



YOUNG LAWYERS

ALM

Law Enforcement Officials Unite With Community *Outreach Programs Target Crime Where It Starts*

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Of the Legal Staff

The tassels on the Shriners' fezzes nodded as Scott Sigman opened with the flourish of an overacting player.

"I specialize in prosecuting big, bad drug dealers," Sigman told the room of 50 Shriners and some of their wives.

The men and women listened, chewing London broil and sipping Moosehead beer. This wasn't a courtroom in Center City but the Club House family restaurant in North Philadelphia.

The mood was festive, but what Sigman had to say was serious.

So began the after-hours shift for Sigman, an assistant district attorney in Philadelphia's special narcotics unit, at 8 p.m. on a rainy Thursday night.

"You arrest a drug dealer, and within a day they'll be out on bail and right back in their house selling so they can pay their lawyer to defend them," Sigman said. "We want to empower the community to keep the drug dealer out. In some cases, we've put a stop to their business by boarding up their house, their business or their apartment."

The key to successful cases in high-crime neighborhoods is sometimes "community prosecution," he said.

Sigman, 30, is one envoy inside a network of law enforcement officials who in recent years have reached out to the people living on city blocks overrun by drug dealers and crime and who may feel helpless and forsaken.

REACHING OUT

In Philadelphia, the areas these officials target are in the northeast and west, totaling nearly 500 city blocks altogether. But the strategic effort extends beyond city limits to a nine-county region under the umbrella of the federal prosecutor's jurisdiction in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Sections of Allentown, Lancaster, Reading and Coatesville, and neighborhoods in Bristol Township and Berks County have been identified as high-crime hotbeds needing special attention.

Prosecutors say a group of indignant neighbors sitting in the courtroom during a judge's sentencing has a persuasive presence. Tips from community residents, law enforcement officials say, make them better at finding dealers and guns and plucking them off the streets.

After the dealers and gang members are swept away, residents can feel comfortable letting their children play outside again, community activists report. In some neighborhoods, drug lairs have become youth centers and vacant lots have bloomed into



gardens. Some residents have a relationship with a police officer or prosecutor and know who to call if trouble arises.

"They can actually get an ear," said Clarence Dupree, an assistant district attorney who visits community group meetings in West Philadelphia as part of the "Weed & Seed" outreach there. "That's something they don't actually get by dialing 911."

Overall city crime statistics may not always reflect the changes the outreach has made, because the criminals often just move somewhere else. But for the residents who no longer feel threatened, it has meaning.

CREATING A PARTNERSHIP

Weed & Seed, Project Safe Neighborhoods and Project Sentry all started with a partnership among law enforcement agencies — such as the state and federal prosecutors'

offices — that didn't formerly exist. Officials who didn't talk to one another now do.

"We decided to get married, really," Philadelphia District Attorney Lynne Abraham said of the collaboration.

Dupree, 37, often makes his pitch to community groups in West Philly alongside a captain from the police district, someone from the U.S. Attorney's Office and a city official from the municipal services unit. Dupree hands out his business card and he listens.

"I grew up in North Philadelphia," he said. "Often at meetings, I'm able to identify with some people because I've seen it myself and, unfortunately, was a victim of it myself."

Dupree said he grew up in a neighborhood where drug dealers moved in and set up shop. The police weren't able to dislodge the dealers for a while.

"So when people say, 'I feel like I'm isolated and trapped in my own home,' I can identify with that. I know where they're coming from."

Part of what attracted Dupree to his assignment in the District Attorney's Office was the opportunity to leave his desk and the courtroom and go face-to-face with the people he's trying to help.

"I wanted people to be able to place a face with the District Attorney's Office and know that there's someone specific in that office they can call on," he said.

When they do call, they tell him where the drugs are being sold, who's doing it and other details. Dupree passes the information — and his relationship with the neighbor — on to the police. If the cops' investigation is successful, Dupree sees the information again. This time it's in the form of a police report.

In a case that went to trial recently, Dupree was trying to seize the property at 4826 Westminster Ave., a two-story row house in West Philadelphia where police and neighbors had documented frequent drugs sales.

Dupree called on the neighbors that had originally identified the property to prosecutors as a continuing problem. They told him how many times the owner had been told about the drug activity there and how many community meetings had been held to discuss the dilemma. They also identified family members of the owner who lived on the block, he said.

"I let it be known to the family of the defendant that the community was coming forward and was coming to court," Dupree said. "The next thing, the defense attorney

called me and said [his client] wasn't interested in contesting the forfeiture."

Next, the District Attorney's Office seizes the property title and auctions it off. Sometimes it donates such a building to a neighborhood group. A chapter of United Neighbors Against Drugs now holds its monthly meetings in a former drug house in Norris Square.

"You need to establish that one-on-one relationship in order to be able to do that," Dupree said.

The federal government chose Philadelphia and 18 other cities in 1991 to receive grant money through a pilot program later named Weed & Seed. The gardening metaphor bespeaks the strategy — "weeding out" violent or drug-dealing criminals and "seeding in" city and social services to revitalize the rundown. Today, Weed & Seed sites operate in 337 communities located across 49 states.

