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PRACTICE BRIEF

KEEPING DRUG MARKETS CLOSED: THE HIGH POINT PROTOCOL

NATIONAL NETWORK FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES

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The National Network's drug market intervention (DMI) strategy was successfully pioneered in High Point, North Carolina, in 2004 and has since been applied to close down all of the city's open-air drug markets. It has also been implemented in dozens of other jurisdictions, including three rounds of Department of Justice-funded replications in over 30 cities.

The DMI strategy is aimed at eliminating overt drug markets—those well-known locations where anonymous drug buyers and sellers can connect. Because they are “known places,” such markets attract outside buyers, robbers, prostitution, lead to loss of public space, and are profoundly destructive to community life and public safety.

The DMI strategy identifies street-level dealers, arrests violent offenders, suspends cases for non-violent dealers, and brings together drug dealers, their families, law enforcement and criminal justice officials, community leaders and service providers for a meeting that makes clear the dealing has to stop. It delivers a clear message that the community cares for the offenders but rejects their conduct, help is available, and renewed dealing will result in the activation of any existing cases.

Since closing down five drug markets High Point, has been continuing to lead the way in developing innovative measures to maintain these closures and to prevent displacement of open-air dealing into other neighborhoods. This document sets out the key steps of High Point's drug market maintenance protocol—the measures its police department and community takes to ensure closed street markets stay closed.

The National Network for Safe Communities would like to thank Major Marty Sumner, head of the Major Crime, Prevention and Deterrence Unit at the High Point Police Department, for contributing his time, knowledge and insights to this document.

Since pioneering the first drug market intervention strategy (DMI) in 2004, High Point, NC, has shut down a further four open-air markets within its borders, making it one of the most advanced National Network jurisdictions in terms of broad strategy implementation. The city's police department, in close partnership with High Point Community Against Violence (HP-CAV) and other city stakeholders, has been equally successful in developing steps to ensure that drug markets stay closed. Key to its approach has been a strong focus on building trust among the affected communities, establishing direct lines of communications with residents, introducing innovations in police department protocol, and responding swiftly and meaningfully to threats. The steps set out below are at the heart of "the High Point maintenance model" that has allowed the city to keep drug markets closed and cut crime without few additional resources.

1. Police-Community Communications

The successful and long-term closure of an overt drug market, more than anything else, requires a police department to develop relationships, build trust, and maintain lines of communications with the residents of the area where the market is located. "Whatever follows, this is the glue that keeps it all together," says Major Marty Sumner, head of the police department's Major Crime, Prevention and Deterrence Unit. While the foundations for strong relationships and trust are laid during the early phases of a drug market intervention,¹ building on them during the maintenance phase has proven equally crucial.

In the first couple of weeks after a market intervention, police command staff is the immediate point of contact for residents. Once a drug market closure matures, approximately five to six weeks after a call-in, responsibility for upholding lines of communication becomes, in the first instance, the responsibility of beat officers. Sumner says to ensure a smooth transition and preserve trust he personally introduces selected officers to key residents as they take on this particular task. Moreover, he is particularly careful in selecting the right officers. "You have to pick the good communicator, the good people person. It is no longer about enforcement but about talking to people, so don't pick the most aggressive guy who will get bored and start

¹ See: Kennedy, D.(2009, March). **Drugs, Race and Common Ground: Reflections on the High Point Intervention.** *National Institute of Justice Journal*, No. 262.

messing with the public. You'll end up undoing everything you want to do." Also, whenever an officer in a DMI neighborhood is replaced by another, a full transfer of knowledge and community connections is essential, Sumner says. "Officer knowledge of, and ties to, the neighborhood are very important resources that must not be overlooked and that have to be sustained and protected."

Sumner said it is not difficult to find residents best suited for becoming the police department's points of contact. "They are the ones that continue to call us; those who are the most outspoken at community meetings; those who have the "No Trespassing" signs on their well-kept front yards. All you have to do is to show up in a neighborhood and see for yourself," he says. His department also runs regular call-dispatch searches to determine who from a DMI neighborhood has been making frequent calls for service and what type of service they requested. "We don't necessarily seek out the appointed or obvious leaders in a neighborhood but just anyone who demonstrates in their own way that they still care about what is going on. These individuals became our eyes and ears in the neighborhood."

