

## **The Angel's Triangle Abstract**

In 1995, the El Paso Police Department began a new initiative to rehabilitate a troubled neighborhood that for years had been plagued with drug dealers, prostitutes and gang activity. Traditional methods of policing had failed to control the increasing crime rate and the neighborhood was known as the "Devil's Triangle". The residents had lost confidence and trust in the police.

Community Policing philosophy had been introduced in El Paso in the early 1990s, with an emphasis on community engagement and problem-solving techniques. To facilitate the participation of the citizens, five Regional Command Centers were opened to serve the different areas of town. The Northeast Regional Command identified the "Devil's Triangle" as a prime target for community policing methods.

One of the first steps taken by the Department in the implementation of Community Policing was the addition of a Police Area Representative (PAR) Unit in each region. New PAR officers received special training in problem-solving techniques and citizen participation.

The "Devil's Triangle" was located in the district assigned to PAR Officer Raul Prieto. Officer Prieto utilized a community group called the "Angel's Triangle Association" (ATA) to provide a foundation for the Police Department's endeavor to reduce crime in the area. The ATA had been organized in 1993 by residents of the "Devil's Triangle" to improve the image of their neighborhood.

A Town Hall meeting was held to seek community input. While only a few citizens attended that first meeting, the first seeds of cooperation were planted.

Officer Prieto enlisted several other PAR officers and inspectors from the City's Building Services Department to walk the area with him, issuing written warnings wherever they observed a violation of City ordinances, such as graffiti, junked cars, and substandard housing. Many of those notified corrected the violations, but those who ignored the warning received a citation.

Subsequent Town Hall meetings generated more participation, and soon a few Neighborhood Watch groups were formed. The PAR officers joined with the Bike and Foot patrol officers to make contacts with businesses, apartment managers, and school administrators. The apartment managers formed an information network which helped to remove chronic bad elements from the neighborhood.

In the three years since the program began, crime in all major categories has dropped steadily in the renamed "Angel's Triangle". Equally important, the attitude of the residents toward the police has done a 180 degree turn around.

## The Angel's Triangle

### **El Paso Police Department Herman Goldstein Award Submission June 1998**

#### **A. Scanning**

The El Paso Police Department faced a monumental challenge when they decided to use community policing methods to rehabilitate a high crime neighborhood in Northeast El Paso. For many years, the area in question had been plagued with drug dealers, prostitutes, and gang activity. A triangular shaped tract bordered by three major streets: the Patriot Freeway, Dyer, and Hondo Pass, the area was home to 7,705 individuals (according to 1990 and 1992 census data). The population was largely composed of young families receiving public assistance, low income families, and families of lower ranking military retirees. Nearly one third of the population was under the age of 12, and many of these children attended Wainwright Elementary School. According to a 1994 report submitted by the El Paso Independent School District, Wainwright's student enrollment was 100% economically disadvantaged.

The unemployment rate in the area approached 15%, significantly higher than the city-wide average of 10%, and the entire neighborhood was covered with low income rental housing units, many of which were poorly maintained and marked with graffiti by neighborhood gang members. Drug deals were openly conducted in the apartment common areas and the neighborhood park. By 1994, the crime rate in the area had reached an all-time high.

Traditional methods of policing: stopping suspicious individuals, responding to incidents after they occurred, and saturating the area with patrol cars, had failed to control the increasing rate of crime. The residents had lost hope and feared to leave their homes at night. Things were so bad that the neighborhood was dubbed "The Devil's Triangle."

## B. Analysis

In 1995, the El Paso Police Department began to try another approach. The community policing philosophy had been introduced in the early 1990s, with an emphasis on community engagement and problem-solving techniques. To facilitate the participation of the citizens, many police functions were decentralized to five Regional Command Centers located in each section of town.

The Northeast Regional Command identified the "Devil's Triangle" as a prime target for community policing methods. Rather than merely treating the symptoms (apprehending and arresting perpetrators after a crime had been committed) it was decided to identify the root of the neighborhood problems, to understand the conditions that gave rise to those problems, and to develop and implement a solution tailored to relieve those conditions.

