

Seattle Safer Streets Initiative

12 Significant Steps Addressing Street Crime and Social Disorder

August 18, 2008

Problem Statement

Reported violent crime is at its lowest level in Seattle since the 1960s, yet many city residents complain bitterly to the Council about the deterioration of their neighborhoods caused by street crime and social disorder.

Complaints come from across the city—Rainier Valley, Beacon Hill, Belltown, Pioneer Square, Capitol Hill, Fremont, and the University and International districts. The complaints primarily involve misdemeanor crime and social misbehavior related to drug trafficking, street prostitution, aggressive panhandling, public urination and defecation, theft, property damage, gang-related graffiti, and littering. More serious crimes in these same neighborhoods—assaults with firearms, robberies, and burglaries—contribute to anxiety and perceptions of social disorder.

Recent complaints received at the Council have included the belief by some that police commanders and city leaders, including the Council, are indifferent or don't appreciate the magnitude of the crisis our neighborhoods are facing.

Response

There is no single solution to the problem of social disorder, no magic bullet or instant fix. Instead, the solution lies in a variety of collaborative, multidimensional responses that involve both government and the private sector, including nonprofit organizations committed to helping individuals change and make better choices. The police play a key role because they are intimately engaged at the sidewalk level, but the provision of prevention and treatment services is crucial for ultimate success.

Recognizing the problem and acknowledging the complexity of any solution, the **Seattle Safer Streets Initiative** is a Council-generated series of significant steps designed to make our neighborhoods safer and healthier. Some of these steps require new legislation, others involves new partnerships with King County government and nonprofit organization service providers.

Separately, and importantly, Mayor Nickels is preparing recommendations related to gang activities and youth violence and will present these to the Council in September as part of his annual budget proposals.

Beginning, Tuesday, August 19, 2008, the **Public Safety, Human Services, and Education Committee** will begin discussion of the Council's **Seattle Safer Streets Initiative**.

Prevention and Treatment Steps

1. Create joint police-mental health professional response teams designed to respond to incidents where alternatives to jail or hospitalization are appropriate, providing rapid support to individuals in crisis while freeing neighborhood patrol officers to maintain basic police services. Establish as a pilot project funded with money from the King County Mental Illness and Drug Dependency (MIDD) Fund. (Estimated \$240,000 needed for 2009.)
2. Establish safe housing for children involved in prostitution, including transition and support services. A city-funded study¹ of child prostitution in Seattle completed earlier this year found that as many as 300-500 children may be involved in the Seattle area. The study found a severe lack of transition housing for children who want to escape the coercive violence and abuse of prostitution. Nearly all of the children involved in prostitution have chemical dependency and mental health issues requiring extensive treatment and secure housing to escape their pimps. In addition, there is evidence that some child prostitution is gang-organized and managed. Establish housing and wraparound services funded with money from the King County Mental Illness and Drug Dependency (MIDD) Fund. (Estimated \$480,000 for 2009.)
3. Support funding for a Crisis Diversion Center through the King County Mental Illness and Drug Dependency Fund. This Center is designed as an alternative for individuals in crisis where jail booking or hospital admission is not required or appropriate. A proposal for this Center is being reviewed by the Regional Policy Committee now.
4. Add two full time support workers to the Seattle Municipal Court to enhance monitoring and counseling for defendants placed in diversion treatment programs. Large numbers of criminal defendants in Municipal Court have mental illness or chemical dependency issues and expansion of services designed to avoid jail by focusing on long-term solutions is highly desired. (Cost estimate being developed, or may be addressed through reallocation of existing staff resources.)

¹ See "Who Pays the Price? Assessment of Youth Involved in Prostitution in Seattle," by Debra Boyer, PhD, June 2008. Available at http://www.seattle.gov/humanservices/domesticviolence/Report_YouthInProstitution.pdf.

