

promising approaches to addressing crime

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The Milwaukee *Safe & Sound* Initiative: A Community-based, Collaborative Approach to Violent Crime Reduction and Neighborhood Revitalization in High Crime Areas

By Gwen A. Holden

Milwaukee's *Safe & Sound* initiative is a community-based, collaborative crime prevention strategy with the stated mission of "measurably" reducing violent felonies and revitalizing neighborhoods in that City's high crime areas.¹ Launched in 1998, the *Safe & Sound* Initiative is the second generation of Milwaukee's experimentation with the *Weed and Seed* geographically targeted community-based approach to crime prevention and community restoration developed by the U. S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs (OJP) in the early 1990's, and currently in place in some 280 sites in 240 local jurisdictions across the country.²

As a result of a strong private/public partnership; close collaboration among local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies; and an aggressive neighborhood organizing strategy, Milwaukee's *Safe & Sound* Initiative is realizing sharp reductions in violent felonies, enhanced citizen interaction with the police in addressing neighborhood crime problems, and increased availability of constructive services and activities for youth in the targeted geographical areas.

Background

In the early 1990's, Milwaukee was awarded funding from the Justice Department's OJP Executive Office for Weed and Seed (EOWS) to implement a pilot *Weed and Seed* initiative in three areas of that City. In March 1998, Milwaukee's Youth Crime and Violence Task Force recommended that this geographically targeted crime prevention

¹ See "What is *Safe & Sound*" at the *Safe & Sound* Web Site, <<http://www.safesound.org.htm>>.

² See Executive Office for Weed and Seed. *Implementation Manual*. U. S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs: Washington, D. C. (Undated). Online Vers.: <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/eows/impmanl.htm>>

and community revitalization approach be adopted for broader application in the City's high crime areas. The Task Force, a representative body comprised of a cross section of elected and appointed government officials; law enforcement administrators; and community leaders, called for the implementation of an anti-crime approach that would integrate and balance tough law enforcement and community crime prevention. In June 1998, the *Safe & Sound* Initiative was created to undertake an aggressive strategy to reduce crime; increase economic viability, and enhance proactive youth development.

Highlighting Innovation: The Milwaukee Safe & Sound Strategy

The *Safe & Sound* Initiative's strategy is comprised of three central elements:

- *Positive Alternatives for Youth*: The establishment of *Safe & Sound* "Safe Places" in youth centers; schools; public parks and recreational facilities; and churches to offer children and teenagers constructive activities in safe environments during the critical after-school and evening, weekend, and summer hours;
- *Neighborhood Organizing*: The designation of a Community Partner in each of the targeted geographical high-crime areas to work with residents in support of law enforcement and neighborhood revitalization initiatives;
- *Tough Law Enforcement*: The enhancement of coordination, cooperation, and communication among local, state, and federal law enforcement to target crime problems, including gang activity and drug trafficking; strictly enforce laws; and provide support for the operation of Safe Places, neighborhood revitalization, and citizen involvement in creating safe communities. The enabling components of this element of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative's strategy are:
 - the seven Milwaukee High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) Task Forces and the HIDTA Intelligence Center, a joint federal, state, and local initiative to investigate, apprehend, and prosecute individuals engaged in drug trafficking and gang-related criminal activity;
 - the Milwaukee Police Department's Area Specific Policing Initiative, which employs the COMSTAT system to map crime incidents and guide the development of operational law enforcement strategies to address high crime problems; and
 - CEASEFIRE, a joint federal, state, and local gun violence reduction public education, investigation, and prosecution initiative.³

The organizational structure of *Safe & Sound* includes a high-level board of directors, comprised of prominent individuals from the public and private sectors, and a paid six-person staff.⁴

The State of Play

Milwaukee currently is in its eighth year of adapting and applying the *Weed and Seed* community-based strategic approach to crime reduction and neighborhood revitalization.

³ See description of CEASEFIRE at the Wisconsin Department of Justice/Office of the Attorney General Web Site, <<http://www.doj.state.wi.us/dci/sa/#ceasefire.htm>>

⁴ Telephone interview with Sue Kenealy, Community Partners coordinator for the Milwaukee *Safe and Sound* Initiative, April 18, 2002. All comments attributed to a program official in this paper were drawn from this telephone interview.