To accomplish this, an ongoing dialogue with the community had to be established. Problem solving without community engagement risks overlooking the most pressing community concerns and tackling problems that are of little concern to the residents with tactics that the public may find objectionable.

One of the first steps the Department had taken in the implementation of Community Policing was the addition of a Police Area Representative (PAR) Unit in each region.

Officers who requested this assignment were required to have at least two years experience as a patrol officer and a willingness to work closely with the residents of their assigned districts. They also received specialized training in Community Policing philosophies and problem-solving techniques. In the Northeast region, each PAR officer was assigned to cover two police districts. The "Devil's Triangle" was located in District 64, which was assigned to PAR Officer Raul Prieto, who had four years patrol experience on the force.

Officer Prieto had heard of a group called "The Angel's Triangle Association" (ATA) which was organized in 1993 by Mr. and Mrs. Luis Aguilera, community activists who resided in the "Devil's Triangle" area. This organization had approximately 25 members who objected to their neighborhood's nickname and believed it was contributing to the degradation of the area. They had been meeting in a neighborhood elementary school (Wainwright) and had identified a list of pressing community needs including a health clinic, a recreational facility, cleaner neighborhoods and youth activities.

The Angel's Triangle Association had already taken action to address some of these needs. The first projects undertaken by members of the ATA involved cleaning vacant lots in the area of weeds and trash and sponsoring picnics afterward for the volunteers. They focused their attention on attracting young people to participate, and also sponsored a neighborhood Boy Scout troop.

In 1994, the Association was successful in obtaining funding from the State of Texas for a small clinic to be operated at Wainwright Elementary school in cooperation with the school district. This was considered a pilot project for other school/ community/ health joint

operations. The ATA also held a contest for school children to design a logo for the organization and started printing a quarterly newsletter.

Members of the ATA were instrumental in assisting the City of El Paso's Community Development Department to obtain designation of their neighborhood as an "Enterprise Community" in 1994. This program was funded by a grant through the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and provided funds for job training, day care and other community services in specific areas of selected towns experiencing high rates of poverty and unemployment.

Officer Prieto believed the grassroots approach taken by the ATA would provide a foundation for the Police Department's endeavor to reduce crime in the area. He contacted Mr. Aguilera and began to attend the ATA meetings. He informed the group of the new approach toward crime that was being taken by the Police Department. The Association was blunt about the fact that, up until then, the police had been a part of the problem. Continuing to refer to the neighborhood as the "Devil's Triangle" perpetuated a negative image of the residents and created animosity toward the police.

Officer Prieto explained to the group that with the use of crime analysis of the neighborhood's calls for service the police had detected a pattern of activity and behavior that would only respond to a long-term plan of action. Through community mobilization and increased enforcement of municipal ordinances concerning junked and abandoned vehicles, condemned and substandard housing, and graffiti, they could begin to attack the root of the problem by eliminating the physical appearance of decay that permeated the neighborhood.

A Town Hall meeting was scheduled in the evening at the nearby Wellington Chew Senior Citizen's Center to seek further neighborhood input and to inform the residents about the Department's plan. The police handed out 900 flyers informing area residents and businesses about this meeting. Only 10-15 citizens showed up for that first meeting but Officer Prieto wasn't discouraged. He asked for their input and advice on community issues. One concern expressed by the residents was a lack of information and education about the community resources available to them. Officer Prieto answered their questions and encouraged the residents to become more assertive in seeking help. The first seeds of cooperation were planted.

#### C. Response

After that initial meeting, Officer Prieto persuaded the police to start referring to the neighborhood as the "Angel's Triangle." He enlisted several other PAR officers and inspectors from the City's Building Services Department to walk the area with him, issuing written notices whenever they saw a violation of the City ordinances. Between 100-150 notices were handed out. These notices generated a multitude of telephone calls to the Regional Command. This created a perfect opportunity for the PAR officers to explain their new plan of action, to introduce the concept of community policing and to inform the callers about the next scheduled Town Hall meeting.

The majority of callers proceeded to correct whatever violation they had been warned about, but about 20% ignored the notices. Officer Prieto and the other officers of the PAR

unit canvassed the neighborhood again, this time issuing citations to those not in compliance.

