Neighborhood Network Center concept at work
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Newport, Rhode Island

Newport, Rhode Island (Pop. 30,000), is a resort community well known for its yachts, mansions, beaches, and bustling night life. However, within the 5.5 square miles of Newport, another city co-exists. Newport has the second largest number of low-income housing units in the state, is second to Providence in the crime rate per capita, and has a significant illegal drug problem ranging from international smuggling to street corner dealing, the sixth highest high-school drop-out rate in the state, and a sizable minority population (Black and Hispanic), many of whom live in the low-income housing projects.

Newport has defined neighborhoods, each displaying its own characteristics. The housing projects of Tonomy Hill, Park Holm, and Chapel Terrace portray the crime, joblessness, low income, and despair of many such living environments. The Historic Hill section of Newport is representative of a middle to upper-middle class neighborhood, but is plagued by its proximity to downtown with its commercial areas, nightclubs, bars, and restaurants adjacent to the waterfront. The southern section of Newport, formerly a stable, Irish Catholic, middle-class neighborhood, is currently under siege from an expanding commercial district, condominiums, and highly-populated apartment complexes occupied by young adults. The Bellevue Avenue/Ocean Drive area of the city is home or summer home to some of the world's wealthiest people, residing on estates or in mansions. In contrast, the Broadway/West Broadway area exhibits a mix of middle-class and low-income residents - whites, minorities, and senior citizens. The residences vary from low-income housing plots to restored Greek Revival homes; all anchored by a commercial area of retail stores, bars, and restaurants. Many other definable neighborhoods are evident throughout the city.

A growing problem with crack

By 1989, several of these areas seemed overdue for a Community Policing approach. The Tonomy Hill and Park Holm projects were overrun with crack. Street corner dealers did a booming business with customers from southern Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Gangs of Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Columbians, Jamaicans, and Nigerians dealt drugs in the areas. A local youth gang emerged, ranging in age from 15 to 22, using extortion, violence, and intimidation to stake
their claim. Crack purchased elsewhere - New York City for $3, or Providence for $6 - was being sold in Newport for $20. The profit motive brought dealers in from those cities and others.

Concurrently, the success of Newport's tourist industry, the booming real estate market of the 80's, and the nightlife of downtown Newport combined to assail the residential sections of Historic Hill and the southern end of the city. Noise, litter, traffic, drunkenness, fights, illegal drugs, party houses, lack of parking, and more served to build frustration and anger among the year-round residents. As the summer season ended, the frustration continued with the arrival of college students to Salve Regina University. Newport appeared to be buckling under the weight of its popularity. More younger adults were being attracted to Newport as a place to come and "raise hell."

In March 1990, a Community-Oriented Policing (COP) office was opened in the Tonomy Hill/Park Holm Multi-Purpose Center. The Tonomy Hill/Park Holm section was initially given the primary focus due to the prevalence of serious crime, propensity for violence, illegal drug trafficking, and the quality of life for the residents. Staffed by an ex-patrol officer as the CPO, the Multi-Purpose Center houses a variety of other social service agencies, including a drug rehabilitation clinic (CODAC); Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a social service agency, and others. The facility has an indoor gymnasium, as well.

Some of the COP officer's primary duties were to create various programs designed to address crime in the neighborhood; establish a liaison with various social service agencies, and develop mutual programs to address the root causes of crime and disorder; institute Neighborhood Watch and other community-based groups to involve residents in the resolution of problems; and to coordinate with the Newport Housing Authority, the police department, other city agencies, social service agencies, and residents, to resolve crime and crime-related problems.

Many of the programs the COP officer put together was done so in conjunction with other social service agencies. A variety of programs operate out of the Multi-Purpose Center which include:

- Teen and youth dances,
- Basic and advanced women's self defense courses to improve the self-esteem and sense of control within an area where 70% of the residents are single mothers,
- Aerobics classes for women in conjunction with New Visions, an umbrella social service agency to improve fitness, self-esteem, and general sense of well-being.
- Neighborhood Watch groups,
- Men's night programs (18 and over) providing basketball, general fitness, clinics, and a weight-lifting facility,
- Field trips for youth with the Boy's and Girls Club of Newport,
- Parenting skills seminars,
- Substance Abuse Outreach program in conjunction with the drug rehabilitation clinic (CODAC),
- youth and peer counseling,
- drug awareness programs for parents and youth,
- Turn In Pushers (TIPS) program,
- COP newsletter

The Tonomy Hill/Park Holm Community-Oriented Policing program has been in operation for two years. Statistical data over such a short time is insufficient but encouraging. Street corner dealing has been virtually eliminated with trafficking constrained to residential units and alleys in the early morning hours. The local gang has been interrupted with 70% of its members in adult prisons or the state juvenile delinquent training school. Out-of-town drug trafficking has been reduced substantially. Although there will always be a presence of illegal drug trafficking, its impact on the quality of life in these projects has diminished. Other crimes have fallen off considerably, most likely as a result of enforcement and improved neighborhood attitude. Malicious mischief incidents dropped 34% since the implementation of COP as a result of the neighborhood's overall improvement and new-found respect.
Part One of a Two-Part Series