With implementation of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative in 1998, the number of *Weed and Seed* sites expanded rapidly, in a matter of months, from an initial three pilot areas to the 20 highest-crime, lowest income areas of Milwaukee, with a combined population of 270,000, that are the focus of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative today.

The **Safe Places** element of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative's anti-crime strategy likewise has continued to expand, with 99 Safe Places currently in operation and an additional nine about to open with recently received federal funding. In 2000, the CEASEFIRE gun violence reduction program became a component of the law enforcement element of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative.

The *Safe & Sound* Initiative benefits from a strong **intergovernmental, public/private partnership** as reflected in the membership of its board of directors and an intricate tapestry of funding sources that finance its activities. Funding sources include the Justice Department (EOWS and OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance); the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy's HIDTA program; such state agencies as the Wisconsin Bureau of Justice Assistance and the state's Division of Family and Community Services; and the City of Milwaukee. The U. S. Department of Education's 21st Century Learning program funds a number of Safe Place sites, and contributions from a host of corporate and private donors support Safe Places program activities. The law enforcement element of *Safe & Sound* not only benefits from financial support provided under HITDA, but from non-monetary, in-kind services provided by the Milwaukee Police Department.

The heart of the *Weed and Seed* strategy is the linking of geographically targeted law enforcement efforts with community-focused human services programs. According to a *Safe & Sound* Initiative official, the **Community Partners Program** provides that vital linkage, facilitating implementation of the crime reduction, youth development, and neighborhood revitalization elements of the *Safe & Sound* strategy.

The central component of the Community Partners Program is a corps of 21 men and women who serve as anti-crime liaisons and "communicators" among neighborhood residents, law enforcement officials, and community agencies and organizations. Twenty of these Community Partners are assigned, one each, to the 20 high-crime neighborhoods that comprise *Safe & Sound*'s targeted geographical area. The remaining Community Partner serves as a "floater," providing back-up support to the other 20, and additional coverage in the sector of the target area that has the highest homicide rate.

All but two Community Partners are residents in the 20-neighborhood target area, but they do not reside in the specific area for which they are directly responsible. Each generally puts in 25 hours a week and is available to respond to calls from residents during off-hours. They are not volunteers, but are "well-paid" for their work, a program official noted. This official explained that *Safe & Sound* wants to make certain that Community Partners' compensation reflects visibly the importance assigned to their work.

By means of door-to-door visits, Community Partners establish relationships with residents within their assigned areas and work toward gaining their confidence and respect. In these visits, they provide residents information about services in their neighborhoods, such as Safe Places activities. A program official explained that *Safe & Sound* officials decided not to rely on the informal neighbor-to-neighbor “wash-line” approach to spreading the word about community services and programs, instead pursuing the more aggressive course of sending Community Partners out into the neighborhood to share this information directly with residents. They also talk with residents about opportunities for improving conditions and services within the neighborhood, such as organizing a neighborhood clean-up, establishing a neighborhood watch program, or sponsoring a job fair, health fair, sports league, or other neighborhood-wide event.

Community Partners play a particularly significant role in advancing the crime reduction element of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative. They serve as “street investigators,” a program official explained, gathering information about crime problems during their visits to, and other contacts with, neighborhood residents, and sharing this information with law enforcement. Community Partners also promote better relationships between residents and law enforcement in addressing crime problems within the community by encouraging residents to contact police with their concerns and, to that end, helping residents “get smarter” about how they approach the police.

Asked about the safety of Community Partners in the high-crime areas in which they work, especially given their role in gathering and sharing intelligence about possible criminal activity, a program official responded that this generally has not been a problem. Community Partners know their neighborhoods well and “where to go when a [situation] gets hot.” Moreover, she continued, they carry radio phones, and on the infrequent occasions when calls have been made for law enforcement assistance, police officers’ response has been immediate.

Does Safe and Sound make a difference?

Since the inception of Milwaukee’s experimentation with the *Weed and Seed* strategy in 1994, the overarching goal of that initiative has been the “measurable” reduction of violent felonies in the city’s high-crime areas. In order to ensure that crime reduction remained a constant focus, Milwaukee *Weed and Seed* projects have been the subjects of almost continuous evaluation by Marquette University’s School of Criminology and Law Studies. Researchers there evaluated the initial Milwaukee *Weed and Seed* strategy’s performance from 1994 to 1997, concluding that it helped produce a 47% reduction in violent felonies in the period in the three high-crime areas targeted.

