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'We got our neighborhood back'

Targeted areas see a drop in crime

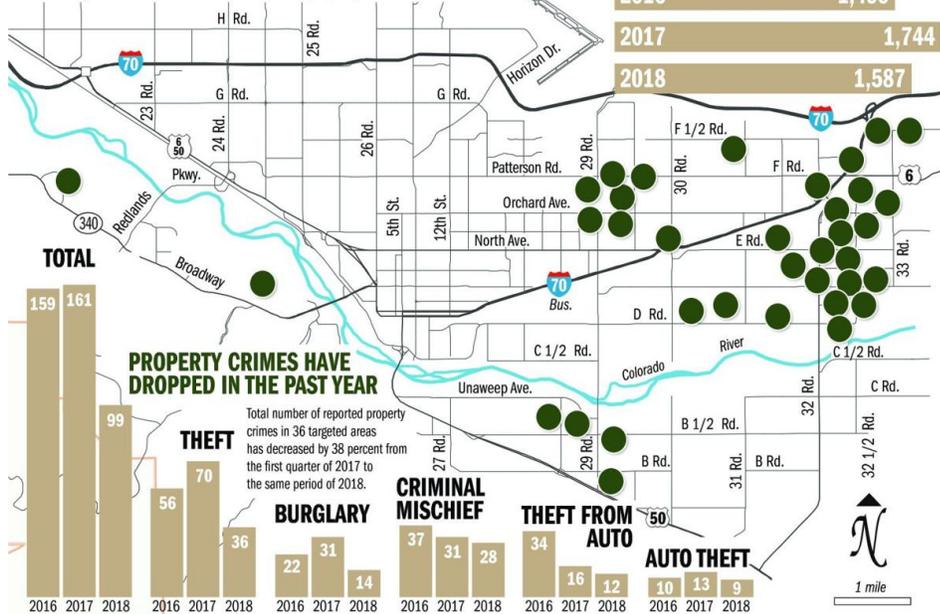
By ERIN McINTYRE/Erin.McIntyre@gjsentinel.com

TARGET AREAS SEE A DROP IN CRIME

The Mesa County Sheriff's Office implemented a new crime-reduction strategy in May 2017 and is seeing positive results in targeted areas as well as fewer crimes reported across the county. Green dots on the map represent general areas targeted because of elevated levels of property crimes.

CRIMINAL CASES DROP ACROSS COUNTY

These numbers reflect the total number of cases the Mesa County Sheriff's Office opened in the first quarter of 2016, 2017 and 2018.



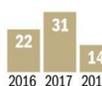
PROPERTY CRIMES HAVE DROPPED IN THE PAST YEAR

Total number of reported property crimes in 36 targeted areas has decreased by 38 percent from the first quarter of 2017 to the same period of 2018.

THEFT



BURGLARY



CRIMINAL MISCHIEF



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Source: Mesa County Sheriff's Office records. Note: Numbers above are a comparison of January-March crimes reported to the Mesa County Sheriff's Office.

ROBERT McLEAN/The Daily Sentinel

The scariest part for Kelly Johnson was how being a prisoner in her own house started to feel normal.

She and her husband, Ray, moved into their Fruitvale home a decade ago, and their backyard neighbors were hoarders, but that was no biggie.

The couple moved away, and after having renters, they allowed their own son to move into the house on Jamison Avenue. He kept to himself, the house fell into disrepair, and he got roommates, including one Johnson suspected of being a meth addict from his telltale shards of discolored teeth and his emaciated frame. He was friendly enough, and did some yard work, which was promising. But "he went from being the friendly neighbor who was keeping the yard up to the drug lord who was having all these parties," she said.

More people started coming and going, and pretty soon, they couldn't keep track of who actually lived there. The yard filled with junk, including a 1970s RV that dozens of people used to squat on the property, and became crowded with car parts and tents erected by campers. Shortly after Johnson's youngest child was born a year ago, she was up in the middle of the night feeding her, looked out the kitchen window and saw people who were working on bikes at 3 a.m., obviously strung out.

Her children asked to go outside and play in their backyard, but she didn't want them seeing or hearing what was going on, or finding used needles.

"There's bad people out there, you can't go out there," she told them.

Over about 18 months, the property next door became a flophouse for drug addicts and the neighborhood saw constant traffic at all hours from druggies looking for a fix. Johnson and her neighbors compared horror stories about the house and its residents, people beating each other up, screaming and fighting, and the day a man overdosed in the driveway. They all called 911 to report what was going on, begging law enforcement to do something. Johnson attempted to contact the house's owners and let them know what was going on, but was unsuccessful. She and her husband discussed moving, but feared they wouldn't be able to sell their home with the nightmare next door, and didn't think it was fair because they lived there first.

Johnson estimates she called law enforcement more than 20 times, the last time crying in frustration. They told her the house was "on their radar" and to keep letting them know what was going on next door, but she saw no change and became angry and doubted that conditions would improve.

Two weeks after that, the deputies' promises came to fruition.

"They swept in and when it finally went down, it was fast and furious," she said.

