

COMMUNITY AIDED PROSECUTION IN THE WEED & SEED SITE:

A SUCCESS STORY

Weed & Seed Insights

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In a recent drug prosecution in the North Philadelphia 26th District Weed & Seed Site, a small time crack dealer named Juan Camargo was identified as a public nuisance by the Weed & Seed. Camargo had just been arrested for his nineteenth time for selling crack cocaine on the 2100 block of Orianna Street. This block sits one block from the McKinley Elementary School and just five blocks from Norris Square, a once notorious needle filled “drug user” park that was reclaimed by the neighborhood led by community leader (and Weed & Seed board member) Sister Carol Keck. Camargo, feeling confident after numerous acquittals using a high priced private defense attorney, chose a public defender for the first time. Finally, an arrest led to a conviction, however Camargo was sentenced to minimal jail time and quickly returned to selling drugs on the 2100 block of Orianna Street.

On July 17, 2003, police observed Camargo, who was sitting on a lawn chair in the middle of the 2100 block of Orianna Street, remove a plastic baggie from his pants and hand it to a co-defendant who then began to sell individual crack cocaine packets from the baggie to numerous buyers. Those buyers were stopped by police and individual crack cocaine packets were recovered. Both Camargo and the co-defendant were arrested and charged with crack cocaine dealing and conspiracy. This was Camargo’s twentieth drug arrest from Orianna Street.

After a bench trial, the Judge convicted Camargo of drug possession. In this case, Camargo again had hired his long time, high priced defense attorney. Since Camargo had a previous possession conviction he faced up to three years in state prison, but would likely get probation. However, prior to being sentenced an email was sent out to the Safe Havens, Weed & Seed board members, and the 26th Police District requesting that the community come to the Criminal Courthouse in Center City Philadelphia and attend the sentencing hearing.

On May 10, 2004, after the defense attorney postponed the sentencing hearing twice, the Judge heard from Camargo’s wife and niece on his good character and standing in the community. Camargo did not wish to speak. Finally, the time had come for the people affected by Camargo to advocate for a prison sentence. First, a 26th District Officer was called to the witness stand. The Officer testified to the location of McKinley Elementary School, the make up of 2100 Orianna Street, the opinion that Camargo is a “case worker” (a drug dealer who runs the block and uses others to sell crack for him), and that Camargo’s wife was also seen engaging in drug sales and had been arrested.

After the Officer testified, the Court’s attention was focused on the commanding officer of the 26th District, Captain Lou Campione, who was in full uniform and seated beside five members of the community. Each community member stood up and told the Judge their names, addresses, and explained the harm inflicted on their neighborhood by Camargo’s crack selling operation. The community members were sincere and their message was loud and clear, “send Camargo to prison.” The Judge then sentenced Camargo to 6 – 23 months in county jail followed by 1 year of reporting probation. In addition, the Judge ordered that Camargo stay away from the 2100 block of Orianna Street for three years or face being sent to state prison. The addition of the stay away order was out of the ordinary for a Philadelphia Judge in a drug case. In this case, the stay away order has armed the community and police with a powerful tool to keep Camargo away from that block and end the terror inflicted on this neighborhood by his drug operation.