The next Town Hall meeting attracted more participation. Following a recommendation of the Angel's Triangle Association, the police wore plain clothes, instead of uniforms. Officer Prieto asked for the residents' help and support to improve the image and quality of life in their community. He also referred to the neighborhood by its new nickname "The Angel's Triangle." He introduced the idea of community mobilization, through the formation of Neighborhood Watches, marches, citizen patrols and youth outreach. He explained the police role in civil law enforcement: issuing citations for fire, health and code violations, enforcing licensing regulations and evictions. He shared the police vision of a physical redesign of the environment through neighborhood clean-ups and improved facilities.

Three Neighborhood Watch groups were formed at this meeting, and Officer Prieto requested that they act as his "eyes and ears" within the community. He promised that the police would follow up on any incidents that were reported. He also asked the residents to take back control of the Wellington Chew neighborhood park which had fallen into disrepair and was frequented only by gangs. He encouraged them to use the park and guaranteed a higher police presence which would discourage the criminal element.

In 1995, Chief of Police Russ Leach initiated a new city-wide program called "El Paso Pride Day" as a practical application of the "broken windows theory." Fixing dilapidated areas of town prevents apathy from causing further deterioration, both physical and in terms of criminal behavior. On one Saturday in October, the officers and staff of the

Regional Command Centers joined with citizens to make a concentrated effort to clean up their community. In 1995, more than 5,000 volunteers were recruited to participate in collecting garbage and painting over graffiti. Local merchants donated supplies, food and drink for the volunteers.

This concept appealed to the members of the Angel's Triangle Association, who had already been conducting neighborhood clean-ups on a smaller scale. Their first clean-up day on April 1, 1995 had attracted nearly 200 citizen participants. The second one held in September 1995 drew more than 100 volunteers who collected 12 cubic yards of trash which filled 150 bags. Participating in the city-wide event was a natural way to involve even more area residents.

El Paso Pride Day was so successful, it became an annual event, and in 1996 more than 6,500 volunteers turned out. The "Angel's Triangle" neighborhood pitched in enthusiastically. The Northeast Rotary Club donated food and drink for the volunteers to hold a picnic following the clean-up. By the time the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual El Paso Pride Day took place in 1997, the media had become aware of the many positive changes taking place in this particular neighborhood and spotlighted the area in several newspaper articles.

The Regional Commander had given the PAR officers leeway in fashioning solutions to the problems in their neighborhoods, and they were guaranteed the support of other units in implementing any changes. In 1997, the PAR Unit established a partnership with the Bike and Foot Patrol officers in District 64. Together, they made contacts in the community with business owners, apartment managers, and school administrators. The apartment managers had a stake in the improvement of the neighborhood, because drug deals were

frequently taking place on their premises. They also experienced a continual problem with tenants being evicted from one complex but relocating to another nearby complex. They felt singled out by the new increased enforcement of code violations but had received no assistance from the police for their unique problems.

The managers were advised of the reasons for the increased police enforcement of the municipal ordinances, and were asked to cooperate by making needed repairs to their properties. They were encouraged to contact the Regional Command and to file reports if they had any problems with trespassers on their property. By documenting these incidents, the police were able to identify, apprehend and arrest drug dealers who had previously used the common grounds of apartment complexes to conduct their "business."

The apartment managers asked for and received information and education on eviction proceedings and were asked to strictly enforce lease requirements. They formed a "Manager's Network", with more than 20 members. Prior to renting to a new tenant, the members of the network would call each other for references. This helped to remove many chronic bad elements from the neighborhood.

