

The SMART Solution:

Turning around a problem motel through multi-agency coordination

The Problem

The Days Inn, a motel located on Pacific Coast Highway, was taken over by new ownership in April 2002. Shortly thereafter, Police began to note an increase in the number of calls for service to the motel, as well as an increase in the severity of the crimes from the location. There were a number of drug dealers who were making use of the motel and impacting the surrounding neighborhood. The motel was causing an increasing number of problems and was consuming an inordinate amount of City resources, from both Police and other City Departments.

Analysis

The initial response focused on working with the owners to tighten up their registration processes in order to make the motel less attractive to criminals. However, it became clear that the motel's owners were not willing to implement the kinds of changes that were required to achieve this goal. As the Community Lead Officers continued to work the location they discovered a number of irregularities in the operation of the motel. The Community Lead Officers spoke with neighboring residents and businesses and got a clearer picture of the effects that the operation of the motel were having on them. The City SMARTeam, which involves resources from a number of City Departments, was brought into the picture and, ultimately, a coordinated response involving the City, as well as State, County and Federal agencies was formulated.

Response

A team was assembled, led by the Torrance Police Department, and including personnel from Fire Prevention, Code Enforcement, Building Inspection, and Planning. In addition, representatives were involved from the State of California Employment Development Department, Labor Standards Enforcement and CalOSHA; the IRS; the County Board of Equalization and Environmental Health; and the Alcoholic Beverage Commission. This team served an Inspection warrant at the motel, and as a result the owners were forced to deal with many of the issues that they had previously chosen to ignore. After the inspection, all the agencies coordinated and continued to pursue resolution of the issues under their purviews, while the Police maintained a high profile at the motel and in the surrounding neighborhood.

Assessment

The motel has been sold to a new owner, who intends to operate it as a corporate destination point. The new ownership has evicted all of the long term tenants, has implemented more stringent registration requirements and is working closely with the Police and other City departments to ensure that the Days Inn is no longer a magnet for criminals in our community.

Introduction

Torrance first began community policing in 1992. As the Community Lead Officers (CLOs) grew more comfortable with the program, they began to explore resources available to them to assist in resolving the problems that they encountered. As they discovered the number of resources available to them within the City, they began working to organize a team that would bring these resources together on a monthly basis to discuss problems and mobilize resources. The Special Multi-Agency Response Team (SMART) includes staff from the City Manager's office, the City Attorney's office, Code Enforcement and Building and Safety, Planning, Section 8 Housing, Streets, Parks and Recreation, General Services and Fire Prevention as well as the Community Lead Officers. In addition, the team also brings in members from other jurisdictions such as County Health and Adult Protective Services to provide additional support when needed.

This team concept has allowed the CLOs immediate and easy access to a variety of resources that can be of use in dealing with community issues. Although the CLOs themselves rotate through the detail every two years or so, each new CLO has the SMART team and its members as an immediate resource for support, information and back up. This relationship has proven very helpful in approaching problems from a number of perspectives and has not only given the CLOs a better understanding of other City functions, but has also proven to be a vital and very helpful resource for other departments within the City in terms of their relationship with the Police Department and their ability to resolve problems. The SMART team has been functioning for a number of years now, and each year has attacked new and increasingly difficult problems using a multi-pronged approach and insight and resources from a number of different areas. It is this team approach that allows the Torrance CLO program to be so successful in solving long term problems within the City.

Scanning

In Torrance, we have observed that often times our problems are other jurisdictions' solutions. We are fortunate to serve a community that has a very low tolerance for crime and very high standards for property maintenance. The Days Inn did not appear to be a typical problem location. From the street, the complex appeared to be well maintained with fresh paint and new cosmetic exterior treatment. However, a closer examination would reveal that, underneath the surface, there were a number of issues at the Days Inn, not the least of which was an increasingly serious criminal presence.

In April of 2002, Roop and Ana Chaudhry became the owners of the Days Inn on Pacific Coast Highway in South Torrance. The motel is located on a corner, surrounded by retail and strip mall businesses to the south and east, and fairly high-end apartments to the north and west. While the location had been somewhat problematic in recent years, in early 2002, the CLO for the area began to notice a pattern of increase in calls for service and criminal and drug related activity at and around the Days Inn. In addition, the area Code Enforcement Officer received several complaints regarding various nuisance issues at the

property. Initial contacts with the new owners indicated that their business practices were poor; they often did not require identification from guests when registering nor did they make any record of license plates and guest vehicles.

