

Problem Oriented Policing Conference Proposal

Project Title: Problem Solving Partnership Shuts Door on Illegal Massage Parlor

Participants: Lt. Diane Groomes (Police Service Area 309 Lieutenant)
James Kane (PSA 309 community activist)
Clark Ray (Neighborhood Services Coordinator for political Ward Two, which includes PSA 309)

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SUMMARY

This success story describes a problem solving initiative that worked through the power of a neighborhood partnership among police, community, and city agencies. Backed by the enforcement authority of police and city agencies, residents in a Washington, D.C., neighborhood that had been beleaguered in the past by street prostitution took on an illegal "spa" and closed it down to prevent the prostitution problem from flaring up again. From this experience, they developed a model now being applied to similar establishments in their community.

SCANNING

What problem did you address in your POP project?

The problem addressed was an illegal massage parlor that opened under the guise of an exercise studio. Residents investigated the problem by approaching the business as customers where they were greeted by a hostess and led to one of eight small rooms with beds. They brought the problem to the attention of the Police Service Area team and the PSA Lieutenant Diane Groomes. She conducted a walk-through of the area with Jim Kane, a resident who lived near the business, so that she could observe the problem firsthand.

Why did you select this problem over others?

Residents were intensely concerned because prostitution and its related problems had plagued the area for decades. Throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s, prostitution brought to the area horrible traffic jams, drugs, trash such as used condoms, needles, and other drug paraphernalia, and finally, the violent murders of three prostitutes. One resident compared Saturday nights in the area to Mardi Gras, but with more fear, drugs, and violence. Kane still keeps a large jar filled with used crack vials he collected from the alleys behind his apartment during those days to illustrate to visitors how bad the problem was.

Thanks to an aggressive focused law enforcement strategy implemented in the mid-1990s, and continued involvement of the community with the police, prostitution in the area is virtually non-existent today. Fearful that this massage parlor would gain a foothold in the community and undo the ongoing economic revitalization of the area,

residents brought this concern to the attention of their PSA team as the number one problem they wanted to address.

ANALYSIS

What analysis was done concerning the problem?

Analysis of the problem is the crucial second step of the Partnerships for Problem Solving five-step model used by the Department. The five steps of the model are:

9. Target a problem
2. Understand the problem
3. Create a Plan
4. Take Action and Review Progress
5. Celebrate and Create a Lasting Community Presence

Kane and Groomes worked together to identify the stakeholders who could impact the problem, and then convened a strategizing meeting. Stakeholders were:

- Jim Kane, the community activist who first noted the problem;
- Ward Two Neighborhood Services Coordinator Clark Ray, who coordinates resources from city agencies-through the Mayor's Office-to address neighborhood disorder problems;
- David Stephens, the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner for Ward Two, a grass-roots elected official who represents neighborhood concerns to his Ward's city council member;

- Jim Abdo, a neighborhood businessman with a strong knowledge of city rules and codes related to building and development;
- Wayne Dickson, the president of the local neighborhood civic association;
- Windy Abdul Rahim, a representative from the office of the Ward Two council member, and
- *an outreach coordinator from the Office of the Public Advocate, who in part, serves as a liaison between the Mayor's office and civic groups, ANCs, and other community organizations.*

First the group analyzed the problem, using the crime triangle to identify offender, victim, and location information. Group members took on assignments to gather the missing information needed to devise a strategy. This included:

Offender information:

- names and addresses of the owner of the building and the manager/owner of the business
- evidence that prostitution was occurring

Victim information:

- identifying other missing stakeholders, such as additional residents living near the business-as well as other business owners in the area-who were impacted by the problem

Location information:

- determining what type of license(s) the business was operating under

Based on this preliminary analysis, the group's goal was to permanently remove the business from the neighborhood by impacting location. They wanted to send the clear

message that the community would not tolerate such activities in their neighborhood and decided the best strategy was to use the regulatory authority of city agencies-backed by the enforcement power of police-to shut down the business.

Given the history of prostitution in the neighborhood and the fragility of the economic upswing, residents felt they had no time to lose. They felt this strategy would push an undesirable business out more quickly than a drawn-out police investigation.

RESPONSE

Along with two of her PSA officers, Lt. Groomes did repeated business checks on the presumed exercise studio to determine if illegal activities were occurring. They noted there were no large rooms to exercise in, no exercise mirrors, and no exercise equipment. There were the eight small rooms with beds, as well as linens, towels, oils, two shower rooms with tables, and a kitchen with a large bedroom area. Security cameras were mounted on both the inside and the outside of the building, and no apparent manager was present on the premises, as required by city regulations.

The first city agency brought into the battle was a representative from the Historic Preservation Division in the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA). Because the building is a designated historic structure, alterations to the outside require review and approval, and the problem solving group noted that the business had altered a door and enlarged a window.

After inspecting the building, the representative cited the building owner because he had allowed these illegal alterations without securing approval from the city's Historic Preservation Board.

Next, the Fire Marshall's Office was brought in. Groomes accompanied its inspector, who observed no fire hazard, but did note many building code violations. The effect of all these regular visits served to put the business on notice that the community was watching.

What was involved in the response?