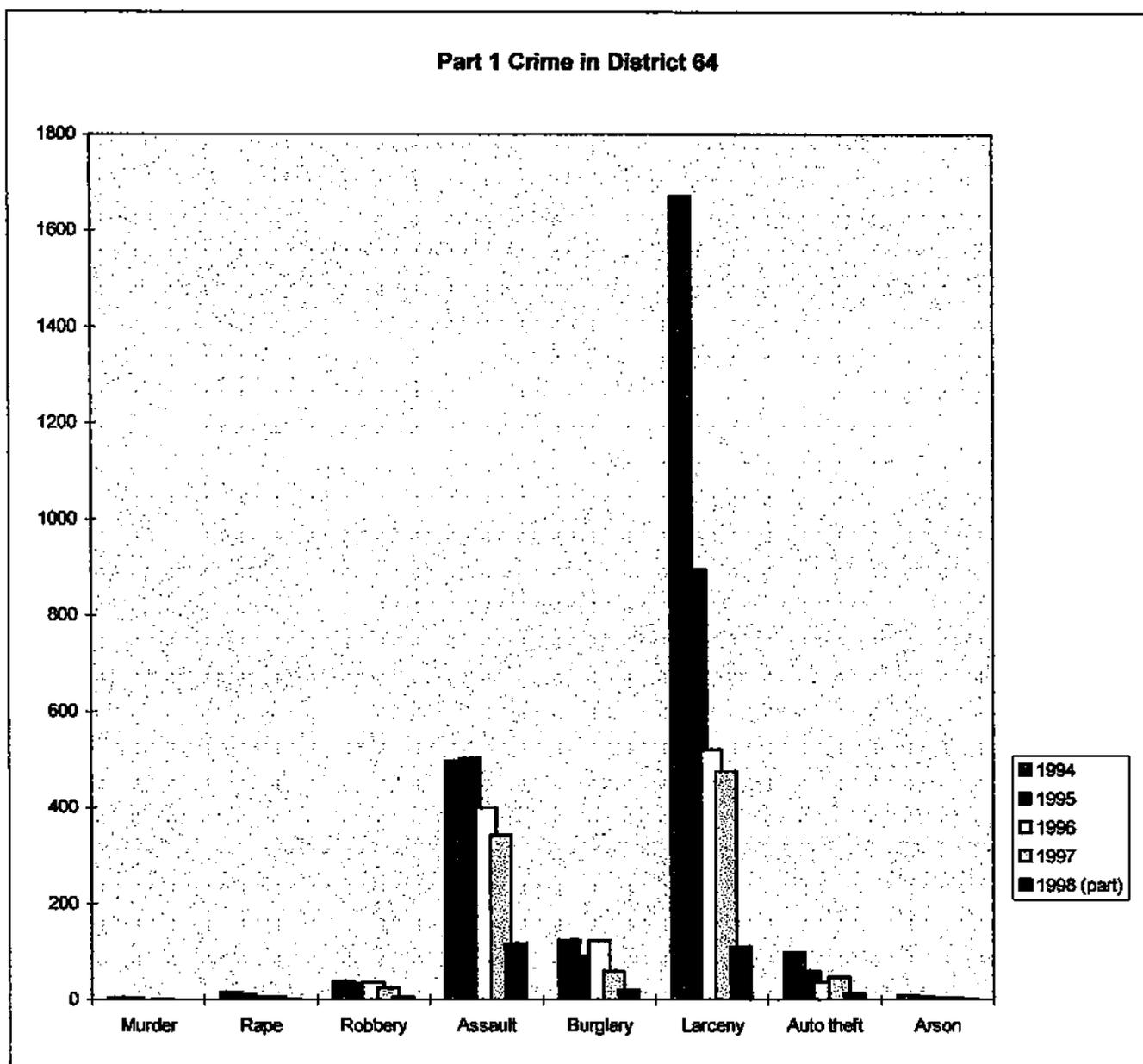
#### **D. Assessment**

The results have been impressive. In the three years since the program began, the rate of Part I crime in the Angel's Triangle has dropped in all categories. In 1995 there was a 35% overall decrease in reported crimes, in 1996 crime rates declined 30%, and 1997 showed a drop of 15%. This steady pattern of decreasing crime rates is continuing into 1998. (See Exhibit A).

Exhibit A

**Part 1 Crime in the Angel's Triangle (District 64)**

	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto theft	Arson
1994	4	15	38	495	124	1672	98	8
1995	3	10	33	501	91	893	59	6
1996	0	6	35	398	121	518	35	3
1997	1	6	24	340	58	473	46	3
1998 (part)	0	1	5	117	19	110	12	1



The project has reached the stage of changing social and individual behavior, and Mr. Luis Aguilera of the Angel's Triangle Association was recently quoted as saying, "the attitude of the residents toward the police has done a 180 degree turn around." The present focus of Officer Prieto is the maintenance of a better quality of life in the "Angel's Triangle" which has come about as a result of empowering the residents. With their success had come a willingness to be more assertive in trying to obtain simple benefits like street lights and sidewalks. The community has learned a little about the political process and the strength in uniting behind a common cause.

