

1311 Fairmont: Drug Dealers' Demolition of a Neighborhood Leads to Their Operation's Demolition



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Abstract

Regardless of the types of goods produced, establishing a successful business enterprise requires skill, ingenuity and perseverance. As a community policing officer, I was challenged to develop appropriate and effective methods of addressing a common problem: a drug house where gang and other criminal activity frequently disturbed surrounding neighbors. My attention was called to the house by community members that complained about the activities that occurred there on a regular basis. However, an analysis of the calls for service at that site for the past five years did not support these contentions. Although there were several calls for service, most involved traffic stops and abandoned cars.

Upon further investigation, I found that drug enforcement officers were following drug buyers from the house, and pulling them over a few blocks away. In addition, the tenants of the house had installed many warning devices to allow them ample time in the case of a raid. They included videocameras outside the building, steel reinforced windows and doors, lookouts with walkie talkies, and a police scanner.

Beyond continuing the execution of search warrants and arresting buyers, it did not appear that anything additional could be done to address the problem. However, on a raid, pictures of the condition of the house were taken, documenting the dangerous state of the structure. These pictures were taken to the City's Neighborhood Services Department, where an inspector immediately cited the owner for dozens of code violations. The owner was given thirty days to decide whether he wished to fix the house or have it demolished.

Contrary to popular belief, the owner did contract for some limited repairs, but did not obtain any building permits. At a final meeting between all parties involved, it was agreed that

the house was in such poor condition that it would not be financially feasible to repair it. The owner voluntarily had it demolished.

Soon after this occurred, I conducted an informal survey with all surrounding residents. All appeared pleased that the house was no longer a "drug house", and felt that the problems associated with that house had diminished. The majority of respondents stated that there was still some drug activity on a nearby corner, but that it was not nearly as frequent as it had once been. The persons operating the house certainly are not doing the dealing; both have been sentenced to fifteen years in prison on other charges.

The City of Joliet was founded in 1833, along the Desplaines River. The local economy was based on several industries that utilized the river as a method of transporting their goods. Our city slowly grew over the decades into a working class town, dependent upon the factory jobs that were plentiful. As the nation's economy shifted from manufacturing to service, Joliet suffered severely. At one point in time in the 1970's, the unemployment rate was the highest in the country. Workers that could no longer afford to stay abandoned the small homes in which they once resided.

Today, our local economy has made much progress towards recovery. The unemployment rate is down, housing starts are at an all-time high, and the population keeps growing by leaps and bounds. Unfortunately, many of the small abandoned homes have been allowed to deteriorate to the point that the remaining homes that are not condemned are hot spots for drugs, gang activity, and a variety of other criminal behaviors. The situation as I describe it is not necessarily unique; cities and towns across the country have experienced similar decay. Police departments have had to address gang and drug activity under many of the same conditions. On the other hand, some of the events that unfolded in my area were both challenging and creative on the part of offenders.

I was assigned to this area as a community policing officer in 1995 after receiving several weeks of specialized community policing and problem-solving training from my sergeant. As with all officers assigned to the Neighborhood Oriented Policing Team, my job eight hours a day is to patrol and perform community policing activities in a relatively small area. This area, located in the Northeast Section of the City, included a housing project and many small homes occupied by low income residents.

With a barrel full of ideas and good intentions, I began the extraordinarily daunting task of familiarizing myself with the neighborhood and neighbors. I say "extraordinarily" because those residents that are not involved with criminal activity are often scared, isolated, and unwilling to trust the police. Convincing residents to speak out and become involved in their community is sometimes more difficult than convincing a hungry snake from eating you. After many months of introducing myself, and showing community members my concern with their neighborhood, their resistance began to wear thin.

Informal surveys of residents led me to a house that many people claimed was a drug house. Residents complained that there was car and pedestrian traffic at all hours, gang activity, and harassment by people that congregated there. Eager to begin a problem-solving project, I performed an analysis of calls for service on the property. However, the data did not support community members' contentions. There was in fact a steady stream of incidents, but few involved any serious crimes. The bulk of the calls concerned traffic stops, abandoned vehicle complaints, and suspicious auto calls.

Unwilling to let the project drop, I had discussions with drug task force officers, and continued observing the house. Through perseverance, I learned that there was actually quite a lot of drug activity occurring, but that the persons operating out of the house had made some serious fortifications to prevent getting caught. According to informants, steel bars were placed on all windows, doors had been fortified with steel, video cameras had been installed outside the building to track pedestrian traffic, a police scanner was used, and lookouts utilized walkie talkies.