However, lines of communications must run both ways. The police department gets in touch with residents whenever it has neighborhood-relevant news to report. This may involve a recent arrest, the outcome of a "knock-and-talk," or other types of police activity in the area. "Everyone knows that if you share information with someone it will make that person feel valued and trusted. Communications during the maintenance phase cannot just be a one-way street where we expect to be a mere recipient of information from the community. If information flows both ways everybody feels connected," Sumner says. Methods used by the police department or HP-CAV to communicate to residents the goals, principles and progress of a drug market intervention range from meeting directly with key residents, distributing newsletters or fliers, and attending monthly neighborhood meetings to organizing joined celebrations of success.

Sumner says his department experienced first-hand the effect good and bad communication can have on maintaining a drug market closure. In one of High Point's DMI neighborhoods, where police had stayed in close contact with residents throughout the implementation and maintenance phase, residents immediately contacted officers each time they observed any type of drug-related

activity. In another target area, however, police suddenly began to receive anonymous notes rather than direct calls and soon afterwards noted an unexpected uptick in crime. This was taken as immediate evidence that the department had failed to sustain community trust built in the run-up to the intervention. Responding immediately, command staff returned to the neighborhood to meet and speak directly with residents, reallocated some of its resources, including foot patrols, to the area, and, in a neighborhood meeting accompanied by a cook-out, admitted openly that the police department had temporarily lost focus. While this type of breakdown in communications should be avoided, Sumner says, the department learned that it was entirely possible to quickly regain the community's trust provided it responds promptly and admits its mistakes. "I was concerned that the progress we had made would be lost. As it turned out, it took no more than a couple of weeks and lines of communications and trust were reestablished and strengthened," he recalls.

2. Communication with call-in participants

The second element essential to High Point's maintenance approach is staying in contact with offenders who participated in a call-in. This particular task is managed largely by HP-CAV, whose members not only represents the community's moral voice at call-ins but also directly support offenders in turning their lives around. Sumner says even though a significant number of notified offenders often leave the DMI target area, HP-CAV ensures that those who remain have a central point of support to go to and receive the assistance they seek. In addition, HP-CAV ensures this group are informed about both the success stories and the arrests of their peers. "We couldn't rely on call-in participants remaining in contact with each other. Whenever we made an arrest we made sure that somebody from HP-CAV would let all the call-in participants know why and how it happened," Sumner says. Direct communications between ex-offender and police is limited during this phase, he adds. Experience had shown that notified offenders who were succeeding in transitioning from a life of crime usually preferred to keep police at arm's length at that stage in their life.

3. Police department innovations

To help police stay focused on target areas and individuals once a market is shut down, command staff and officers developed a range of interdepartmental solutions. In line with the

overall drug market intervention strategy, police maintains a strong presence in the target area for the first five to six weeks after the market is shut down to make sure buyers are made aware of the change. “We know the dealers got the message in the call-in, but it takes a while longer for it to get through to the customers,” Sumner says. During that period officers in the neighborhood are less involved in enforcement action but instead spend their time meeting residents and building connections. After approximately six weeks, the additional resources are withdrawn and beat officers are left to police the area. However, command staff continues to have regular meetings with these officers to examine complaints and tips and get their perspective on neighborhood developments. Next steps are determined based on the data collected.

