

## **A Defensible Space Project: Deterring Crime and Building Community in Rogers Park**

A project conducted by the Rogers Park Community Council in partnership with Loyola University Center for Urban Research and Learning

January - May, 1997

### Foreword

This document has been compiled to describe the process and implementation of a collaborative project created by Rogers Park Community Council (RPCC) and Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL). The Policy Research Action Group (PRAG), a collaborative endeavor between four Chicago universities and local community based organizations, also contributed resources as a segment of their university/community partnership with Loyola University. From the beginning, the project revolved around the concerns and interests of the community members. RPCC intends to use the findings and recommendations outlined in this document to promote further concrete action. We hope this document will also serve as an illustrative tool for future community initiated projects of this type. The research for this report was carried out by teams of community residents and university students. A list of participants is located in the appendix at the end of the document. Without their dedicated efforts, this project could not have been successfully completed. In particular, we would like to thank Cary Steinbuck (RPCC), Michael Realmuto (RPCC), Dr. Richard Block (Loyola), and Laura Herrin (Loyola).

### How the Project Began

During the fall of 1996, Rogers Park Community Council (RPCC) and Loyola University Chicago's Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) entered into a conversation about an appropriate project to address the concerns of the community. It was agreed that a defensible space project could be most beneficial. RPCC and CURL met on January 14, 1997 to discuss the goals of the project and the availability and integration of Loyola's resources. The three main goals of the project were: 1) to expand the residents' knowledge and awareness of defensible space strategies, 2) to develop recommendations to improve the community, and 3) to enable the residents to use the recommendations and develop a plan of action that increases community safety. In order to achieve these identified goals and build community support, a defensible space workshop and forum were planned for February 22nd and April 5th, respectively.

### Building Support

The proposed project was presented at the 24th Police District beat meeting held on January 27th to solicit participation from Rogers Park residents. RPCC and CURL presented an overview of what the project entailed and the role the residents would play in the course of the project. Several residents came forward and expressed their interest in the project. CURL then contacted these residents and asked them to inform other residents within their beats. Subsequently, a defensible space packet was distributed to community residents describing the key issues involved in defensible space and inviting them to participate in the project.

## Defining "Defensible Space"

The idea of "defensible space" conjures up a variety of different images for people. Some people tend to assume that defensible space implies brick walls, barred windows, and high fences which inevitably segregate people from their community. However, defensible space actually can be applied to unify and build a better community. Defensible space commonly refers to architectural and environmental design used to reduce criminality by increasing field of observation and ownership. When space is used in such a way that makes people feel safe and secure in the community, it fosters the likelihood for increased social interactions- a primary source of crime deterrence. Techniques, such as lighting, fencing, and landscaping, can define spaces in a manner that promote community safety by decreasing criminal activity.

Ideally, space should create a sense of territoriality--a feeling of control over personal property and the space around it. According to Oscar Newman, author of *Defensible Space- Crime Prevention through Urban Design*, defensible space must contain two components. First, defensible space should allow people to see and be seen continuously. Ultimately, this diminishes residents fear because they know that a potential offender can easily be observed, identified, and consequently, apprehended. Second, people must be willing to intervene or report crime when it occurs. By increasing the sense of security in settings where people live and work, it encourages people to take control of the areas and assume a role of ownership. When people feel safe in their neighborhood they are more likely to interact with one another and intervene when crime occurs. In short, the community is the first line of defense for crime control.

Although defensible space is not a cure-all, it is a good starting point to facilitate social interaction and prevent crime in communities. When strategies of defensible space are used in conjunction with other programs, such as community policing and neighborhood watches, they can have long lasting effects. Research by the National Institute of justice reveals that crime prevention benefits from defensible space strategies and community policing. Community policing makes police more visible and familiar to residents and with the physical environment of their beats thus reinforcing the efforts of police-citizen partnerships to curtail crime. By using formal social controls of the police to strengthen informal social controls of the community, urban safety problems can be more readily managed.

## The Defensible Space Workshop

RPCC, in conjunction with CURL, conducted the defensible space workshop on February 22, 1997 at the 24th Police District. The primary objectives of the workshop were to inform the residents about the project, to present defensible space concepts and strategies, and to form "scan teams." These scan teams, composed of residents and Loyola University undergraduate students, each selected a specific location in Rogers Park to video tape problematic areas. Target areas were selected by resident participants based on actual and perceived amounts of criminal activity.

## The Scan Teams

The scan teams consisted of four different teams that surveyed four different areas in Rogers Park. The four areas were: 1) Howard Street; 2) Devon, Clark, and Ashland; 3) Howard and Western; and 4) Thorndale. Over the course of four weeks, the teams

video taped the areas, reviewed and analyzed the video tapes, and developed various recommendations that could improve community safety.

#### The Defensible Space Forum

The defensible space forum was held on April 5, 1997 at the 24th Police District. It was a time for all the scan teams to come together, discuss their observations, and report their findings. Each group showed their video tape footage and presented their recommendations for the area they surveyed. After viewing and analyzing the video tapes, the residents discussed how the recommendations could be implemented within the community and whom they needed to contact in order to make the necessary changes.

