**Can a letter make a street safer? Oakland's Dear John Campaign will find out**

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A group of people holding signs

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*EBAYC*

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Street prostitution is a major problem in Oakland, but arrest rates have dropped by 37 percent from 2011 to 2012. Nevertheless, community members remain vigilant. In Oakland’s San Antonio neighborhood, which includes some of the main trafficking corridors, residents are sick of the street scene. They’ve launched what’s called the Dear John Campaign to take on the street level sex trafficking that happens right outside their doors.

With the help of the Oakland Police Department, the East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) holds community trainings to teach residents how to identify and capture pertinent information on suspected Johns in the neighborhood. The campaign started after EBAYC asked 500 people that live in Oakland’s San Antonio neighborhood what would make the neighborhood a better place to raise children, says Andy Nelson, EBAYC’s Deputy Director.

The Dear John Campaign entails receiving a letter that reads something like this: “A vehicle registered under your name, License number XXXXX has been observed in the area of 1800 block of International Boulevard in Oakland on January 14. We want to make you aware that this area has had an increase in drug dealings, vehicle theft, robberies, and prostitution. … Prostitution is not a victimless crime and is associated with kidnapping, human trafficking, and the sexual exploitation of children…”

This is a Dear John Letter. To get one, you have to take your car to Oakland’s San Antonio neighborhood and linger. You have to arouse suspicion that you’re propositioning women for sex.

“One of the things that we came up with through our research was this idea to address the demand. Reduce the demand for prostitution by sort of going after the customers,” says Andy Nelson.

On a weekday night about six months after the campaign’s launch, Police Captain Johnny Davis stands in front of a crowd of about 50 people, holding a green form.

“This is the Dear John report form,” he says. “This is the form that we use to make a report when we see men trying to buy sex on the corner,” Captain Davis tells the audience.

Residents are supposed to write down the vehicle make and model, license plate number, and any other details they can catch.

“After you fill it out you mail it to me at the police department – and me or a member of my staff will check the license plate number to make sure it's right. And we get the address,” Captain Davis explains.

Since the program launched in July of 2012, Davis says he’s sent out 18 letters. There were 12 more he couldn’t send because the reports were illegible. All together, this averages out to about a letter a week.

“Some of those letters went to businesses like an extermination company. One letter belonged to a garbage truck that originated in West Oakland. One belonged to an electrical company,” Captain Davis reports.

Captain Davis says that in the majority of reports the vehicles weren’t local. “These men come from San Leandro, Brentwood, San Carlos, San Francisco, Alameda, San Jose, Hayward, Corona. Corona, CA that's far away,” Captain Davis says.

Captain Davis says the goal of the program is to let Johns know that their actions have consequences and that people are watching – even though the letters are anonymous.

“They mail the letter to us and we mail it out under the City of Oakland's letterhead. So the perpetrator or the John if you will has no idea who saw them or why this letter’s come to them until they read it,” Davis explains.

Usually, though, that’s the end of police involvement. Unless they catch a John in the act there’s nothing else they can do. “So the purpose of the Dear John letter is really to educate and inform people what prostitution does to this community,” Captain Davis says.

Some community members are thrilled about the program. “I love it! The sending the letter to the registered owner and hoping the other half opens it and finds out what their loved ones is doing,” Juan Borquez says.

Borquez lives in the neighborhood and manages an apartment building there. As a property manager, he says he’s received a flood of complaints from people who live in the building. He says the problem is prostitution.

“Right in front of my windows, disturbing the peace, being loud and obnoxious, and that happened for almost three months in a row,” Borquez explains.

Tashina Manyak is the Program Coordinator at MISSSEY, an organization working with commercially sexually exploited children. She says a big part of Oakland’s prostitution problem relates to young women. “The San Antonio neighborhood is absolutely known in the City as a hot spot. Specifically certain areas of International Boulevard that’s really kind of the main track as it is called in Oakland. It’s known specifically for minors,” Manyak explains.

The numbers certainly suggest Oakland is facing a major problem. In 2009, Los Angeles arrested 69 minors for prostitution, whereas Oakland – which is 12 times smaller in population – made 75 arrests.

“We’re really looking at this massive, epidemic of kids, that are again anywhere between 11 to 16 to 17 years old,” Manyak says.

EBAYC’s Andy Nelson says it’s too soon tell if the Dear John program is helping to combat that epidemic. But he’s hopeful.

“If the Johns feel less comfortable in engaging in the activities that they are engaging in you can actually make an impact that way,” Nelson says.

The Johns are taking note. On MyRedBook.com, a website for people looking for commercial sex, a user recently posted an alert about the program – and spurred a long discussion.

One person wrote that he was sure his own plate had been noted, and left the following comment: “When it's in a residential neighborhood and cars keep driving back and forth around the block, it really sucks for the people that live there. Once a spot gets hot, the cars just don't stop.”

Others discussed ways to subvert the program. “It is a very good idea for those of us who cruise to change our registration address to a personal P.O. Box or our office’s address. I did and now breathe very comfortably knowing that they can send what the hell they want and it is not coming to my house!”

It’s hard to confront Johns anonymously, whether on the street or online, but there is one program that talks with them face to face. The SAGE Project in San Francisco runs what’s formally known as the First Offender Prostitution Program or the “John School”. Every other month, about 30 Johns meet to learn about how their actions can affect a community. Executive Director Ellyn Bell says the goal is to educate the men about the negative consequences of soliciting sex.

“Essentially what we try to do is give awareness a kernel of awareness or plant a seed, people can begin to examine their own behavior, look into the effects of his behavior upon others and just maybe just maybe question their choices in the future,” Bell says.

Project SAGE has been effective at reducing Johns’ recidivism, but the program is for first time offenders without felony convictions – in other words, people who have gotten caught. It doesn’t reach men who’ve never been arrested. That’s a very different approach than the law takes to young women on the street.

“It’s very difficult to arrest Johns because you literally have to catch them in the act. Yet you don’t have to catch the girls in the act,” says Manyak.

This is what’s frustrating for police and community members. Everyone knows the problem is there, but there’s only so much they can do legally. At the community meeting residents want to know what their other options are.

One person in the audience asked: “Is there anything else the City does after sending out the letter?”

Another person asked: “What else is the police department doing about prostitution?”

EBAYC’S Andy Nelson says sending letters is just one tactic among many. EBAYC has also worked to get problem motels shut  down, put up security cameras, visibility campaigns and worked with schools to prevent at-risk girls from falling into prostitution.

“So we've done a whole host of things to address this problem and we know it's going to take that. It's going to take a lot of everybody working at it from different angles,” Nelson says.

More than 40 cities across the U.S. send Dear John Letters. Some cities go further, trying tactics like publishing John’s names and photos in local newspapers. As for Oakland, community members are eager to get more eyes on the street and more letters in the mail.