

# THE EL DORADO PARK “STONE SOUP” PARTNERSHIP RETURNING A NEIGHBORHOOD TO ITS RESIDENTS

FRESNO POLICE DEPARTMENT, CALIFORNIA, 1996

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- THE PROBLEM:** In a one-year period, Eldorado Park was responsible for 9% of the calls for service in the northeast area and was consuming a disproportionate share of police resources. The most serious problem was a juvenile gang.
- ANALYSIS:** The youth gang was out of control. The gang took over a church parking lot and intimidated the community’s impoverished residents. Fire and paramedic units would not respond to certain calls until police units had arrived and stabilized the scene. Fearing reprisal from the gang members, residents were hesitant to report crimes.
- RESPONSE:** The police cultivated relationships with neighborhood residents to encourage them to report gang members and criminal activity. The police also established the El Dorado Housing Authority, a coalition of city officials, property owners, managers, business owners and Stone Soup volunteers to exchange problems and hear solutions, suggestions, and recommendations
- ASSESSMENT:** During the first year of the project calls for service increased by 9%, while crime decreased by 26% due to increased participation under the POP philosophy. In the second year of the project, calls for service decreased by 31.5% with a 53% reduction in crime. The area is cleaner, safer and more desirable to live in.

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## INTRODUCTION

El Dorado Park is located in the northeast section of Fresno. It is approximately two square blocks with a population of 3,000 people living in 524 apartments. The area zip code 93710 houses the largest number of children living below the poverty level in the state of California. The ethnic make-up includes a variety of Asian, Hispanic, African-American and Caucasian cultures.

The northeast problem oriented policing team used the problem-solving approach to address the high number of gang, drug, graffiti, trash and sub standard housing conditions created by a large diverse population living in a small neighborhood.

This unique program consists of the motivated El Dorado Park residents consisting of a small group working within the neighborhood called the “Stone Soup” Partnership. Stone Soup was

named after a French folk tale that united a community.

The story told of two soldiers returning from the war who traveled through a small village. They knocked on every door asking if anyone could spare some food, but the people were too poor to help. Tired and hungry, the soldiers took a large black kettle and set it in the middle of the village. They filled it with water and started a fire to heat it. When the people asked what the soldiers were doing, they put two Large stones into the boiling water and explained they were making Stone Soup.

Intrigued by the concept everyone in the small town wanted to help and contributed a meat or vegetable toward the pot. The finished product was a healthy, hearty soup for all to enjoy.

By today's standards, this philosophy lives on in that if everyone would donate a small portion of their time and effort, the result would be a healthy, happy community that all could take pride in. Kathy Garabed, the founder of "Stone Soup" had these same goals in mind for the El Dorado community. All that was needed were the two soldiers to boil the water.

The results of our efforts and achievements have received both local and national recognition, including The Presidents Service Award "Points of Light" Medal to the Stone Soup Partnership.

## **SCANNING**

In June of 1994, the Northeast Area Police Commander requested that the POP team research the problems in El Dorado Park. In a one-year period, the area was responsible for 9% (1,241) of the calls for service in the northeast area. El Dorado Park used the largest amount of resources in the northeast portion of the city, which encompasses 28 square miles.

The most serious problem was the juvenile gang that had developed and was living within the El Dorado community. Associated problems included drug use, alcohol, gambling, gang intimidation, drive-by shootings, graffiti, auto theft, extortion, burglary and theft.

We observed drug dealing from open windows that faced the streets. Cars would drive up and order narcotics like a fast food drive through. Other considerations were blight, trash, debris and illegal dumping in the alleys.

It was obvious that there was nothing for the youth in this area to do. There were no parks, playgrounds or activities for the youth to get involved in. The parents and elderly were helpless to control the situation. Children and young adults were being forced into gangs as families could only stand back and watch.

Living conditions were below housing code standards as many apartments were found with exposed electrical wiring, stopped up plumbing, inoperative kitchen appliances and pest control problems. The buildings remained in these conditions for extended periods of time due to the lack of care or concern.

The owners and managers felt that the properties were already "lost" to the neighborhood. Several of the surrounding area businesses and commercial property lay vacant. One of these complexes consisted of four buildings, which adjoined the southern boundary of El Dorado Park. The buildings were unsecured with broken doors and windows allowing for transient occupancy, drug use, and other illegal activities. The buildings were covered with graffiti marking gang territory.

## **ANALYSIS**

When the area police commander assigned El Dorado Park to our POP unit, the department had serious doubts about the future of the neighborhood, whose adverse history dates back to the mid 1960's. Nicknamed "Sin City," its reputation was a place where college students followed Timothy Leary's advice to "tune in, turn on, and drop out."

It has remained this way for decades defying all efforts to foster a wholesome neighborhood environment. The area surrounding El Dorado Park includes Fresno State University to the east, Wesley Methodist Church and an affluent older residential community to the north, a middle-income neighborhood and elementary

school to the west and a vacant business complex to the south.

The Tiny Rascal Gang (TRG) within El Dorado Park was out of control and there was little or no support from the community. Money was unavailable for assistance projects and the residents were living at the lowest level of poverty in the state.

Available police resources provided for only reactive response as opposed to a proactive presence. The patrol units could only respond to crimes and acts that had already occurred. Crimes against persons remained unsolvable with the lack of witness cooperation or assistance by the public.