MAKING IT WORK

The impact of the strategy on a community isn't immediately reflected in crime data. Statistics don't show a drop in crime at Weed & Seed sites until the fourth year of the effort, according to a 2004 study of crime data reported by 20 sites.

In the first three years of the Weed & Seed project, site statistics actually showed an increase in crime. The jump is attributed to a police crackdown at the sites and residents' increased willingness to report crimes — events consistent with the Weed & Seed strategy.

The study's authors at the nonprofit Justice Research & Statistics Association called their finding "tentative" but said it "suggests that special police emphasis, community policing and neighborhood cooperation with the police can have a positive impact, even in the toughest parts of town."

Homicides declined by at least 30 percent at each Philadelphia Weed & Seed site when police statistics from 1995 and 2003 are compared. Reports of other crimes, such as robberies at one of the Northeast sites and aggravated and assaults at the West Philly site, went up.

Custodians in the U.S. Department of Justice say their 13-year-old project is foremost a strategy and not a grant program, downplaying the fact that the funding has not multiplied as the number of sites has. More than 100 sites currently receive no funding. Those that successfully compete for grants

get \$175,000 to \$225,000 a year over a five-year period — a shallow amount compared with the \$1.1 million Philadelphia's first site got in 1991.

The federal dollars are meant to fill in the gaps law enforcement and human-services agencies can't quite reach, and the DOJ's hope is that local money eventually replaces the federal support.

What Philadelphia gets in Weed & Seed dollars — \$175,000 annually for each of the three sites — is split down the middle between policing duties and community revitalization work, said William R. Hausmann, a former police officer who works out of the U.S. Attorney's Office coordinating the community outreach projects.

A minimal amount goes to the prosecuting side of Weed & Seed.

"The strategy is not about money," Hausmann said. "The strategy is about strategy."

A year and a half ago, Hausmann and the chief of the firearms unit in his office, Robert K. Reed, used the Weed & Seed network in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties to spread the word about another collaborative law enforcement strategy. This one focuses on getting the most violent gun-crime offenders off the streets and into federal prison.

"We let people know there is a federal presence out there — most people don't know that," Reed said.

He's letting them know that in addition to prosecuting white-collar crime and other complex cases, U.S. Attorney Pat Meehan has assigned more of his prosecutors to black-market gun crimes.

With Project Safe Neighborhoods, launched by the Bush administration in 2001, task-force members in the nine counties — including a federal prosecutor and one from the local district attorney's office — nominate cases for prosecution in federal court. They often pick individuals who have proved over time to be repeat or particularly violent offenders, explained Reed, who makes the final cut.

DRIVING IT HOME

Reed has made it part of his job to inform everyone who is in danger of being a victim of violent crime or a perpetrator about what his office is doing.

As part of Project Safe Neighborhoods and a related program, Project Sentry, Reed and other federal prosecutors visit high schools, prisons, halfway houses and youth centers

explaining just why these young people should think twice about “packing heat.”

Think federal prison sentences measured in years instead of months, and time behind bars in Phoenix rather than Lewisburg, Pa., said Reed.

“It is different than the ‘scared straight’ idea,” said Reed, although when he’s in front of audiences he quotes his prosecutors’ “win” rate, which is over 90 percent. “We’re just putting the information out there, so that if you’re on the street, hopefully you’ll think about it.”

He shows audiences a videotape, “Put Down the Guns.” One scene features Reed himself urging a group of teenaged boys to “remember the law.”

“You get three convictions for drugs or robbery or something like that, and you have a gun,” Reed implores. “You don’t use it, you don’t brandish it, you just have it. ... You’re facing a 15-year mandatory minimum. And a maximum sentence of life.”

The crowd listening is still and silent.

Since 1999, the average prison sentence for

those prosecuted and sentenced for gun crimes by Reed’s office is nine and a half years, he said in an interview. In state court, those offenders would get 11 and a half to 23 months.

There’s no comedy in the videotape, but there are tears and words from a man left severely disabled by a bullet to the head in a Broad Street mugging. Reed said his office has removed more than 1,300 violent offenders from the streets since 1999. In Berks County, which has seen a 40 percent drop in shootings since 2002, the impact is evident. In a large jurisdiction like Philadelphia, the effect is difficult to measure.

“In Philadelphia, it’s harder to see,” Reed said. “My view is that you remove people [from the street] who’ve been convicted five, seven, eight times, you’re having an impact.”

Reed acknowledges that outreach isn’t a part of his job.

“Our office doesn’t have to make this part of our vision. We could just prosecute cases,”

he said.

“But I believe it’s our obligation to tell people what they’re facing. A lot of what goes on in court, people don’t want to know about — they don’t care about. But when you have the reality in front of them, when they see the faces and have someone from the U.S. Attorney’s Office or the District Attorney’s Office, it has an impact.”

Considering his work on both Weed & Seed and Project Safe Neighborhoods, Hausmann noted the difficulty of measuring what kind of deterring effect — if any — their message has had.

“Sometimes you have to ask yourself, if we did nothing, would it make any difference?” he said. “And then you see a success story here and there, and, you know what? We made a difference.”

Sigman and Dupree said the extra hours they put in West Philly and the Northeast are well spent.

“It may not be a victory for the state or for the country,” Sigman told the Shriners. “But for that one block, it’s an amazing victory.”•