Prospects for resolution initially seemed good, as the owners indicated that they were willing to work on better business practices and were actually investing money in improving the motel grounds and exteriors of the building. However, the calls for service continued as did the drug activity and the nuisance complaints from neighboring residents and businesses. It soon became clear that the owners, while professing to be willing to work to correct their business practices, were in fact, not willing at all to change the way they were doing business. It also became clear that the improvements being done on the exterior of the motel were being done without proper building permits and were masking many internal safety problems in the units themselves.

An assessment of the situation noting the continuing problems even after focusing on the motel using more traditional community policing methods led to the decision to make the Days Inn a project bringing in the resources of the SMART team.

Analysis

In formulating a comprehensive plan of action for the Days Inn, information was gathered and analyzed in three main categories: criminal activity, business practices and code enforcement issues.

Criminal Activity

The criminal activity at the Days Inn had been evident since 2002. Calls for service were excessive in comparison with other similar businesses in the City, averaging one per week in both 2002 and 2003. In addition, officers were at the Days Inn several times a week handling evictions or other unreported disturbances and made many arrests in the area surrounding the Days Inn. Actual calls for service at the motel were only made in cases of emergency; the general criminal activity that went on at the motel remained largely unreported unless discovered by officers as they patrolled the area. The criminal activity at the motel was focused on drugs for the most part. It was also determined that there were a large number of local residents staying at the Days Inn, very few customers from out of the area and virtually none staying at the motel on legitimate business or vacation trips.

Local residents staying at the motel have been arrested for possession of methamphetamine, narcotics and domestic violence, sales of narcotics, possession of a controlled substance while armed, and possession of methamphetamine and carrying a loaded firearm. In addition, there was a death by overdose, as well as arrests of local residents for burglary, and an arrest as a result of a confrontation with police by friends and family of a local parolee. The preponderance of local residents at the motel is a recognized as a common indicator of drug activity. The observations made at the

Torrance Days Inn were corroborated by officers in the neighboring City of Redondo Beach, where the Chaudhry's owned another motel. The motel in Redondo Beach was known to their officers as being a haven for criminals and one of the highest crime locations in their City.

Owners of businesses surrounding the Days Inn reported that the clientele of the Days Inn was having a negative effect on their businesses. Two different owners reported seeing regular drug deals in between their businesses and the Days Inn; another reported that they regularly had items stolen from cars in their parking lot. Yet another reported that they had had several break-ins and burglaries. All businesses reported problems with shoplifting and with residents from the Days Inn accosting their customers. The surrounding business owners were all in agreement that the Days Inn was having a very negative effect on their businesses and their customers.

Business Practices

One of the first issues raised with the owners of the Days Inn was the lack of identification for their residents. The motel routinely accepted walk-in customers who paid with cash. These customers were not asked for any form of identification, nor were they requested to identify their vehicle when they registered. In addition, it was found that there were rooms that were overcrowded and a number of tenants who had been in place for longer than thirty days, in violation of City codes. No bed tax was collected for the long-term residents. After the initial thirty days, they were considered to be tenants and could not be removed except through the eviction process. These issues were discussed with the owners of the Days Inn, and suggestions were made as to how they could improve their business practices by training front desk personnel to check and document identification at the time of check-in. In addition, they were instructed in security options, and things to look for before and after renting a room to insure that the residents were law-abiding. However, although the owners stated that they were eager to improve the Days Inn, none of the improvements were ever implemented.

As the Community Lead Officers gained the trust of the employees of the motel, they learned that there were a number of questionable practices in the operation of the motel beyond the basic registration issues. The two front desk managers are in this country trying to obtain visas and, therefore, did not want to bring any attention to themselves. They were paid \$4.00 per hour and allowed to live at the Days Inn. However, they were not trained in proper business practices. In fact, they were instructed that when a customer paid cash for a room, the cash was to be placed in an envelope with the room number written on it. The room was not entered into the computer as having been rented. When the owners arrived each day, they would remove the cash and discard the envelopes. According to the employees, the owners referred to this cash as their "zero account". It appeared that this was a method of hiding income and avoiding payment of the bed tax.

Employees also reported that they were paid under the table for overtime at a rate substantially lower than that required by law.

The picture that emerged as the business practices of the owners of the Days Inn were disclosed was one of a business that was being run with no concern for the effects it was having on the surrounding community. Criminals stated that they found the Days Inn to be a good place to stay because they could get in for \$54 a night, and no questions asked.

Code Enforcement Issues

The Code Enforcement division began receiving complaints regarding maintenance issues at the Days Inn in the summer of 2002. The initial complaints focused on the placement of the trash enclosure, overflowing trash and debris both in the enclosure and on the property as a whole and noise generated by the residents and employees of the Days Inn. Additional complaints came in regarding light spillover from the site and dogs belonging to residents of Days Inn defecating on the apartment lawns. Those issues that were actual violations were taken care of by the owners of the Days Inn; however, many of the issues were related to ongoing rehabilitation of the buildings, such as painting and landscaping. From the point of view of Code Enforcement, the property owners initially were fairly compliant in correcting violations, and seemed to be working on improving the physical aspects of the property.