As part of improving interdepartmental communications, officers set up a bulletin board with news about each DMI neighborhood in the roll-call room where they review it daily and add any new information. Crime stats of DMI neighborhoods are reviewed every two weeks so that resources can be focused on locations or people requiring special attention. In addition, officers proposed utilizing SharePoint (Microsoft Office standard software already owned by the city) to help them share information about DMI developments. Given that all patrol cars are already equipped with internet access, officers are able to have real-time discussions across all shifts at any time or location, Sumner says. In addition, SharePoint is used to create a daily bulletin of incidents in each DMI neighborhood that command staff receives in the morning. Details of each incident and a map of where it occurred are included. “Everybody reviews the latest information via SharePoint when they start their shift. It is easy to set up an alert to make sure nothing is missed, and we found that this is by far the most efficient way to keep everyone focused on what we are doing,” Sumner says. By including these low-cost but highly effective steps to its DMI protocol, he adds, the department trained itself to stay alert during maintenance phases.

High Point police also changed the way it holds personnel accountable after a market shutdown. Traditional narcotics efforts, such as arrests, search warrants and seizures, inevitably decline and the department had to find new ways to account for narcotics officers’ time and reward them. “We asked them to carefully document how they spent their time and those activities were added to their work sheets as performance measures,” Sumner says. These included items such as

number of “knock-and-talks;” hours of surveillance in a DMI neighborhood; number of attempted buys in the area and the like. By making this adjustment, Sumner says, officers were satisfied that what they did was correctly recorded and that success was measured differently—not simply in terms of number of arrests or seizure weight. In addition, the department included violence reduction as a measure of success in a drug market area. A year after the original drug market intervention, these changes in fact led to an increase in overall seizure weight because officers—freed from arresting street sellers—were able to focus their attention on mid- and upper-level dealers.

Additionally, the department’s narcotics unit changed the way it pays informers. In the past, payment was based on weight: the more drugs were recovered the more an informant was paid. As a result, informants had no incentive to turn in the kind of low-level dealers that were mostly active in DMI target areas. To address this issue, lieutenants and captains were instructed to tell their informants that those particular neighborhoods were getting special attention and that they would get paid a premium for any dealer they could identify as active in the area.

Finally, the department added questions about the drug market intervention strategy to its promotional exam to gain insight into officers’ level of understanding and explain the department’s approach and the motivations behind it. “Whenever someone applied for a transfer to the narcotics unit, they’d better know what the initiative was all about and how and why we do things here,” Sumner says.

4. The Role of Community Stakeholders

While most of the steps described above were taken or guided by High Point’s police department, maintenance of a drug market closure will be viable only if supported by neighborhood residents and city agencies. “We kept reinforcing the message that it was up to residents to decide what happened in their neighborhood,” Sumner says. “We told everyone that while we had helped to reset standards with the initial intervention, it was now in the hands of the community to continue spreading the message that drug dealing is no longer tolerated in the neighborhood.”

Reinforcing this message becomes particularly important in neighborhoods with high residential turnover, especially those that include public housing. Current residents are encouraged to pass on information about the drug market intervention whenever they see a new neighbor move in. In addition, High Point's Housing Authority includes DMI information in its welcome package for new residents, explicitly alerting them to the fact that they are now living in a neighborhood where overt drug dealing is not tolerated. Meanwhile, members of HP-CAV and police officers distribute fliers with information of any arrests of call-in participants or new residents or whenever a search warrant is executed. The flier also reiterates the DMI's goals and principles. These various methods of communication have proven successful. The University of North Carolina Greensboro, in an evaluation of High Point's drug market interventions, found that 85 percent of neighborhood residents surveyed were aware of the initiative and able to articulate its overall goals.

City agencies also stepped up to play their part in DMI maintenance. With officers a constant presence in target areas, the police department decided to compile a weekly report to inform city inspectors which houses need to be boarded up, where street lights are not working, where trash needs to be collected, or where graffiti has to be removed. This approach was supported by High Point's City Manager who instructed all city departments to respond immediately to any police requests for service in a DMI area. "We all recognized that an area has to look and feel differently for things to change over the long term," Sumner explained. "If city officials cooperate with you in these particular efforts, you'll get a much bigger bang for your buck."