A new team with the Mesa County Sheriff's Office, called the Crime Reduction Unit, had indeed kept the address on its radar and pulled the trigger on taking action. Not only had they contacted the property owners and notified them of the criminal activity taking place, they also helped evict the residents, encouraged the owners to clean up the property, made contact with everyone who came to the address and arrested anyone who came to the house who had warrants or committed crimes.

In a matter of weeks, the traffic to the house stopped, there were no more middle-of-the-night tweaker fights. Eventually, the house was cleaned up, new renters moved in, and the neighborhood quieted down.

Johnson, a former skeptic, is now one of the department's greatest supporters, and values the responsibility the team took for getting to the root of the problem and improving the quality of life in her neighborhood.

"It's not just the empty words we heard before," she said. "We got our neighborhood back."

HOW THE CRIME REDUCTION TEAM WORKS

Sgt. Wayne Weyler and deputies Curtis Brammer, Kandyce Stuckenschneider and Chadd Searcy comprise the Crime Reduction Unit, or CRU, a new tool the Sheriff's Office implemented in May 2017 to get to the source of crime and start fighting it more effectively, with a goal of reducing crime and improving the quality of life across Mesa County. The CRU is part of the most drastic organizational change the Sheriff's Office has enacted in recent memory, one that also includes using crime data to target hot spots, identify trends and anticipate criminal activity to better allocate resources and fight it before it becomes a pattern.

Weyler's unit doesn't get dispatched to calls like other units on patrol. Instead, they deal with the hardest cases that aren't easily solved with an arrest or a warning, with the goal of taking pressure off deputies dispatched through 911.

Since the unit was formed, it has been assigned 40 cases, nine of which have been permanently resolved.

These cases are tangled messes, often complicated by mental health issues, substance abuse and other social problems accompanying crimes, which are the true root of the issue for some. The problem solving required to diagnose the source of the problems for individuals or cases is part of their task. Convincing the individuals to comply, accept help or otherwise resolve the issue is another element of their job.

"These people aren't understanding the rules of society," Weyler said. "That's why we have to take a different approach with them."

Sometimes, they deal with the loose ends left over from other arrests, the issues that can fester and cause other problems after the main players have gone to jail. Other times, they play a role in just letting criminals know they are watching and will take action if their behavior doesn't stop.

"Part of our mission is to inform the criminal element of Mesa County that this is not a good place to do business," Brammer said. "I personally have no problem if every dooper decides to leave town."

When the unit is first assigned to a person or address and opens a case, the initial contacts are serious, notifying the parties that the CRU has taken an interest. The deputies attempt to communicate with those involved, form a relationship if possible, and offer assistance. Compliance is always an option for anyone they've contacted, if they'd like to stop being on the team's radar.

After unraveling some of the issues and identifying the root of the problem, the team is charged with trying unconventional solutions. While deputies usually stick to using criminal laws to resolve problems, this team is learning how they can use civil laws and even county-level codes to achieve results. They negotiate their way through other means of resolving issues, using condemnation, property use code violations and petitions to courts for mental health holds or emergency rehabilitation treatment at times.

TARGETED LOCATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

The unit accepted 247 Fifth St. in Clifton as one of its assignments last month.

The department has received numerous complaints from neighbors about activity at the house, and the Clifton Assembly of God Church across the street has also reported that squatters have been illegally using its utilities, as there doesn't appear to be running water at the home. The property is in absolute squalor, with little bare ground around the house, multiple junk cars, RVs, makeshift shelters with tarps and blankets, and abandoned junk.

The owner of the house has refused to allow deputies inside and isn't cooperating at this time, but the unit has made six arrests for outstanding warrants and drug possession at the property recently, according to Weyler.

When the deputies visited the home last month, neighbors saw their squad cars on the street and came out to talk to them, expressing their gratitude that they were taking notice of the situation.

"We're assigned to this house and we're going to fix it," Brammer told neighbors Yvonne Marrs and Milton Miller, who were thrilled to see deputies paying attention to the eyesore.

"There's lots of comings and goings," Marrs said.

"We don't know what's going on, but we can imagine," Miller said.

The CRU refers to this property as a "flophouse," a drug house where addicts arrive to get high and "flop," for however long they like. It's a transient kind of place where the people contacted in the yard sometimes don't even know who the owner is inside the house or each other, but somehow the word got out that this was a good place to score drugs and hang out.

"People aren't coming to sit on the porch and drink lemonade," Brammer said.

After weeks of trying to work with the owner, the team is at a point where they need the county's building department and code enforcement to assist, as they're pursuing a possible condemnation of the home. But limited resources in those areas has made it difficult to move forward, especially with code enforcement, as the county only employs two half-time people in that position, so it doesn't really involve much enforcement.

"We can only go so far, but we need assistance," Weyler said. "I can't condemn a house."

This case will be a long-term project for the CRU, as many of their cases tend to be.

With individuals, the team often builds a relationship with those who need help because choosing to have a better life and get help means leaving behind others who encouraged poor decisions or were a bad influence. The deputies find themselves filling that void, especially in the case of one person they helped last year.