#### Defensible Space Recommendations

##### Howard Street

The commercial area of Howard Street has a notorious reputation for drug dealing, prostitution, robbery, and gang violence. Many efforts made by the residents and police in this area have posted victories against these destructive elements, but as one problem is solved, another is waiting to take its place. The scan team video taped the area and developed the following recommendations as other methods to prevent crime:

1. The removal of advertisements and store products from business windows to allow people to see in and out of the stores.
2. The placement of mirrors in various corners of the strip mall next to the El station in order to see down certain corridors.
3. Pete's Coffee Shop allows vagrants and panhandlers to use the store's entrance as a warming station; therefore, it is recommended to close the store's direct entrance to the El station and divert the entrance/exit to Howard Street
4. Queen's Pantry contains a long brick wall that faces Howard Street and attracts problem loitering. It is recommended to put a slope base on the wall making it uncomfortable to lean and sit against. It is also suggested to put plants, a long mirror, or a jagged texture on the wall. A gate with sharp stakes around the entrance of Queen's Pantry could also deter loiters. It is also recommended that the public telephone be removed.
5. The installation of video cameras in order to video tape the prostitution that takes place.
6. In general, Howard Street needs better lighting, the removal of trash and debris, a gate on an unattended parking lot, and the closure of useless walkways.

##### Devon, Clark, and Ashland

A primary problem of this area is gang graffiti. Throughout the area, graffiti is prevalent along the surfaces of many buildings, alleys, and garages. In particular, the alley behind the strip mall on Ashland has an abundance of gang graffiti and gang activity. The recommendations to improve this area and hopefully combat gang activity are as follows:

1. The organization of a Clark Street "clean up" where the residents would partake in corner plantings, including the planting of flowers on the corner of their streets that intersect with Clark Street and in traffic circles.
2. The installation of motion detection lighting in the alley behind the stores on Ashland.
3. Additional lighting is needed on many of the side streets off Devon so that both sides of the streets are well lit.
4. The conversion of some of the two-way streets to one-way streets in order to deter drug traffic.
5. The placement of more traffic circles and speed bumps along Ashland.

#### *Howard and Western*

The main concerns of this area are the abandoned hospital and the deteriorating shopping mall. Because the hospital has been repossessed by the lender, it is surrounded by trash and debris. Its extremely deteriorated appearance reflects the notion that it is a dangerous and potential area for crime. The following are several suggestions that could help refine the area:

1. The removal of trash and graffiti around the hospital grounds.
2. It is suggested to transform the hospital into a retirement home, a day surgery center, or simply tear it down.
3. With regards to the shopping mall, gates should be installed that close off certain walkways at night and then are reopened during the day.
4. The installation of a traffic light at the CTA bus turn around so that people can safely cross the street in order to reach the shopping mall.
5. It is recommended that the parking spaces in the parking lot near Walgreens all face one way to lessen the traffic chaos.
6. Better lighting is needed in the shopping mall's parking lot and the entrance needs to be improved so it has an "inviting" appearance.
7. The buses should be re-routed into the shopping center parking lot in order to use the open space; and the placement of additional seating for persons waiting for the buses.

#### *Thorndale*

According to Officer Derrick McClinton, a Thorndale patrol officer, muggings and robberies are the majority of crimes that occur in this location. The Dominicks food store is a primary location for individuals to become victims of crime because perpetrators assume that people have money prior to entering the store. Furthermore, due to several dark alleys and corridors, offenders have many opportunities for escape in this area. With the assistance of Officer McClinton, the team developed several recommendations:

1. The removal of advertisements in store front windows that obstruct people's vision inside and outside of the store.
2. The removal of garbage along the streets and in alleys.
3. More lighting is needed in front of many businesses.
4. The parking lot on the corner of Thorndale and Broadway needs lighting and security features.
5. Bushes and shrubbery covering bay windows of many homes and apartments should be removed or trimmed.

6. More lighting is needed underneath the el tracks.
7. Several corridors between apartment complexes need lighting.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the defensible space project was to bring Rogers Park residents together so that through collaboration they could think of ways to prevent crime and create a safer community. In general, the project allowed residents to express their concerns about Rogers Park, discuss and document various problems in the community, and most importantly, develop recommendations for improving community safety. Because implementing the desired changes would take longer than a few months, the project was designed to formulate concrete recommendations. The participants agreed that implementation of the recommendations was the most important step; therefore, some of the residents took the video tapes to their individual beat team meetings for further discussion and follow-up. These recommendations are a good starting point for deterring crime and building community; however, they are not the only solutions. As defensible space research indicates, not only are physical changes needed to prevent crime, but there must be a strong and devoted community that is committed to increasing the safety and well-being of residents in Rogers Park. As mentioned previously, the concept of defensible space is effective when used with other programs such as community policing in order to deter crime. According to Cary Steinbuck of RPCC, the project helped put energy back into the CAPS program in Rogers Park and heighten crime prevention efforts in the community. Through defensible space strategies, community policing, and community intervention, residents can make headway toward winning the war against crime and regaining control of their common environment.

## **Project Participants**

Michelle Anderson, Cathy Gerlach, Laura Herrin, Ian Jipp, Shell Lulkin, Meribeth Mermall, Mike Realmuto, Brian Scruggs, Susan Sullivan, Lin Von Dreele, 24th Police District, Richard Block, Dru Fordon, June Griffin, Blair Henderson, Cherylette Hilton, Karen Hoover, Cas Kotowski, Kenneth Lee, Craig Lund, Derrick McClinton, John O'Leary, Sanju Oommen, Christina Rigas, Dane Ronvik, Cary Steinbuck, George Sullivan, Norm Susman, David Van Zytveld, Maggie Walsh, Barb Young,

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For further information, contact Cary Steinbuck, Rogers Park Community Council, (773) 338-7722, fax: (773) 338-7774;

or Lin Von Dreele or David Van Zytveld, Loyola University Center for Urban Reserach and Learning (312) 915-7762, fax:

(312) 915-7770, e-mail: [Ivondrecdluc.edu](mailto:Ivondrecdluc.edu) or [dvanzyt@luc.edu](mailto:dvanzyt@luc.edu)

1 Summaries and recommendations based on evaluations made by Loyola students and Rogers Park residents