These items certainly explained the discrepancy between what residents claimed, and what the police department's data contained. Residents were too intimidated to call police on

incidents that occurred at the house, thus minimizing the number of calls to service. Additionally, the persons operating out of the house were both closely monitoring police activity in order to remove all evidence before police could find it and making it as difficult as possible for drug enforcement officers from entering the home on raids.

Through cooperation with the City's Neighborhood Services Department, research into the ownership of this house provided additional insight about the owners of this property, and their probable motivations. The absentee landlord resided in a neighboring city, and purchased the property from a well-known drug king for one hundred dollars. Apparently his only purpose for purchasing the property was to provide his sons unlimited access to an empty house. No one resided there on a full time basis, but rather used it solely for drug trafficking. Given the house's history, and the fact that it was totally uninhabitable, it is highly unlikely that the owner was unfamiliar with the activities that occurred within.

Since my primary concern was to make the area livable for all residents, I attempted to discuss the problem of the traffic and gang activity with the two sons that were using the house to no avail. My second line of attack was to maintain the status quo until a better plan could be designed. This included tracking the drug enforcement officers' activities of making controlled purchases and performing search warrants.

While this was going on, I struggled to find the best approaches to gauging exactly what was going on, and how to address it. I spoke with several departments that had utilized All-Purpose Vehicles in serving search warrants. I learned that the supply of drugs was being kept at a nearby house and held two surveillances to observe the transfer of drugs. I kept in close contact with the drug enforcement task force to ensure that all parties were kept abreast of all activities.

Further discussion with drug enforcement officers revealed that several transactions were actually documented, but buyers had not been caught at the site, but rather nearby. Since the addresses did not match the address of the house, it was impossible to gauge exactly how many persons had been caught with drugs after purchasing them at the house unless someone manually tracked it as it occurred. However, at least a total of fourteen arrests for possession of controlled substances had been made between May of 1994 and January of 1997, and drug enforcement officers were able to trace the drugs directly back to the house. This discovery convinced me that if the drug trafficking was stopped at this house, the neighborhood would be safer, and one less drug house would be available for buyers.

On the last search warrant executed, no drugs were confiscated. Although the outcome may have been disappointing, a new strategy emerged. Through videotape and still photos of the house during and after the search, the deplorable condition of this house was formally documented. There were obviously many City Code Violations.

In a stroke of inspiration, I brought this information to the City's Neighborhood Services Department, to ask whether the house could be demolished. An inspector viewed the evidence, made a site visit in person, and then proceeded to cite the home for dozens of violations that, if repaired, would cost an estimated forty thousand dollars to repair. The best description of this house was given by one of the officers: "If a strong wind came by, this house would just collapse." There were plumbing, electrical, heating, structural and foundational problems. This included electrical, heating, and plumbing problems as well as insufficiencies with the foundation.

A letter was drafted by a Neighborhood Services Inspector to the owner of the house listing all of the code violations. He was given thirty days to decide whether he wished to

expend the money to repair it, or have it demolished. In the meantime, the property was condemned. Neither the Inspector nor I realistically expected that the owner would be willing to spend any money on repairs. After all, his total investment to date on the house was around one hundred dollars. A few days after speaking with the owner of the house, the Inspector placed the property on petition for approval for demolition.

Contrary to our expectations, the owner did contract with a company for approximately four thousand dollars' worth of repairs. However, he had not attained any permits, as the owner was advised was necessary. The contractor was ordered to stop work until the proper permits could be issued. One week later, a meeting was called between the owners, the inspector, the contractors, and the head of the City's Community and Economic Development Department. All parties made another site visit to the house, and it was decided that the repairs would not be cost effective. The property was condemned and labeled unfit for occupancy until it could be demolished. Rather than wait for the City to perform this task, the owner voluntarily had it done.

These events occurred over one year ago. Since the house no longer exists, there have not been any calls for service since its demolition. The gang and drug activity has not been completely eradicated from the area, but it has been diminished somewhat. I conducted a door-to-door survey approximately a month after the house had been destroyed, and asked residents what they now thought about the neighborhood. Those that responded felt that the problems had decreased, but activity still occurred at a nearby corner. Many were unwilling to supply their names, when told that it would be optional.

The neighborhood has been improved through the eradication of one drug house. Although the purpose of this project was not necessarily to involve community members in neighborhood functions, most still failed to become active in their neighborhood. The next step

for me, at least, is to attempt to involve them more heavily in the eradication of other drug houses, and the roots of other problems. This project may have been a complete success, but the contribution of residents would make victory that much more sweet.