In this case, a man in his 40s had become addicted to drugs after his "friends" started dealing out of his Clifton home. Those people were arrested and sent to prison but left behind an addict who needed treatment, and his house had been taken over by criminals who came over to get high.

The team befriended the man, who wanted to get clean but was worried about his cat, which he could not take with him to treatment.

Concern over the cat's well-being was the hurdle to getting drug treatment for the man. And so deputies agreed to feed the cat and check on it periodically, and even complied with the man's requests to receive photos of his cat and FaceTime with the pet when he started getting worried and wanted to leave treatment.

"We had to replace that part of his friendship world," Stuckenschneider said.

Now, the man has completed rehab, his family has relocated him and they plan on cleaning up the property and selling it.

The team realizes the idea of deputies cat-sitting might seem ridiculous to some, but it was a small task that kept the person they were trying to help where he needed to be, away from drugs and the life he left behind,

FORMER CRIMINAL A FAN

The CRU has gained an unlikely supporter, a notorious convicted felon and drug addict who spent the better part of his adult life involved with law enforcement.

When Searcy dealt with him in the past, it was usually when he was getting shocked with a Taser stun gun, handcuffed at gunpoint and arrested.

And now, the man has Searcy's cellphone number and knows he can call 24/7 for anything he might need.

"For 20 years, the sheriffs here were my mortal enemies," the man said. The Daily Sentinel has agreed to not use his name for safety reasons.

He had been out of prison the most recent time for a week when the CRU contacted him, wanting his help with a relative who had a drug house. They told him they weren't looking for information, they just wanted to help his mom and get her house cleaned up. He felt some responsibility to help because he was the one who started the drug activity there years ago, but he was skeptical of their motives.

"You don't have to believe us, let us show you," he remembers them telling him. "But then they kept their word on everything they've told me," he said.

With his help, the unit was able to get the druggies out and find a new place for his mom.

And they told him if he stayed clean, they'd help him, too.

The CRU's offer to help him with his own situation came at a time when he wanted to change his life. He was just getting out of prison — again — and a new baby had entered the picture.

But that was hard. Most everyone he knew from before was either in prison, headed to prison, or dead. He was on a two-year waiting list for housing, and Searcy talked to the landlord and vouched for him so he could get a place to live. That was a vital step to getting custody of their baby, who was in a foster home. Searcy helped with that, too, and went to one of the child-protection agency's meetings, testifying that the man had changed and he would continue to help him succeed in his new life.

The relationship has developed into one where he uses Searcy and the team as a resource in learning the ropes of his new life. He's learning to be a productive citizen who doesn't live by the gun. That means learning to budget, to keep food in the house, how to fill out paperwork, how to deal with conflict appropriately when he wanted to beat up his neighbor.

"He didn't have a lot of tools in his toolbox to know how to live as a responsible, accountable adult without committing crimes," Searcy said.

"Deputy Searcy has been a mentor to me," he said. "These guys have done more for me than my family ever did."

Sometimes he asks the deputies what he can do to repay them for their help.

"They say, 'Just keep doing what you're doing,'" he said.

He advises anyone who is contacted by the unit to comply and accept their help in turning their lives around.

"If you stay sober and get with the program, they will help you," he said.

Word has gotten around about the new unit, and some people don't appreciate the attention. To anyone who feels they've been harassed or targeted by the unit, the man has a message for them.

"You know you're doing bad. Quit. You know they're not going to quit coming back," he said. "You put that target on your back yourself. If there wasn't a reason to be at your house, they wouldn't be at your house."

CHALLENGING BUT REWARDING

Though the work is hard, they're paving new ground with every case, and sometimes it seems they take one step forward only to reach a new obstacle, the CRU team said this kind of policing is rewarding.

"I like that we have the freedom to problem-solve," Searcy said.

Because the team is charged with truly getting to the bottom of an issue, that requires stamina, creativity and determination. It's not like patrol, when they did their shift and went home and the next day it was something different.

"The biggest challenge is, these cases don't go away," Brammer said. "You bring it home with you more."

He admits he goes to bed thinking about some of the people involved in the cases, trying to think of a new approach or something they haven't tried yet.

Stuckenschneider enjoys the teamwork, the progress they've made and the difference they've made for individuals who wanted to change their situations and start living clean.

The department is already starting to see a reduction in crime across the county, and the people who have had personal experience with the unit appreciate that.

"It's all worth it because my children can play in the backyard again," Johnson said. "That may seem very small to the taxpayers of Grand Junction, but it's not."

She said she realizes some might not consider this "police work," but she's grateful they tackled the problem next door.

"For them to handle this eviction and be present, and let the drug dealers know they're not welcome back here in this neighborhood around my children, that's worth every dollar," she said. "To help people get better, to help someone turn their life around, that's taking responsibility and making a difference."



Sheriff transforms office, changing approach from reactive to proactive



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Drug and Homeless Cleanup photo gallery; June 03, 2018.

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Case studies of the Crime Reduction Unit