Policing and Criminal Justice Steps

5. Maintain the city's commitment to hire additional police officers. In 2007, the Council and Mayor agreed to a plan to increase the size of the police department. Various studies, and the experience of other cities, show that the presence of police officers deters street crime and social disorder. Cops matter! Full implementation of the Neighborhood Policing Plan requires the hiring of more officers. Even as the city faces budget cuts because of the slow economy, Seattle must remain committed to increasing the number of officers available for patrol duties in our neighborhoods. (Funding already allocated in the city budget.)
6. Encourage more assertive policing to deal with street crime and social disorder. This means additional emphasis patrols—officer presence—in areas with recurring problems. Our police officers must know that city officials support—and expect—proactive and assertive response to these problems. There is no justification for allowing open-air drug markets, street prostitution, graffiti, aggressive panhandling and other social disorder to continue on our streets. Assertive and proactive policing to address street crime and its attendant social disorder improves quality of life and reduces fear in our neighborhoods.
7. Re-establish one police detective position dedicated to the tracking and analysis of graffiti crime as previously existed in the police department. Equip park and public utilities staff with tools to photograph and document graffiti removal for evidentiary purposes. Graffiti is often gang-related and sometimes used as “turf marking” or to intimidate. Identification and prosecution of graffiti perpetrators is possible. In fact, Seattle had good success in this area when the graffiti detective position was staffed. Removing graffiti and prosecuting those responsible is a key component of gang disruption efforts, even when current gang activity may be less turf-focused and more drug trafficking focused. (Estimated cost is being developed, or could be addressed through reassignment of existing personnel.)
8. Return School Resource Officers to select public high schools and middle schools in Seattle. The presence of uniformed police officers in schools has proven to be a positive and well-accepted practice in Seattle and many other cities in the United States. Seattle withdrew officers from schools several years ago, but the recent increase in gang recruiting and gang-related violence suggests we should return the officers. The school superintendent fully supports this recommendation. (Funding for this effort is problematic, but this issue deserves full examination in the fall budget process.)
9. Re-establish the city prosecutor's High Impact Offender Targeting Program by adding one full-time position to prosecute individuals in the

city with more than ten prior misdemeanor or felony convictions. A similar program exists in the prosecutor's office for frequent domestic violence perpetrators. These efforts should be expanded to target other individuals who are engaged in continuing and destructive criminal behavior. (Funding for this effort will be considered in the fall budget process.)

Legislative Steps

10. Increase financial penalties for patronizing a prostitute and reinstitute peer-support and counseling groups for women involved in prostitution. The current maximum penalty for patronizing a prostitute is \$500 in Seattle Municipal Court. This penalty should be raised to \$1,000 with the funds used to support the peer-counseling transition groups designed to move individuals out of prostitution. When previously funded by the city, these peer-counseling groups effectively reduced recidivism. Committee action will be focused on amending ordinances to increase penalties and funding the peer-counseling groups. (Estimated expenditure of \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year.)
11. Enact new legislation that imposes civil and criminal penalties when businesses, property owners or property managers knowingly allow criminal behavior to occur and fail to take steps to stop it. Also, add a regulatory section to the city's business license that gives the city the authority to revoke a license when a licensee knowingly allows criminal behavior to occur on their premises and fails to take steps to stop it. These "good neighbor" provisions will provide added tools to control and eliminate chronic trouble spots that are the focus of continuing crime and social disorder.
12. Expand the downtown Metropolitan Improvement District (MID) north to include portions of the Belltown neighborhood. The MID has been tremendously successful in creating cleaner and safer streets and alleyways in the downtown core. Expansion of the MID into Belltown will bring similar services to the north end of downtown. The MID would also pay for four to six off-duty police officers on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights to establish a stronger police presence in Belltown, a neighborhood with particularly high levels of nighttime disorder.

For further information, or to comment on the **Safer Street Initiative**, contact the office of Councilmember Tim Burgess at 206-684-8806. Or write tim.burgess@seattle.gov.