Creation of *Safe & Sound* in 1998 was accompanied by a continuation of the arrangement with Marquette University, this time to carry out a three-year evaluation of the strategy’s elements. In February 2001, researchers completed an interim evaluation of *Safe & Sound* and its HIDTA component. That interim evaluation found that from 1997 to 2000, the number of violent felonies in the Initiative’s targeted areas declined by 1,600, or 30%.

Currently, the final report of the three-year evaluation, which examines *Safe & Sound* Initiative activities from the baseline year 1997 through 2001, is pending final review and release. That report will include the findings of on-site visits to Safe Place sites and an in-depth examination of the activities and performance of the Community Partners. Although the final report is not yet public, a preliminary draft of its executive summary suggests that in its first three years *Safe & Sound* has achieved the following:

- a significant drop in violent felonies in the targeted geographical area;
- law enforcement acceptance of Community Partners as vital sources of information about safety issues in the community and important links between the police and neighborhood residents;
- close collaboration between the law enforcement, youth development, and neighborhood revitalization elements of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative strategy;
- visible improvements in the relationship between residents and the police;
- increased involvement of residents in neighborhood safety initiatives.⁵

What has been the federal government's role?

Milwaukee's *Safe & Sound* Initiative, and the *Weed & Seed* sites in 240 other jurisdictions across the country, are the progeny of an approach to crime prevention and community restoration that features an arguably novel focus on linking law enforcement efforts with community-focused human services. That approach, developed and aggressively promoted by the Office of Justice Programs Executive Office for Weed & Seed, reflects continuation of the Justice Department's three-decade role in fostering state and local anti-crime initiatives.

Federal agencies also are active participants in the intergovernmental, interagency collaboration that is the centerpiece of *Safe & Sound*. Federal officials, including the U.S. Attorney and federal law enforcement, play important roles in implementing the law enforcement component of the initiative. OJP continues to provide funding for the original three *Weed & Seed* sites, while the U.S. Department of Education has been an important source of financial support for the Initiative's Safe Places. Further, the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy has designated *Safe & Sound* as one of seven Milwaukee HIDTA task forces. That designation not only affords *Safe & Sound* officials the opportunity to inform the development of HIDTA enforcement strategies in affected communities, but also permits the Initiative itself to receive HIDTA funding.

Challenges

The *Safe & Sound* board and staff continue to refine the Initiative's implementation strategy to ensure its viability and responsiveness to community needs. According to a program official, funding to support continued operation and expansion of *Safe & Sound* is the most significant challenge faced today.

⁵ Richard S. Jones, et. al., *HIDTA and Safe and Sound: Preliminary Report (Draft)*. Marquette University, School of Criminology and Law Studies: Milwaukee, Wisc.: (pending publication).

To meet financial needs, program officials also must expand the broader community's awareness of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative and the interrelationships of its various elements. By way of example, a program official noted that while residents of the targeted areas may be well aware of the Community Partners, these citizens oftentimes do not recognize that this program is an integral component of the *Safe & Sound* Initiative's three-pronged anti-crime strategy. Likewise, media "don't get this *Safe & Sound* stuff," and therefore in their reporting on Initiative-related activities, such as the opening of new Safe Place sites or successful law enforcement operations, do not make the link between these activities and *Safe & Sound*. Information on the importance of *Safe & Sound* therefore "has to drift up from the neighborhood to the funders," the program official observed.

Future local support for initiatives like *Safe & Sound* rests in part on the ability to document success. Evaluations of comprehensive, community-based efforts like this are challenging because of the need to parse out the impact of individual elements within a multi-part initiative and to assess the influence of other, unrelated factors. *Safe & Sound*'s linking with Marquette University researchers is an unusual step for a community-based organization; it represents a commitment to measuring effectiveness that should be applauded.

To Learn More: Available Resources

- Executive Office for Weed and Seed. *Implementation Manual*. U. S. Dept. of Justice, Office of Justice Programs: Washington, D. C. (Undated). Online Vers.: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/eows/impmanl.htm>
- <http://www.safesound.org.htm>. The Milwaukee Safe & Sound Initiative's Web Site.

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