

In High Point, N.C., they took a chance But in a targeted neighborhood, crime plunged when community coalition mobilized to fight drugs.

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By CHIP SMEDLEY, Staff Writer

Pete Anders believes city residents have had enough of drug dealing and the related violence plaguing some of their neighborhoods.



This poster is an example of one issued to the community in High Point, N.C., when accused dealers who are given the opportunity to avoid jail time violate the terms of their agreement. High Point police said the posters not only keep residents aware of the program's status, but also reinforce the fact that individuals who do not abide by their contracts do, in fact, serve time and do not ultimately evade prosecution.

That's why Anders, captain of the police detective division, is eager to implement a new Violent Crime Reduction Initiative that mobilizes an army of community resources to strike at the heart of drug-dealing operations.

The program was first implemented in High Point, N.C., a city of 100,000 between Winston-Salem and Greensboro.

"In 2003, we experienced an uptick in violence, and when we researched ... we realized it was all related to the drug market," High Point Police Department Maj. Marty Sumner said.

He contacted David Kennedy, a researcher for Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government who, Sumner said, "laid this set of ideas out that he said he had been thinking about."

Those ideas form the basis of the Violent Crime Reduction Initiative now being implemented in Lancaster.

Key components involve targeting specific neighborhoods where drugs and drug-related violence are a problem, making buys in those neighborhoods, and then providing some specially chosen dealers with the opportunity either to go straight or go to jail.

Critical to its success is a partnership that unites residents, clergy, schools, police and government in the fight against drugs.

High Point began the program in 2003, and the results have been staggering. In the first two years, drug crimes in targeted neighborhoods fell by almost 40 percent.

The first neighborhood, Sumner said, annually accounted for a tenth of all the murders in High Point prior to the program's implementation.

"Our last homicide in that neighborhood was 2003," he said.

The city has since added three more neighborhoods to the program and, Sumner said, the four targeted neighborhoods have experienced "a 50 percent drop in the last five years."

"This has exceeded our wildest expectations."

The success of the program, Sumner said, is dependent on community involvement.

Residents themselves must reach a tipping point and declare they've had enough.

In High Point's West End neighborhood, "they were past the tipping point," Sumner said. "They had already had conversations among themselves, and when we went to a community meeting to present the program everyone was raising their hands to count them in."

They reached this point, Sumner said, because their faith in the system had collapsed.

"In healthy neighborhoods, the people are the eyes and the ears. You don't need an occupying police force."

In High Point's West End, though, residents "had become apathetic," he said. "They would call and call [the police] but nothing ever changed. They were afraid. If one person stands up, it is too much of a risk, but if an entire community says they are going to stand up. ..."

As the initiative succeeded, Sumner said, "everybody tended to focus on these guys [the dealers offered a second chance]."

He said of the 75 people his office has called in since the program's inception, "in only 26 percent did we have to execute the initial charge. When you're looking at a national average for recidivism that is 68 percent, these are good outcomes."

But for Sumner, that is only part of the story.

"The real story," he said, "is about the people in the community who get their lives back."

Lancaster first became aware of the program in fall 2007, when the U.S. Attorney's office told Anders they were looking at a focused deterrence project to deal with drug dealing along the Route 222 corridor.

At the same time, the city's Public Safety Research Institute became aware of the High Point program.

Originally formed as the research committee for the Lancaster Crime Commission, the PSRI continues to undertake research projects for various city organizations. Millersville University professors Mary Glazier and Angela Cuthbert coordinate the research work.

Intrigued by the program, the PSRI organized a delegation to attend a February 2008 conference in High Point, where officials provided details about the program.

Six cities along the Route 222 corridor attended the presentation. Lancaster's 11-person delegation was the largest. Another group from Lancaster attended a second conference a few weeks later and everyone agreed, Anders said, to begin implementing the program in Lancaster.

Scott Fisher, head of the Lancaster County Council of Churches, was one of those who attended the presentation. He said county church leaders were already wondering, "How can we connect with young people's lives and stop all this violence?"

Clergy were galvanized, he said, by the January 2007 wounding of Brianna Pratt, a 7-year-old girl caught in a drug-gang-related shoot-out, and a subsequent sermon delivered by Arbor Place Director Wayne Scott.

"When Wayne Scott delivered what we now call the 'Not on My Watch' sermon, we became committed to not let this go on any longer," Fisher said.

Mayor Rick Gray facilitated the process by holding a clergy summit in conjunction with his Youth Gang Task Force, he said.

With all of the activity, Anders was enthusiastic about the High Point program, but skeptical.

He knew when the program was first introduced in High Point, some police referred to it as "hug a thug."

Anders emphasized that normal police activities will not stop in Lancaster.

"We will continue to do sweeps and surveillance, but this will give a few offenders an opportunity to make changes in their life," he said.

And if dealers attempt to intimidate citizens?

"If that occurs, the residents have a commitment from us that we will act aggressively against those individuals.

"This community is stronger than a few thugs."

Anders looked at the High Point crime statistics and said, "One question I always have about data is, is it legit? Some places, the person compiling the data is writing a book, or looking to move on, and all they do is leave a house of cards behind."

In High Point, he found, "the people were very convincing. Members of the community, police and clergy were all very positive.

"They also provided good, social-scientific data that it has had a very positive impact," he added.

Both Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro sent their own investigative teams to confirm the High Point numbers.

Harvard subsequently bestowed its 2007 Good Government Award on High Point for its work on the program.

The program requires no additional police staffing.

In High Point, Sumner said, the program helped to make existing officers more available.

"With fewer arrests, they were spending less time on paperwork and more time out patrolling the streets," he said.

One person is needed to help guide the offenders through the obstacles they encounter when they must seek counseling, training or jobs.

In Lancaster, that's clergyman Luis Torres, who works for the Council of Churches to operate the Clergy Youth Empowerment Succeed or C-YES program.

Anders also believes there's a direct relationship between the size of Lancaster's delegation and the fact that the city is the only one of the six represented at that first conference that is implementing the program.

"We have very progressive leadership here," Anders said. "When I came back from the trip I asked everyone what they thought. We had incredible buy-in from everyone."

For one thing, Anders detected no political agendas.

"Sometimes a political bent can destroy an initiative or a program," he said. "To the credit of the people here, that has been absent. The people who wear the political hats have not used this as a football."

At Thursday's call-in, numerous public officials said they initially had doubts about the program but the city police force convinced them to give it a shot.

"You could hear there was skepticism in that room," Lancaster County Commissioner Scott Martin said. "As public officials, regardless of our politics, our No. 1 responsibility is public safety. Anything that sounds like it may be a little soft can cause concern."

But, he added, "where it has been used, statistics have shown it is a success.

"To have the police being the ones that have pushed this, I think that sends a powerful message," he added. "Then, when you see a room full of people like that, and hear their powerful statements, it gives you hope."

Mayor Rick Gray said the unified effort of the community encouraged him, particularly the involvement of all the faith-

based groups in the city and county.

"The police, the courts, the cameras, the General Assembly, they're not going to solve this problem," he said. "It's a community problem, and the only way to solve it is with the community."

Anders concluded the call-in by referring to a Wednesday evening rally that drew 300 people to Roberto Clemente Field, where the initiative was unveiled publicly.

"Three hundred people is great," he said. "But the challenge for a city of this size is that it can't be 300, it's got to be 3,000."

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