The information gathered from these first efforts led the group to develop a two-pronged approach involving two city agencies. The first was the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA)- which licenses professionals and businesses, inspects and regulates building, housing, and land, and enforces business laws. The second was the Department of Public Health, which at the time, regulated spa licenses. The problem solving group reasoned that the business, which marketed itself as "Osaka" in newspaper advertisements, was being run more like a spa than an exercise studio. It would then need to show evidence it was operating with the proper license.

Neighborhood Services Coordinator Clark Ray secured copies of the Certificate of Occupancy (CO). He discovered that the person listed as the business owner was not the owner, and the address listed-which was for the rear entrance of the building-was not the address used by the business. Instead, it was using an address that did not exist in the city zoning book.

The occupancy certificate also stated that the business was named the "Rhode Island Sports Center," but the rear entrance awning and the newspaper advertisements used the name "Osaka" and the unofficial address to market the business.

The problem solving group made a request to the Department of Health to send an inspector. Accompanied by Groomes, he toured the business and determined it was actually a spa operating without a spa license under an unofficial address that was not on the Certificate of Occupancy. After citing the business for an improper occupancy permit, he issued a Cease and Desist order, effectively shutting it down.

Troubles were not over for the business or the building owner, as shortly after, the business received a citation from the Sanitation Enforcement Office for not having trash dumpsters in place.

During the inspections by various city agencies, police and residents kept the pressure up. Residents noted the time of the day people went in and out of the building, the number of visitors, and at what times traffic was heaviest, and passed this information to police. Kane recorded license plate numbers of customer cars and turned them over to Groomes, who issued letters on MPDC letterhead to the registered owners. The letters stated that the cars were observed parked in the lot of a business under surveillance by police for suspected prostitution activity.

Although the letters impacted the business, it continued to operate, even after the Cease and Desist order was issued. Groomes then sought advice from the Corporation Counsel regarding police authority to enforce the order. Based on their advice, she

issued the business a 61D citation-a \$500 fine in lieu of arrest. Shortly after this, Groomes visited the massage parlor accompanied by an officer fluent in Korean, who explained to the apparent business manager what the citation meant. Before they left, they gave pamphlets offering hotline numbers and other information to the female employees, whom Groomes viewed as sex slave victims trapped in a lifestyle that offered no way out.

To further discourage customers, Groomes barricaded the parking lot with police tape and put up a "Closed" sign. These actions were reinforced by letters from all of the stakeholders to the director of the Business Regulation Administration of the DCRA requesting that the business not be granted a spa license on the grounds that it was an illegal massage parlor and prostitution site.

In less than three months, the group knew they achieved success when the security cameras came down, the mailbox and awning were removed, and traffic ceased. Groomes confirmed the building had been vacated.

ASSESSMENT

The problem solving group immediately followed up with the owner of the building, who was not a resident of the city. Groomes contacted him and made it clear the community would not tolerate a business like that again. The problem solving group drafted letters to the Business Regulation Administration demanding that the business not be granted a spa license. Ray is researching a city law to use under which the owner can't rent the facility again until he pays all fines owed to the city. These tactics are intended to

reinforce the message that the community means business and will be monitoring future activities at the building.

Information about the business was turned over to the FBI because of the business's suspected connection with the Asian Mafia, and the possibility that it could be subject to a federal investigation if it opened elsewhere in the city.

What were the results?

The problem solving group accomplished its goal: it shut down the massage parlor and drove the business permanently out of the neighborhood. From this experience, residents and police know the indicators: businesses that try to subtly blend into the neighborhood, but have security cameras, darkened windows, and heavy traffic during nontraditional business hours.

The results from the problem solving effort were:

- the elimination of an undesirable business that would have kept quality businesses away.
- an improved relationship between PSA residents and their police because of this success. Citizens are much more willing to share information with police and assist in other problem solving efforts, and police no longer view the citizen organizations as adversarial.
- increased knowledge by police and residents of the role city agencies can play in solving crime and disorder problems.
- the creation of a problem solving model that can be used in other PSAs in the city that face a similar problem.

Successful elements of this problem solving model include:

- creating a collaborative partnership among residents, police, and city agencies;
- ensuring that all the essential stakeholders participate in developing response strategies;
- taking on and completing assignments by agreed-upon deadlines;
- using email and other resources to systematically communicate and share information between problem solving meetings;
- creatively using the regulatory authority of different city agencies to yield results;
- vigorously following up to ensure that success is sustained; and
- documenting the problem solving process in the PSA Action Plan for other city PSAs to use.

The PSA team and the community plan to apply the problem solving model for this particular problem to two similar businesses currently operating in the neighborhood.

AGENCY/OFFICER INFORMATION

This problem solving initiative was implemented in one of the city's Police Service Areas-PSA 309-which are generally one-to-two square miles in size and tend to encompass one or more neighborhoods. The PSA 309 team worked with community and city agency representatives on this problem, using the MPDC's five-step problem solving model.

All PSAs in the city have received, or are receiving training in this five-step model, which is then applied on problems targeted by police and community during the monthly PSA

community meetings. The problem solving process is documented by the PSA lieutenant in the PSA Action Plan and posted on a central server on the MPDC computer network.

Success can be both qualitatively and/or quantitatively measured, depending on the nature of the problem. Department members from the seven police districts can view Action Plans on the central server from PSAs around the city and share good ideas and other successful problem solving initiatives.