



Providence

Calm comes to Lockwood neighborhood

The police help transform Providence's Lockwood neighborhood, once known for drug-dealing.

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By Amanda Milkovits
Journal Staff Writer



Ken Cabral, who has lived in the Providence neighborhood for more than three decades, says the streets are now safer for the families who live there. "What the police have done is create a safe and happy community," he says. The Providence Journal / Kris Craig

PROVIDENCE — In the 34 years he's lived in this Upper South Providence neighborhood, Ken Cabral has put up with the drug dealers, prostitutes and pimps who hung around the streets as if they owned them.

Now, he and other residents are becoming accustomed to something they never knew here before — peace and quiet.

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For more than a generation, the triangle-shaped neighborhood of single- and multifamily houses, high-rises and housing projects has been where the drug dealers ruled the streets. The Lockwood neighborhood, named for the street cutting through its middle, was known for gun violence, crime and street-level dealers. Frequent police patrols could not chase them away.

Route 95 whisked drug customers easily on and off Pine Street, known locally as “crack highway.” With Crossroads at one end and Amos House at the other, dealers had walk-in customers looking for their daily fix. Children were recruited as lookouts and drug runners. Gunfire in the streets drove people indoors.

Then, about a year ago, the Providence police launched a crime-fighting initiative that combined an intense drug sting with community policing. The police arrested 104 drug dealers — about a third from the Lockwood neighborhood — and toppled a drug-dealing hierarchy. After the arrests, the police stepped up patrols in the neighborhood and worked with the residents to keep crime down. And, with the hope of winning the trust of the community, the police agreed to give a handful of nonviolent drug dealers a second chance, by promising not to charge them with the felony drug crimes if they stayed away from the streets and went back to school or found jobs.

A year later, the street-level drug dealing hasn't returned. The steps outside the small markets, where dealers used to hang around four and five deep, are vacant of trouble. The street corners where drug dealers ran to stopping cars are clear. Children, instead of drug dealers, are using the playground.

“I see more people walking, more children in my neighborhood, and that's good,” said Joe Vileno Jr., chairman of the Ward 11 Democratic Committee, who's lived on Pine Street for 27 years.

“The drug activity is virtually nil around here,” he said.

Cabral calls the changes “extraordinary,” and he credits Police Chief Dean M. Esserman and his department for making a difference. “What the police have done is create a safe and happy community,” Cabral said.

Meanwhile, many of the drug dealers who were arrested in the 2006 sting are either convicted or being prosecuted in the federal court system and facing prison, the police say. What surprises the police is that no street dealers have moved into the neighborhood to take the places of those who've been arrested. Drug dealing continues in other neighborhoods, even just a few blocks south of Lockwood, but the problems haven't increased elsewhere, the police say.

In Lockwood, the number of drug-related crimes dropped from 88 in 2006 to 26 crimes last year; residents' calls about drug crimes also dropped, from 111 in 2006 to 21 calls last year, according to statistics provided by the Providence Plan.

“Lockwood is a very different place,” said police Lt. Thomas Verdi, who heads the department's narcotics

unit. “The goal is to maintain it without experiencing an increase in other areas, and we haven’t seen [the increase].”

While the street-level dealers have disappeared, there is still crime in Lockwood. There’ve been several shootings, including the murder of a man from Fall River, who was fatally shot in August when he drove to the neighborhood to buy drugs. Two men have been charged with his murder.

At the end of the summer, the police scaled back their extra patrols in the neighborhood, said Lt. George Stamatakos, the commander for the neighborhood. “If there’s anything suspicious, people are calling and we’re responding immediately,” he said.

The number of calls has dropped 58 percent since the initiative began. The most dramatic change was the decrease in calls to disperse people hanging around, from 339 calls in 2005 to just 46 last year. The reason, residents say, is that the drug dealers aren’t hanging around anymore.

The police are still cautious about calling the initiative a success. “A year is not long enough,” Verdi said. “If we’re sitting here next year and we haven’t seen an increase in crime as a whole, then we can say it’s a success.”

There are other reasons for changes in the neighborhood.

A nearby nightclub with a reputation for attracting violence closed early last year after a triple shooting and murder in December 2006. Dozens of attractive new houses, built through nonprofit organizations, are attracting families to the neighborhood.

George Lindsey, director at the Davey Lopes Center in the neighborhood, and street workers under Teny Gross at the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence, have mediated in feuds and disturbances to prevent more violence.

Last week, one street worker told Gross that residents told him about a person in the neighborhood looking for drugs. “They said he looked so funny and out of place,” Gross said. “It’s an area that was constantly busy [with drug dealing] and now it’s had the air sucked out of it.”

Esserman is talking about attempting the same initiative in another neighborhood. Providence is one of a few cities in the nation to try the initiative, which was developed by a college professor who’d helped produce Boston’s anti-gang project in the mid-1990s. David Kennedy, now the head of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, believed that having the police and community work together to rid their neighborhood of open drug dealing could have lasting effects in reducing violence and crime.

Lockwood residents say the program has had lasting effects — a renewed trust in the police and a growing sense of community.

“One of the things that’s so important is the relationship the police have created with the neighbors,” said Cabral, a former North Providence police officer. “They’re recognizing the difference between the kids that are doing bad and those kids just trying to have fun in their neighborhood. I’ve never seen this in any community in the city of Providence.”

In the summer of 2006, it was business as usual, with dealers selling crack on every corner. One night, the police and local politicians staged a community rally to demand safer streets. The anti-crime placards left behind were defaced by the roaming bands of drug dealers, Vileno said.

This summer was different. Neighbors were outside. The dealers were gone.

“I think the people have become comfortable. They’re getting to know their own neighbors,” said Cabral. “Kids get to play outside their homes, and if the kids do something wrong, the neighbors will say, ‘I’m telling your parents.’”

“Right now, I hope it’ll continue,” he said. “It’s up to all of us.”

amilkovi@projo.com