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How Davenport police, residents, brought back a neighborhood

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DAVENPORT -- When a man was shot dead next to a school-bus stop, life in Goose Creek Heights started to change.

Thirty junior high students watched it happen from 40 yards away. Eight of them testified at the trial in 2004. Turned out it was a drug deal gone bad.

For the north Davenport neighborhood formerly known as Americana Park, the brutal episode was pivotal.

"That set a lot of political things in motion," Davenport police Cpl. Mark Berger said.

Back then, police officers wouldn't patrol the neighborhood without backup. Fights raged in the streets, gunshots rang out many times a week and homeowners were afraid to confront the rowdy renters who had taken over their blocks.

"It was ridiculous," said Willie Whitfield, a resident since 1997. "People running around here like this was Iraq."

Five years later, though, the biggest problems in Goose Creek Heights have been fixed. Tougher, smarter regulation of landlords and more attentive neighborhood policing have helped clean up properties and drive away criminals.

Landlords and police in Cedar Rapids visited Davenport this summer and have been studying the city's blueprint. Police here expect to implement similar strategies over the next several months.

The cops next door

In June 2005, Officer Scott Fuller became a fixture in Goose Creek Heights. A tall, stern-looking man, Fuller and another officer worked under the Neighborhoods Energized to Succeed program, which is similar in mission to Cedar Rapids' community policing.

The officers investigated everything from burglaries to noise complaints, built relationships with the landlords and got to know the criminals personally. They pushed landlords to mow weedy yards, and they removed abandoned vehicles -- 260 the first year.

After a few months, the officers began to understand the people and their patterns. Fuller knew which households wanted a better neighborhood, which families were breaking the law and which landlords seemed not to care. He could drive past a home and greet the people out front by name.

"Criminals do not like that," he said.

When residents realized police were committed to the neighborhood, they started to give officers more tips.

Over time, calls for police service in the neighborhood dropped.

From June 13 to Dec. 31, 2004, police made 1,887 calls to Goose Creek Heights that the department considered "reactive" -- disturbances, noise, fights, suspicious subjects. Over the same period in 2005, police made 1,261 such calls. During all of 2008, the number of reactive calls was 1,035 -- less than a third of what it had been in 2004.

Early next year, Cedar Rapids police will institute something similar, deploying a sergeant and few officers to each of the city's three districts, Lt. Chuck Mincks said.

"We want the same faces being seen as often as possible in the same areas of town," Mincks said.

Screening tenants

Goose Creek Heights was home to 2,800 renters leasing from 76 landlords in

2004. When problem tenants were evicted, they would just move down the street.

Police started offering training and free background checks to landlords. Now, when a person applies to rent a property, he or she fills out a form, and the landlord sends it to the Police Department, where volunteers check criminal records and call the tenant's employer and last landlord.

If a tenant trashed the last apartment, has a rap sheet or lies on the application, a landlord knows about it before handing over the keys. The background checks also help police . Because Davenport rental properties require a license and because police run about 40 background checks on prospective tenants a day, officers have compiled a database on landlords and tenants.

This year, police have found 154 wanted men and women through tenant screening and have arrested 60 of them.

Cracking down

On a recent morning, Fuller's phone rang.

"Hey, Leo. Fuller," he said. "You gonna evict Ms. Roberts? Let's make it happen, because she's part of the problem."

Roberts had been evicted 20 times in Davenport , Fuller said, covering the receiver, and a guest in her house had started a fight three nights earlier.

"Don't drop the ball on Roberts," he said to the landlord. "It's got to happen."

Fuller can be pushy with landlords because Davenport 's nuisance abatement ordinance gives police broad authority to crack down on problem properties. When a serious crime or a series of small problems occur at a property, the landlord gets a letter from the city declaring the property a nuisance.

Uncooperative landlords can be billed -- for gas, insurance or man-hours associated with police calls to their property. Their rental licenses can be revoked, which shuts down their property. All but a handful of Davenport landlords have fallen in line.

Yet it is the nuisance abatement ordinance, not landlord licensing, that

Davenport credits for its success in Goose Creek Heights.

The city requires landlords to pay \$25 a year per property after they have undergone eight hours of landlord training. In Cedar Rapids, which doesn't require licenses, a rental property must be registered for a one-time fee of \$50.

Cedar Rapids police are starting to "make more thorough use" of the city nuisance abatement ordinance, Mincks said, and are working with the city attorney to clarify police authority in such matters.

A new day is dawning

Mary Schenck owns two rental properties in Goose Creek Heights. She is a block captain in what has become a vigorous neighborhood watch program.

Groups of residents walk the streets picking up garbage. They share information. They meet once a month to discuss problems.

Landlords lost tenants at first, but the pain did not last, and average rents have increased because the neighborhood has improved -- by about \$350 to \$650 a month, Fuller said.

"We have a wait list," Schenck said.

Whitfield, the resident since 1997, said he woke up one night several years ago to a crowd in his front yard. People were drinking on his property, trying to send a message.

"I said, 'You guys are going to move before I do' -- and they did," he said.
"Every one of them.

"We still got work to do, but it's coming along real good."