acronym is that the Police Department has made a pact with the community to work toward achieving a better quality of life for citizens who do not have to live in fear in their neighborhoods. The team has seven positions assigned at full strength. Currently there are six officers assigned who are nominated. Sergeant Rae Ferguson is the supervisor of the team and the officers are Rick Ingle, Mark Wilson, Mike Godwin, Tim Splain and Wade Wood. These officers have the responsibility of working the Problem-Solving cases in such a manner as to help the community and other departmental personnel work together toward the prescribed goals.

The nominated project was an effort to remove and eliminate the individuals who were conducting illegal activities involving drug sales, drug usage, illegal alcohol violations, prostitution and a constant disturbance of the peace in the Montford community of Asheville. The house in question is located at 177 Flint Street in Asheville. It is in the middle of an historic part of town where the Historic Association is guiding the purchase and restoration of homes by private individuals.

The Police Department became aware that a significant problem had developed by the increasing number of calls for service at that location, combined with numerous citizen

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calls and complaints regarding the fear felt from the increasing number of individuals in the area. Illegal activity being conducted at this location brought large numbers of suspicious individuals loitering in and around the house. Often, there were 25 or more people inside the house and more outside. This concentration of individuals was not limited to a specific time of day or night, but was basically around the clock. This number in itself caused an extreme amount of noise from the loud music, talking, yelling, revving car engines and the occasional gunshots fired in the vicinity. The owner of the residence, who himself was a substance abuser, was totally unable to control the activities and people in and around the residence.

The sale of narcotics in the street and the generally disruptive behavior was of major concern, certainly to the residents in the immediate block, but it became clear that the extended neighborhood was negatively affected as well. As the PACT Team began participating in the Montford Community Meetings, both the residents in the community and the police realized how badly each was affected by the activities in and around 177 Flint Street. The Police Department was feeling the frustration of not being able to do much to alleviate the fears of the residents as the calls for police service rose rapidly. The PACT Team began to investigate what resources could be utilized to aid in finding a solution to the problem.

The team began a formal case file and investigation of the situation employing problem-solving techniques consistent with departmental goals and objectives. It was clear that traditional police responses for calls for service and random patrol could not control the situation. During the analysis, the team researched numerous possibilities for the location.

① The Buncombe County Tax Office was used by team personnel to verify the actual owner of the property, who was in fact the man living there. ② The PACT Officers attempted to begin by cleaning up the area, having the City's Parks and Recreation, Street, and

Sanitation Departments work around the area. Even though these agencies worked diligently, the effort proved unsuccessful due to the constantly large numbers of individuals contributing to the problem. The Metropolitan Enforcement Group, which is an inter-agency unit funded and staffed by the City of Asheville, Buncombe County and the State of North Carolina, was providing the bulk of the covert investigation. ⁽³⁾ The team researched the possibility of having the house seized under a North Carolina General Statute regarding the abatement of public nuisances. The roadblock to this avenue was that the only two purchases of illegal substances out of house were from individuals who the team could not prove actually lived at 177 Flint Street. It had taken months and months of covert investigation to achieve the two buys, all the while the problem was growing at a rapid rate. There was no possibility of the abatement, so other avenues continued to be explored.

As this problem grew, the residents of the area became increasingly fearful of the drug dealers and suspicious people who congregated in and around the house. The neighbors felt like captives inside their homes and were too afraid to take walks or allow children to play outside. Additionally, the officers assigned to the beat were helpless to solve the problem, barely able to do more than answer the 78 calls for service to 177 Flint Street in six months. This number of calls does not reflect the calls to other locations in the area related to 177 Flint Street.

After failing with the attempt at seizure from covert activities and feeling the frustration of being ineffective to meet the needs of the community, the PACT Team met with the Montford Historic Association and discussed the plan to begin an overt disruption of the activity. Research was conducted to gather information in the following areas: call ⁽⁶⁾ histories, suspicious vehicles, suspicious individuals, types of disruptive and criminal activities, and the time frames of such activities. The residents and PACT moved toward

development of a relationship directed toward the elimination of this problem. The residents were disturbed by the noise, were losing sleep, and were fearful of retribution if they reported what they observed. In addition, the streets were jammed with suspicious foot and vehicular traffic, and the trash and filth was constant. Residents were so fed up with the situation that the flow of information from them to PACT was excellent. The residents' frustration accelerated as they could not see positive results coming from the information provided to police.

★ The PACT Team knew what was happening, why it was happening, what had been done in the past and why none of the former attempts had been successful. The beat patrol officers were frustrated because routine patrol of the area could not help due to the size of the crowd in and around the house.

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As the strategy of overt activities began, PACT began to educate the residents as to what their role should be to assist in ridding the area of this problem. PACT was honest about the numbers of officers assigned to the area, the workload each carried, and the knowledge that one officer could not break up a crowd that large conducting illegal business. PACT encouraged the residents to "vent" their frustrations. With this open forum between the police and the residents, a new bond formed which essentially was the turning point for the positive relationship between the police and the community. In the beginning of this process the community was very negative toward the police for what they perceived as ignoring, allowing or even condoning the situation. The Asheville Police Department had not traditionally been geared toward interacting in such a manner with citizens. The PACT Team accepted the verbalization of their frustrations, then introduced and invited the process of working together to solve the problem. PACT was open about the reality of the situation, and that the residents would have to take a more active role in

the process. They readily agreed and the disruption campaign began. Residents began to know the officers by their first names and vice-versa.