5. Response to Threats to Drug Market Closure

In addressing specific threats to the closure of a drug market, High Point's DMI law enforcement working group (consisting of the High Point Police Department, North Carolina's Community Corrections and State Bureau of Investigation, ATF, FBI, DEA, District Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office) pursues a range of actions. First and foremost, any call-in participant who reoffends is tried as swiftly as possible for the case "banked" against him/her and cannot take a plea. Once again, the partners make every effort to publicize such prosecutions and resulting sentences within DMI neighborhoods to deter others. However, across High Point's five DMI neighborhoods, only 26 percent of all call-in participants were prosecuted for their

original offense. “It seemed all we had to do is to hold up a few examples to demonstrate that we had meant what we said at the call-in,” Sumner says.

Second, each Part I crime in a DMI neighborhood is reviewed by detectives the day after it occurs to determine whether it is in any way related to drug activity in the area. If it is, the incident is given immediate priority. If it is a robbery, for example, the department responds as it would respond to a homicide or federal case, Sumner says. Third, any complaints by residents about drug-related activity in the neighborhood also get moved to the front of the line. The police department informed the city’s communications department in writing that calls received from a DMI neighborhood must be given highest priority and immediately passed on for police attention to avoid the kind of sidelining that had occurred in the past and that had stopped residents from contacting police in the first place, Sumner explains.

Lastly, High Point police changed *how* it responds to complaints about drug-related activity in a DMI area. Instead of the narcotics division taking the lead, which in the past meant that as much as two weeks could go by before even a search warrant was issued, a uniformed officer is dispatched immediately to do a “knock-and-talk” at the address where drug-activity was reported. “During a drug market maintenance phase, the traditional approach to handling a drug complaint is completely ineffective because residents are unaware of any action being taken by police or because of the level of scrutiny required before anything else can be done,” said Sumner. “If the response takes too long, overt dealing and related crime can resurface quickly and the damage is done.” Instead, people at the reported address are put on notice. The uniformed officer may say something like, ‘We’ve just received information about drug-dealing activity at this house. Are you aware of the recent drug market intervention in this neighborhood? Here is a flier about it. By the way, we sure would like to clean up this complaint. You don’t happen to have anything in the house? Would you mind if we searched?’ Sumner says many times officers using this approach will get consent to search a house.

The changes made by the police department in how it deals with threats to a drug market intervention produced two key benefits. First, the residents who called the police (who often would not have done so before a DMI) will see a uniformed officer go to the reported address

almost immediately. This will encourage them to keep calling. Second, any dealers are put on notice and will more likely than not quit or go covert. Sumner says the approach has proven to be much more effective for addressing complaints during the maintenance phase than taking the time it takes to build a case.

If a threat to a drug market closure persists, the department immediately switches to “high-visibility business disruption,” Sumner says. This means parking a police car in front of a drug house or doing license checks on both ends of the street to stop customers from returning. “We only ever had to do this twice,” Sumner reports. “Most of the time, the immediate knock-and-talk and putting people on notice were more than enough to change dealers’ minds and help them realize that the area was no longer the place for them.”

Overall, Sumner says, High Point had very few challenges to its drug market closures. “Dealers just realized it was too risky to go out there and start out again when everywhere was quiet. There’s no benefit to them.” It also found no evidence of displacement. In fact, police and residents observed a diffusion of benefits to neighboring areas, where active players toned down violence to avoid attracting law enforcement attention. This has since been confirmed by evaluations of DMI replications in other cities.² “As long as you build trust among residents so that they will call the police, as long as the dealers clearly get the message, as long as the police backs up the message whenever someone tries to defy it, and as long as you ensure that everyone hears about the consequences, you’re not going to have a problem,” is how Sumner sums up High Point’s maintenance work. High Point police recently discussed whether it would ever have to repeat a call-in in one of its DMI neighborhoods. Sumner suggests that as long as the maintenance piece is done thoroughly and in its entirety, a second call-in will never be needed. “You should never find another open market. If you do, it’s your fault.”

² See: Corsaro, N., McGarrell, E.F. (2009). [An Evaluation of the Nashville Drug Market Initiative \(DMI\) Pulling Levers Strategy. Drug Market Intervention Working Paper](#). East Lansing, MA: Michigan State University