

# Hueneme Pilot

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### Police work with apartments to reduce crime

By Lorán Lewis

Hueneme Pilot

Police in Oxnard and Port Hueneme say they have seen the number of crimes committed in apartments substantially reduced as a result of a program both departments instituted in recent years.

Despite the documented success both say they have difficulty attracting some people into the program.

The Crime-Free Multi-Housing Program, which began in Mesa, Ariz., in 1992, was adopted by Port Hueneme and Oxnard in 2005.

Oxnard police in 2009 have cut the number of calls for service from 567 to 128, cut criminal reports from 193 to 16 and reduced arrests from 34 to 16, according to Detective Martin Ennis, who oversees the program.

Port Hueneme has seen a 59 percent decline in its calls for service among participating apartment units, reports Kelly Self, code compliance officer with the city's housing department.

"It truly is the perfect blend of law enforcement, property management and tenants working together to maintain a safer environment," Self says.

The program requires an addition to the lease that allows tenants to be evicted if they, their family or guests are involved in criminal activities. It also requires a background check along with the standard financial check of potential tenants.

"They have to sign it," Ennis says of the contract. "This is a fair housing contract so there are no legal issues."

Self adds: "Crime-Free Multi-Housing has been successful in every single jurisdiction in which it's been implemented. Any lawsuit brought (against the program) has not been won; the decisions have always favored defendants because the landlords have shown they've done everything possible to keep the tenants safe."

Along with the basic agreement, the program also requires apartment managers to go through three training phases. Phase I is an eight-hour seminar that details the program, code requirements and regulations. Phase II is an inspection of the property to determine what safety steps are needed and that they have been met. Phase III includes a safety social with tenants to discuss the benefits of the program to them and ask for their cooperation.

"If (lessees) or their family members bring crime into the apartment units, they can be evicted," Ennis explained. "If someone is a gang member or their family has a gang member and they keep coming back, what good is it?"



Photo courtesy Kelly Self

Seaside Village hosted the first Crime-Free Multi-Housing social in Port Hueneme.



Photo courtesy Kelly Self

Members of Port Hueneme's Crime-Free Multi-Housing group meet with residents during a workshop.

Despite the substantial reduction in incidents and criminal behavior since the start of the programs, some apartment managers are reluctant to take part. Port Hueneme has more than 4,700 apartment units, according to Self, but only about 110 units and one residence are involved in the program.

“The biggest obstacle – and this is actually nationwide – is that people don’t want to spend the money,” Self says. “Many landlords don’t want to spend the money for improvements such as the deadbolt locks, the wide-angle eyeholes. But a lot of properties are more than willing to make the improvements. There are insurance incentives as well. Sometimes (landlords) can save up to 30 percent on their insurance.

“This is an internationally recognized and successful crime prevention program that was specifically designed for rental properties,” she says. “It is much more effective in these properties than the traditional neighborhood watch.”

Spurred by the success of the apartment program, Oxnard police are now pioneering the concept among the business community, especially those in crime-prone areas.

“With the business community, we can’t evict the owners or their customers,” Ennis said, “so we looked at studies to determine what reduces crime in these areas. With the crime-free apartment, we are making them (managers) a part of it. They have to be a part of it to be effective.”

Applying that same principle to businesses, the department reasoned that by asking business owners to take required precautions and work in conjunction with police, similar success could be achieved. They began working on the program two years ago, but have just been putting it into action since January.

The department establishes seven guidelines and requires the business to follow all seven, plus take the awareness training offered by the department.

“For example, they have to have a safe under their register if they have a cash business,” Ennis said. “We want people to see (the clerk) put the money in the safe.” Ennis said a business is less likely to be robbed if the potential robber sees the money goes into a safe rather than a cash drawer.

“Sometimes it’s just a lighting issue,” the detective noted. “If we have gang members loitering around business, we want a little more interaction. Call us if you see a problem. We’ll give you suggestions, resources; if it falls on us, we’ll do our job as police officers.”

The department provides an on-site security evaluation and a follow-up to ensure all guidelines have been met and followed.

“The second point is we teach best methods for surviving criminal attack,” Ennis said. “We don’t want them to chase (the robber) out the door, grab a gun or go eyeball to eyeball.”

The third phase explains what to do after a robbery.

“All of these have been proven nationally to lower crime in businesses,” Ennis said.

The program has drawn national attention. Other police departments across the country and in Canada have been asking about the program, Ennis said, and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health is following the results.

“NIOSH wants to see a decrease in crime where the program is being implemented. They want to be able to say to police chiefs and sheriffs, ‘This is program that works.’ ”

However, acceptance has not been universal.

“We’re also finding a lot of businesses don’t want to be part of it,” Ennis admitted. “Trying to get them to class is really hard. Some of (the reason) is because owners are more intimidated by the environment they’re doing business in. They feel if they bring in the police, it will invite problems.

“Some feel (the training time) is too early to get up. Some say they don’t have enough time. But when they come to class, we have them forever.”