However, a complaint was received some time later regarding a gazebo that had been erected in the parking lot without permits. This complaint brought in both Building Inspection and the Planning Department, as the structure was taking up required parking. This structure was ultimately removed but, shortly thereafter, another complaint was received regarding the construction of decorative columns, again without proper building permits. Fire Prevention was also noticing that there were irregularities in the number of units permitted and the actual number of units on the site. It appeared that some utility rooms had been converted into units and others had been subdivided, all without permit. As more of these irregularities were uncovered, the owners of the motel began to be less cooperative in allowing access to the rooms for inspection.

Conclusions

In examining the situation, it became clear that the core problem was in the operation of the Days Inn. The owners sole concern appeared to be maximizing the income generated by the motel, both through their registration and their employment practices. Poor and apparently illegal business practices led to a growing reputation among the criminal community as a place to stay where no questions were asked and virtually any activity was tolerated. While the owners were engaged in making cosmetic improvements to the property, those improvements masked illegal and potentially dangerous conversions of rooms to add additional rental units, thus increasing the revenue stream from the motel.

Based on the information gathered in these areas, the CLO in charge contacted a number of different agencies dealing with work related issues, financial and tax issues, public health and alcoholic beverages, to name a few. The situation was described to these agencies and they were asked if they had an interest in pursuing further information and

possible enforcement action. As the various experts gave their input regarding the issues that they could address at the Days Inn, a plan of action was formed focusing on attacking the problem from a number of fronts simultaneously, including financial issues, employment issues, and fire and building code violations

Response

As it became increasingly apparent that the owners of the Days Inn were not responding to the CLO suggestions regarding the operation of the motel, it was determined that a more comprehensive and proactive approach was needed. The City resources were already involved, including Code Enforcement, Building Inspection and Fire Prevention, however, the scope of the irregularities in business practices led the CLO putting the response together to bring in additional resources from both the State and County.

The CLO began assembling a team of those agencies who had expressed an interest in pursuing enforcement action during the analysis phase of the project. The team included City resources and resources from the Employment Development Department, the Department of Labor, and the IRS to investigate questions of tax evasion, workers compensation fraud and other employment related issues. In addition, the Department of Health, the Alcoholic Beverage Commission, CalOSHA, and the Department of Consumer Affairs were consulted.

One prong of the strategy was the potential filing of a criminal complaint for maintaining of a public nuisance. After discussion with the Planning and Finance departments of the City, it was determined that, if such a criminal complaint could be filed and upheld, a hearing for revocation of the business license and Conditional Use Permit for the Days Inn could be held. If these hearings were successful, the motel could ultimately be put out of business.

Based on the current lack of cooperation in allowing access for building and fire inspections, an administrative search warrant was obtained so that the full scope of the violations on the property could be assessed. On September 11, 2003, a team led by the Police Department descended on the Days Inn. As a result of the information obtained by the inspection warrant, all employees were immediately ordered from the site due to State Labor Code violations relating to workers compensation. No employees were allowed to return until the workers compensation violations had been fully and legally cleared. Information was gathered relating to failure to pay overtime, as well, which ultimately resulted in both back pay for the employees and a substantial fine for the employer. In addition, an extensive list of building and fire code violations were noted.

After the warrant was served and the violations documented, a period of follow up began. Police continued to have a regular presence at the location and Fire and Building Inspectors began working towards correction of the violations with the owner. During this period, the possibility of a Public Nuisance filing based on the findings of the Administrative search warrant and the criminal history of the motel was discussed with the

owners, but was held off during the initial compliance period. The owners were making progress in terms of the building and fire violations in the physical plant, and had, of necessity, cleaned up some of their business practices, but the motel continued to be a magnet for drug dealers, users and other criminals, as the registration process had not changed.

However, in February of 2004, a business license request for a change of ownership was received for the Days Inn. Because of the SMART involvement in this project, the request, which normally would have been approved with no questions, was flagged. The broker for the motel and the potential buyer were contacted and were requested to attend a meeting with representatives from the Police Department, and Fire, Building and Safety and Planning Departments. At this meeting, the new owner was fully apprised of the issues at the Days Inn, including the potential Public Nuisance filing. The new owner indicated his willingness to work with the City to rectify the problems and his desire to operate the motel as a corporate destination. He provided references for several motels in the Southern California area that he is currently operating as destination points, and provided references with the local police departments, as well. From the City, he requested information regarding the current entitlements under which the motel was operating and discussed in greater detail the outstanding building and fire issues. The CLOs were able to describe the criminal problems that had been occurring at the motel, and the conditions that had led to the motel becoming a haven for criminals. The new owner indicated that the motel had been placed on the market because the old owners had been overwhelmed by the requirements of running a legitimate business and correcting the building and fire code violations in the motel.