Gang activities were so flagrant that the TRG took over the parking lot of the neighborhood Methodist Church. They would interfere with the children's activities at the church. At one point staff members went out and confronted the TRG asking them to leave the property and stop interfering with the operation of the church. The following day, someone had spray-painted graffiti on the church buildings and vandalized the vehicles in the parking lot.

The department gang unit, narcotics enforcement, patrol officers, and crime analysis unit all agreed that the area was out of control. Fire and paramedic units would not respond to certain calls until police units had arrived and stabilized the scene.

Child and adult protective services were constantly called into the area with reports of abuse. The sanitation division would no longer repair trash containers that were burnt, vandalized or covered with graffiti.

The Wesley Methodist Church was attempting to have afternoon and evening activities for the neighborhood families. Gang members who would stand outside of the church facility intimidating the youth in the area and discouraging them from participating were interrupting these efforts.

In the evenings, the TRG would loiter in the parking lot frightening the volunteers of the

church away from participating in these activities.

Criminals considered El Dorado Park a "safe haven" for illegal activities. The offenders could live in the area and not worry about being confronted or identified by their neighbors. The housing conditions were some of the worst in the Fresno area. It was thought that the owners and managers were "slum lords" who had no other concern than collecting the rent.

Doors and windows were missing or broken and not repaired. The landscaping was not maintained and graffiti covered the walls, garages and fences of the complexes. Air conditioning and swamp coolers were often inoperative and unsafe making them a health and safety hazard. Second floor railings were in disrepair and swimming pools were poorly kept and unsafe to use. A majority of the tenants had fortified the front and rear of their homes to insure their safety.

## **RESPONSE**

The immediate goals for the project were traditional policing tactics. Our objectives were to stop gang activities, improve housing conditions and increase contact with the residents. By achieving this, we would gain the respect, trust and confidence of the neighborhood. The families could then contribute to the "soup" and help us identify and locate gang members and problem people living within El Dorado Park.

Our intent was to weed out the neighborhood problems and seed the area with families who could contribute to the community. By using the Stone Soup philosophy, we were working together with the residents to help and train them in how to build for the future and clean up their neighborhood of gangs and crime. Vacant apartments, stores and businesses would once again be filled by a neighborhood dedicated and committed to the future.

To begin, we went into the neighborhood and knocked on every door. We made contact with people on the street and let them know the kind of "soup" we could all create working together.

A pamphlet was prepared and handed out to every person, which explained how he or she could contribute to the pot. Since they were afraid of possible retaliation, we assured everyone that all information would remain confidential.

The crimes we targeted dealt with gangs, loitering, graffiti, drugs, alcohol, contributing to the delinquency of minors and gross violations of public assistance programs.

Our second phase was to contact the property owners and managers. They wanted our help but were hesitant about our program and skeptical as to why the police would want to become involved. A letter was mailed to all of the property owners and managers. An informational meeting was arranged and all were invited to come.

This was the “meat” of the soup. We needed their input. We wanted to know what bureaucracy and red tape problems they had experienced with the residents, neighborhood and city agencies in the past. Our intention was to bring these parties together for the first time and show what the POP team could do to help them.

The response was phenomenal as virtually everyone responded and attended. This close working relationship resulted in one of the most productive accomplishments within the community, the creation of the El Dorado Housing Association (ELHA). A governing board was elected and monthly meetings were scheduled where residents, city officials, property owners, managers, business owners and Stone Soup volunteers could meet together, exchange problems and hear solutions, suggestions and recommendations.

Our kettle was at a full boil and everyone had something to add to the requesting redevelopment funds. Impressed by the unity and courage of the community, the neighborhood was awarded \$170,000 under the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. A \$25,000 Grant was awarded by the Fresno Regional Foundation towards

construction of a community park within El Dorado.

Stone Soup has since incorporated as a non-profit organization and is negotiating to purchase four vacant office buildings adjacent to El Dorado Park with the CDGB funds. These office buildings total 16,000 square feet and were targets for vandalism, graffiti and trespassing.

The master plan is to relocate a police substation and POP office into one of these buildings. The office space and parking will be provided free of rent to the city. This will allow for police patrolling through the area on a constant basis, safeguarding the neighborhood and property. The remaining three buildings will be leased to the public and private sector to pay for the overall costs.

Commitments have been received from Fresno State University who plan to lease a building for an off-site education and training center. Another building is being evaluated for use as a health clinic provided by a joint venture between the Kaiser Permanente and Blue Cross Medical Corporations. The philosophy of rebuilding is being achieved as these vacant boarded buildings are revitalized into a working community center.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The El Dorado Project has been in operation for twenty-four months. During its first year, calls for service (CFS) have increased with the participation of the residents, managers and property owners. The Mayor, City Manager and Development Department Heads were impressed by this project showing a 26% reduction in crime.

The project has unified the working relationships between residents, the police POP team, city and county government, Fresno State University, Fresno Unified School District community leaders, neighborhood businesses and property owners.

A statistical analysis from July 1993-1994 before POP was implemented accounted for

1,241 CFS. During July 1994-1995, there were 1,353 CFS, an increase of 9%. Even though the CFS increased, crime was reduced by 26% with citizen participation under the POP philosophy. During July 1995-1996 there were 850 CFS, a reduction of 391 calls or 31.5% over the first year in the project.

To this date following a two-year study, the success of the project, using the POP philosophy, has resulted in a 53% reduction in crime. The area is cleaner, safer and more desirable to live in.