

East County Public Safety Task Force

December 2009

A proactive, community-government partnership dedicated to building and sustaining safe, livable communities by identifying and eliminating problems associated with nuisance properties in the East Region.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The formation of the first formal nuisance property task force in the East County began in September 2007 as a proposal of the Spring Valley Citizen's Association with assistance from the East County Community Change Project, a project of the Institute for Public Strategies. The Spring Valley Responsible Property Management Review Board (RPM) was created as a response to the community's pleas for help in addressing poorly managed gang or drug infested apartment complexes. The Spring Valley RPM Review Board is modeled after the City of Vista's Nuisance Abatement Task Force. The East County Public Safety Task Force is an expansion of this model and proposes to focus on the entire East County region.

Regular meetings of the East County Public Safety Task Force have been convened since April 2009. Collaborative partners include:

- ◆ Dianne Jacob, District Two County Supervisor
- ◆ San Diego County District Attorney
- ◆ San Diego Office of County Counsel
- ◆ San Diego County Department of Environmental Health
- ◆ San Diego Sheriff's Department
- ◆ San Diego County Code Enforcement
- ◆ Lakeside Fire Department
- ◆ San Miguel Fire Department
- ◆ El Cajon Police Department
- ◆ El Cajon Fire Department
- ◆ Institute for Public Strategies- Countywide Media Advocacy Project

The agencies involved in the East County Public Safety Task Force will apply their resources to address problem properties with chronic gang, drug, prostitution, and alcohol-related nuisance activity. The Task Force is a collaborative, proactive approach to resolving chronic problems, with members working as a team with property owners to identify permanent solutions to problems. This approach is expected to not only increase compliance rates, but also to allocate over-stretched department resources more efficiently.

Neighborhood Safe Streets (NSS), a project of the East County Community Change Project, will support residents living in and around the chosen properties. Many East County agencies not listed are determining their level of participation as strategic planning efforts are developing.

OVERVIEW

The goals of the East County Public Safety Task Force are:

- ◆ To enhance problem solving through a unified multi-agency, cross-jurisdictional abatement approach to addressing nuisance properties.
- ◆ To act as a case evaluation team to elevate cases as needed for greater resource concentration.
- ◆ To catalog data collection findings to track and analyze community and regional impacts of Task Force operations.
- ◆ To achieve voluntary compliance with civil and health codes and responsible management policies and practices.

To date, Task Force meetings have been convened to identify case criteria, agency responsibilities and appropriate processes for effective and uniform case flow management for seven* proposed multi-agency nuisance task force teams.

STEPS FOR IDENTIFYING CASES

1. Task Force receives case referral. Discussion occurs

among Task Force Community Team members.

- Records of excessive calls for service and crime reports and other documentation are gathered.
- Initial multi-agency property inspection is conducted and findings are recorded.
- The property owner is notified through a Demand Letter that corrective action needs to be taken. Demand letters detail the violations and the findings from the multi-agency inspection report. An invitation to meet with the Task Force and work on a correction strategy is also included. The Demand letter sends a message to the owner that immediate action is necessary to avoid further penalties. East County Community Change Project staff will provide training and coordination of Neighborhood Safe Streets cases to support agency abatement efforts.
- Fines are implemented until the problem is corrected if the owner does not comply. Worst case offenders face civil injunctions. The San Diego County District Attorney's Office has encouraged standardized practices and utilization of uniform materials for Demand Letters and Task Force documentation.

According to officials from the City of Vista, using an inter-agency approach has proven to be a cost-effective method of handling problem properties. That city has experienced an enhanced ability to extract greater accountability from problem property owners, including administrative citation, criminal complaint, or declaring the property a public nuisance and abatement. Averaging 50 cases per year, 90% of Vista's cases have been brought into compliance in the early stages through multi-department contact with the property owner or the Demand Letter**.

INFRACTIONS AND CITATIONS

In the cases of nuisance properties, most are expected to be misdemeanor civil citations. It is important to note that infractions do not provide the accused with a jury trial option or a public defender in most cases. Civil violations allow for monetary sanctions. The San Diego Office of County Counsel will work with Task Force members and property owners for effective processing of civil cases. County Counsel is cross sworn with the District Attorney's office and by mutual agreement, able to prosecute misdemeanor cases.

EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Data for each referred case will be collected and retained to substantiate the East County Public Safety Task Force efforts. Comparison data for similar non-nuisance properties will also be collected. After successful resolution, post data will be collected to measure reasonable impact outcomes. The quarterly Task Force meetings will serve

as a collection point for Community Task Force Team data. The East County Community Change Project will catalog data findings to track and analyze community and regional impacts of the East County Task Force operations.

MEDIA ADVOCACY

The strategic use of newsmaking through TV, radio, newspapers and online media sources will amplify nuisance abatement efforts by promoting public debate and generating community support for improved leasing practices and apartment manager policies. The goal of media advocacy efforts will be to engage policy makers and the public by advocating for safe, livable neighborhoods, identifying goals and barriers, and citing current research that supports Task Force strategies.

POLICY SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE EAST COUNTY PUBLIC SAFETY TASK FORCE

A longer-term goal of the Task Force is to advance ordinances which would require the following:

- ◆ Crime Free Multi-Housing certification or Apartment Manager Training for chronic nuisance properties
- ◆ Improved leasing practices.
- ◆ Administrative cost recovery.

The Policy Subcommittee will be responsible for ordinance examination and will make recommendations to the larger committee. Challenges with limited resources for civil prosecution make advancement of ordinances a high priority to support ongoing efforts to improve the quality of life in East County San Diego.

* Unincorporated- Spring Valley, Lakeside, El Cajon, Incorporated- Lemon Grove, Santee, El Cajon and La Mesa (7 total Task Force Teams)

** Kathy Valdez, City of Vista, East County Public Safety Task Force Meeting, April 2009.

For more information contact the East County Community Change Project at E-mail: info@publicstrategies.org

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