Assessment

As a result of the change in ownership, in the space of only two months, the Days Inn has completed the eviction of all long-term tenants and has implemented new rules and procedures for registration, including requiring deposits and identification for all room rentals. The AAA recently approved the motel for corporate referrals. While work is still ongoing to correct Building code violations, the Fire Code violations have been cleared. The new owner is currently working with our finance department to clear any outstanding bed tax owed.

The new owner also allowed the City to make use of the Days Inn for CPTED training, in which several teams of employees from a number of departments in the City as well as other law enforcement agencies inspected the facility, analyzed the areas of highest potential for crime based on the physical layout of the motel and made suggestions for changes that would make the motel safer. The results of the case study were then forwarded to the new owner.

The neighbors report a positive change since the change of ownership, and have made no complaints since the new ownership took over. Although calls for service are still high at the motel, that too, has been a positive change, since the new management calls for

assistance regularly, and is actively partnering with the Police Department in removing criminals from the motel. The CLO's have the cell phone number of the new owner, and are able to contact him at any time. He, in turn, often consults with the CLO's in his efforts to rid the motel of its criminal reputation. Word is slowly filtering out to the street that the Days Inn is no longer a haven for those wishing to engage in criminal activity.

The most recent example is an arrest made at the Days Inn in late April. The arrest was made in the parking lot, after the arrestees had been turned away from the motel. The owner contacted the CLO the next day to let him know that the arrestees had been refused a room rental and were in the process of leaving when the arrest occurred. He also stated that his vacancy rate was currently up some 20% due to the number of prospective customers who are now being turned away. While this is currently a hardship for the owner, he is committed to staying the course until he is able to turn the reputation of the motel around.

The SMART team, led by the area CLO, will continue a period of follow-up for the next six months to a year, as the new ownership continues to take hold of the operation, close out building violations and reshape the Days Inn into a motel that will be a welcome addition to the community.

Agency and Officer Information

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The Torrance Police Department initiated a Community Oriented Policing unit in 1992. This unit is comprised of four Community Lead Officers who are each responsible for a different area of the City. In addition, there is a Sergeant assigned to the unit, as well as a Lieutenant and a Captain. This unit is the point of contact for citizens as well as other officers for any on-going problem in the City. The CLO unit also works closely with other departments in the City in resolving problems. The Days Inn project, like the majority of CLO projects in Torrance, was initiated by the area CLO. However, patrol officers as well as personnel from other departments were brought into the project almost from its inception to support the goals set for the project by the CLO.

Since the beginning of the Community Policing Program in Torrance, officers have received yearly training at the POP conferences as well as periodic training at other Problem-oriented Policing forums. In addition, monthly SMARTeam meetings allow the CLO to access information and insight from a number of different City departments and to explore various strategies for resolving issues in the community.

Officers who are assigned to the Community Lead Officer position receive a premium ranging from 3% to 5%. In addition, the position is highly visible within the community and gives the officers so assigned a better understanding of the operation of the City as a whole. This in turn, tends to give the officers who work the Community Policing unit a broader outlook in their service to the community. Officers who have been assigned to the Community Lead Officer program tend to do very well on promotional exams and are regularly promoted within the department.

The SMARTeam is an excellent resource for our Community Lead Officers in connecting them with various City functions that can be useful in problem solving. In addition, the Community Lead Officer detail keeps records of previous projects as well as training information from various conferences, all of which can be used by CLO's in formulating responses to various problems in the community.

The problem solving model tends to run counter to the general instinct of officers to get in, resolve the problem and get out. Because of the longer-term nature of the work, some officers are not as enthusiastic about working the program; however, the force as a whole is highly supportive of the efforts of the officers who are assigned to the program and appreciates the value of the work done by the unit.

As with the majority of the problems resolved by the CLO unit, the resources of the City as a whole are available to the officer engaged in problem solving. However, those resources brought in are most often other City departments dealing with issues within the problem that are in their area and therefore within their budget. In addition, the SMARTeam has a yearly budget that is available for resources beyond those available within the City. Because of the SMART structure, the CLO detail is able to access a number of valuable resources outside of the department and sometimes outside of the City without an impact to the Police Department budget.