In recognition of his initiative and persistence in mobilizing the community, and the achievement of a reduction in crime, Officer Prieto was named the El Paso Police Department's "Officer of the Year" for 1997. He was also selected by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education (TCLEOSE) to receive their "Public Service Award" in May 1998 for his hard work in fostering a relationship with the residents in the "Angel's Triangle" and for improving the quality of life in that neighborhood.

In the coming year, another community goal will be achieved with the construction of a new neighborhood recreational facility, the Nolan Richardson Center, which was approved for funding in 1997 from the City's Community Development Block Grant. This facility will be used to provide a safe environment for area youth to socialize and participate in recreational, educational and fitness programs sponsored by the City's Parks and Recreation Department. The land for the building, which is adjacent to the existing Wellington Chew Park, has been purchased and the architectural design is nearly complete.

Construction is expected to start in September 1998. The total cost of this facility is expected to be \$1,961,625. The completed facility will be maintained by the City's Parks Department. The ATA and other residents of the neighborhood will serve as members of an Advisory Committee which will make recommendations to the City on the programming, provide volunteers to work at the Center, and sponsor fund raisers to help with operational costs.

**E. Agency and Officer Information**

This problem solving-initiative was adopted by the entire Northeast Regional Command Center as an example of Community Policing. The initial community contact was made by Officer Raul Prieto of the Police Area Representative (PAR) Unit, who was assigned to the district containing the "Angel's Triangle." Officer Prieto and his fellow PAR officers had the full support and cooperation of the Regional Commander, and more than 35 officers were ultimately involved in the project. From Patrol officers to Impact officers (specialists in burglary), to the officers assigned to the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH) Unit which works with gang offenses, all benefited by having a better relationship with the community. The PAR officers would turn over information received from the residents to the specialized units, aiding in the apprehension and arrest of criminals. In the three years since the program began, the rate of crime has dropped significantly and the residents feel safer in their homes.

## **Training**

Prior to the execution of this program, the Police Academy offered a two week training course to new PAR officers in problem-solving techniques and community policing philosophy. Not every PAR officer was able to attend, but additional courses have been offered since. In addition, books and reading materials were made available to the officers. Local seminars and teleconferencing with other PAR units across the country have occurred on a regular basis.

## **Obstacles**

The suspicion and lack of trust felt by the residents toward the police was a significant initial obstacle to overcome. Following a recommendation of the Angel's Triangle Association, the police walked the neighborhood and attended meetings out of uniform. Their goal was to build relationships in the community as people first and police second. Once the citizens began to see positive results in the neighborhood, their level of trust and cooperation increased dramatically.

Another obstacle was the resident's lack of education and information about available community resources. Guest speakers were brought in to the Town Hall meetings to address specific citizen concerns.

The area apartment managers also resisted change at first because they saw only the expense incurred by making repairs to their buildings. Once they began reporting criminal activity and saw police action in making arrests, their participation grew. The establishment of the "Manager's Network" further benefited the managers by improving the quality of their tenants and thereby decreasing the likelihood of problems.

## **Resources**

Many partnerships were forged in order to make this project a reality. Resources committed to the project came from the El Paso Independent School District, which provided a meeting location in Wainwright Elementary School and helped with the printing of flyers, and the Northeast Rotary Club which provided food and drink for volunteers to picnic after the Pride Day activities.

Other City Departments became involved through the efforts of Officer Prieto, especially the Building Services Department which walked the neighborhood with the officers to determine code violations, and the Sanitation Department, which picked up trash after the mini-pride days held in the community. The City of El Paso also lent support through the approval of \$1,961,625 in Community Development Block Grant funding for the purchase of land and the construction of the new Nolan Richardson Center within the Angel's Triangle. The Parks Department will be responsible for the upkeep of the center after construction. The City has therefore made a substantial investment in this neighborhood and will continue to do so.

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