

## **High Point's Washington Drive Residents Reclaim their Streets**

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Residents of the Washington Drive area in High Point, North Carolina, have reclaimed their neighborhood from outside drug dealers following the city's latest implementation of its award-winning drug market initiative (DMI).

"Residents are elated," said Pastor Sherman Mason, whose New Bethel Baptist Church is located on the borders of the neighborhood and who has been involved with all four previous drug market initiatives in the city as a member of the High Point Community Against Violence (HP-CAV). "The area is dry; it's dead," he said. "Everybody is over the moon happy." Street sales, related violence, loitering and any other signs of disorder that typically accompany street drug markets have vanished from the neighborhood.



The corner of Fourth and Washington is quiet a month after High Point's drug market intervention in the Washington Drive neighborhood.

While High Point can now look back on five successful DMIs since 2004, Police Chief Jim Fealy said he, his officers and others in High Point expected this intervention to be "a particularly tough nut to crack."

The Washington Drive neighborhood had traditionally been High Point's African-American economic and social hub before desegregation and subsequent economic downturns set off its decline, Jim Summey, Executive Director of HP-CAV, explained. The construction of roads and thoroughfares around the edges of the area had further deepened its isolation from the rest of the city over the years.

When Summey started his initial surveillance of the neighborhood last year, people were highly suspicious of him and reluctant to talk. "Nobody was out on the porch or in the street," he recalled.

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“People felt they were being held captive by the dealers.”

Moreover, many of the residents had become convinced that the rest of the city no longer cared about the neighborhood and that its decline was “due to a sinister plot to hasten its demise,” Fealy said. “People were aggravated because they felt abandoned by the city and in particular by its police department. They felt we had quit caring, and that they were not receiving their just share of resources,” he explained.

Against this tense backdrop, High Point police and HP-CAV were concerned that it would be difficult to convince people in the neighborhood to become full partners with the police and other city agencies in the drug market initiative – a key requirement for the success of the strategy.

“The roots of disengagement were so historically deep and the level of distrust seemed enormous,” Fealy said. All of the DMI partners believed that re-earning residents’ trust and engaging them would prove extremely difficult. This assumption, it turned out, could not have been further from the truth.

The principles that guide the DMI’s operation are designed to address several common dynamics present in neighborhoods with overt drug markets. One of these principles holds that the anger a community feels about the harm done by traditional drug enforcement, and the collateral damage that approach creates, prevents community members from setting their own standards—against public drug dealing in this case. By entering into a truth-telling conversation, in which the police admit mistakes and unintended harms of traditional drug enforcement and work not to arrest, and to help, non-violent offenders, this dynamic can be fundamentally shifted and neighborhood residents can be liberated to set clear standards for behavior.

What happened at the front end of the Washington Drive initiative proved crucial for its success, HP-CAV’s Summey argued. While police were conducting their undercover investigations to build cases against dealers in the area, Chief Fealy and HP-CAV members identified leading figures in the Washington Drive community with whom to sit down for face-to-face discussions. “These initial discussions were not even about the drug market intervention,” Summey stressed. “They were all about building relationships.”

Two ministers and a city official who had run the Weed-and-Seed office in the area were selected as the initial points of contacts. Not only did the parties discuss the criteria for selecting offenders who were not to be arrested, they also agreed on steps needed to get neighborhood residents on board, gauged what it was the community needed, and how these needs could best be met.

Following these initial meetings, the three community leaders fanned out into the neighborhood to speak with residents directly, distribute fliers, and invite them to community meetings with police, HP-CAV representatives and others involved in the initiative.

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In a series of four meetings over a period of around six weeks, attended by an ever growing number of people as word about the DMI spread, Chief Fealy personally apologized to residents for the lack of attention his police department had paid to their neighborhood in recent years, admitted that it had let them down, and asked them how past mistakes could best be rectified.

The response was immediate and overwhelming, Fealy said, and led to some of the “best interactions police have ever had with community members in High Point.” People present became “immediately engaged” and the partnership that has resulted from it since has been “tremendous,” he reported.

“These meetings were an outlet for people’s frustration,” the Chief explained. They needed to be heard, and, as a result, their sense of agency was restored. “They see us being engaged and they are now doing something themselves,” he said.

In addition, the fact that the city had previously been so successful with its approach in other neighborhoods helped convince people. Despite the historical baggage that had to be laid to rest, “residents now know and understand that the police in High Point are doing business differently,” Fealy said.

With community support in place, nine non-violent offenders were invited to attend a forum on February 9 at which they were told that help and services were available and cases against them would be “banked” provided they refrained from any criminal activity in future. This meeting, or “call-in”, is a central and often very moving component of the drug market initiative.



Members of High Point’s Community Against Violence address offenders at a call-in as part of the city’s latest drug market intervention.

Surrounded by family members, community leaders, local, state and federal law enforcement, service providers and a large and vocal group of Washington Drive residents, the offenders were told that their dealing and any violence had to stop, that the community cares for them but rejects

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their conduct, that help is available, and that any renewed dealing or other criminal activity will result in the activation of the existing case against them. “The drug market of Washington Drive is officially closed as of today,” Chief Fealy told the dealers as neighborhood residents cheered.

To underscore the evidence they had gathered against the mostly young men and women, police officials showed video recordings of drug sales conducted in the neighborhood. “That was the turning point in this meeting,” said Chief Fealy. “Their body language clearly told me that our message had been received.”

Just over a month after the call-in, the change in the neighborhood is evident. “Everything happened as it always happens” [after implementation of the DMI], Fealy said. “Crime plummets; the overt, in-your-face, people-standing-on-street-corners signs of the market are gone; the overt threat to the community is gone; the community breathes a sign of relief.”

“People who go to churches or restaurants in the neighborhood or who own businesses in the area have also commented on the huge difference,” said Gretta Bush, President of HP-CAV, who runs a community recreation center in the neighborhood. What’s more, the increased police presence is being perceived “as extremely positive by everyone,” she added. Every time police tell someone who is loitering to move on “residents are cheering,” she reported.

“And there is no sense of harassment” as a result of the increased police presence, Bush stressed. “The police are just doing their job,” residents – including an ex-offender returning to the neighborhood for reentry services who was stopped by officers – told her.

In addition, four former drug houses in the area will be bulldozed “because the residents want to see them gone,” Pastor Mason said. And landlords who had tolerated drug activity on their property in the past were warned by police that those houses would be seized if there were any signs of illegal activity in future.

Community associations in the neighborhood are now getting ready to focus their attention on the redevelopment of the area, Pastor Mason said. “And their meetings are better attended than ever,” HP-CAV’s Summey added. Police officers continue to participate in these meetings to ensure the newly established partnership is sustained over the long term.

In the meantime, HP-CAV is assisting the nine offenders who attended the call-in in their efforts to get off the street. Some are volunteering for the agency and are involved in maintaining and redecorating community facilities, Bush explained. Summey said he speaks to them daily to offer support and advice in their transition.

“Despite our initial concerns about how to regain the trust of this particular community, we didn’t do anything differently here” relative to earlier DMIs, Chief Fealy said. However, what made this

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initiative stand out was the fact that the “really bad baggage” that had existed between this community and police “was resolved seemingly overnight.”

“What remains the most fascinating aspect of this work is the fact that once we have candid, open discussions” with community members about the issues at hand, “everyone involved finds themselves completely amazed how much mutual understanding there really is between people who for years perceived each other as being light-years apart,” the Chief said.

“Even if this transformation of relations between community and police was the only benefit that was accomplished [by the DMI], it would all be worthwhile,” the Chief said. “We’d still do it”.

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