PACT began regular interdiction checkpoints in front of 177 Flint Street. The residents would come out and talk with officers during some of those times. The media, both television and newspaper personnel, were invited to observe such activities. Many citizens were interviewed as to what they thought of PACT Team activities in response to the problem. The positive publicity created a change in public opinion about the police. As the checkpoints were conducted, PACT developed a 9x3 card to hand to each person checked. The card explains that the individual is entering a known open air drug market and that the police are committed to eliminating the problem in order for people to live in peace with a better quality of life. The officers explained that any information would be appreciated and pointed out the exact house and people involved. During these overt activities, PACT attempted to involve the beat officers as often as possible. Two of the six PACT officers are assigned as facilitators whose responsibilities are to act as liaisons throughout the department, and to bring all employees into the Community Policing or Problem-Solving realm. The facilitators act as trainers in utilizing other agencies, businesses and organizations to find non-traditional means to solve problems.

In addition to the regular meetings with the Montford Historic Association, a free exchange of information was occurring. The residents would call PACT and provide whatever new information they had, and PACT provided updates on what they were attempting and what had proved successful. The residents spoke positively with the media about the police, and more neighbors in the extended area became involved.

PACT continued the overt attempts at disrupting activities at 177 Flint Street. In addition to the checkpoints, bicycle patrols in the area were conducted by PACT. Every person on

foot was stopped and checked. Many turned out to be area residents who thanked PACT for their efforts. Almost every day that PACT worked, at least one member of the team would go to the residence and conduct a "Knock and Talk Consent Search" asking simply to come in and look around. The beat officers were encouraged to do the same when possible. As PACT's activities increased, the illegal activity at 177 Flint became more secretive. It became apparent that the targeted individuals were now concerned.

At the November 6 Montford Historic Association meeting, the residents were discussing the progress that was being made and wondering what else could be done. PACT asked the residents what they were willing to do to further the cause. PACT discussed the concept of safety in numbers, and showing a unified front to the situation. On November 8, 1994 one of the female residents called the PACT office to say that she had commitments from 20 plus people to go down to 177 Flint Street that evening and "hang out." She said if the criminals could "hang out" and scare people, then the legitimate residents could do the same. That evening, which was a Friday night, 27 residents and PACT officers rallied in front of 177 Flint Street, at what is now known in the community as the "Anti-Drug Rally." They brought coffee, hot chocolate and warm clothes to endure the inclement weather and many brought their children in strollers. The rally lasted about five hours and a significant statement was made to the perpetrators. The community and the police were tired of what was going on and were not going to take it anymore.

The owner of the house was frightened such that he had the PACT officers assure him that this was not some sort of vigilante group who would hurt him. The unified show of force worked better than expected. Activity at the house slowed after the rally, as PACT continued the other strategies of disruption. In less than three weeks, the goal of shutting down that residence as a haven for illegal activity was achieved. The residents no longer were afraid to come outside, and no longer felt like captives in their homes.] ✓ +

PACT continued to carry on the overt activities. The Inspections Division of the city and the Environmental Control Officer were consulted to see if any violations could be found. PACT and the Historic Association requested that a street light be placed in front of the house, in order to light up the area and leave less opportunity for suspicious people and activities to be concealed. At the direction of the City of Asheville Traffic Engineer, an exception was made and Carolina Power and Light Company installed the light directly in front of the house.

On the 30th of November several officers went to the residence to conduct a "Knock and Talk" finding some 24 people inside. Pandemonium erupted from the fear the overt disruptive activities had caused, and nine people were arrested for various charges that evening. The owner of the house was finally charged with "maintaining a dwelling for the use and sale of controlled substances."

The strategies employed in this problem-solving activity were simple in design. Involvement of the neighbors by the police, having open and honest discussions, and exchanging information relaxed and improved the relationship. Simple activities which were open and visible caused extreme disruption to the house in question.

This problem had an extremely successful outcome. Since November 30, 1994 the criminal activities in and around the house have ceased. The owner thanked PACT for what occurred, even though at the time he was allowing it to happen. The Neighborhood Association was so satisfied with the results they went to City Council and publicly thanked the PACT Team and members of the department.

As the information in this case was readily available and forthcoming, involvement with many agencies, organizations and individuals was needed to reach the goal. Since this success, the Montford Community raised \$23,000 to build a storefront Resource Center, and in the center provided a brand new office for the PACT Team. The building was completed in four and one half months. Much of the materials, labor and cash were donated by area residents. Local businesses and banks in the community put up large sums of cash for the building. The building, in addition to housing the PACT Team, has an office for the beat officers, and provides an opportunity for neighbors and police to get together and become friends. It is manned by neighborhood volunteers and also has a meeting room for local meetings if needed.

The PACT Team continues to be responsible for Problem-Solving efforts city-wide, but the Montford Community simply likes having Rae, Rick, Mark, Mike, Tim and Wade around. They feel like their quality of life is the best it has been in years since 177 Flint Street was defeated. This success story was a significant episode in the struggle to unite the Police and Community, and allowed Community Oriented/Problem Solving Policing to become a reality in Asheville.