**‘Dear John’ letter fights prostitution**

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Many of the names surface again and again: prostitutes and johns whom police arrest during regular stings in the Main South neighborhood. Then there are the new names — people from outside Worcester who come here because of the neighborhood’s reputation as a trysting spot for the sex underworld.

The big concerns are the consequences — the risk of sexually transmitted disease not only to those involved but to their families, police said. That and the drug addiction that often accompanies such crime.

Police are starting a new effort to curb prostitution, looking at the root causes of the crime and also any deterrents they can use to keep johns from Main South and to keep prostitutes from searching for them.

“It’s us trying to be more innovative to curb prostitution and john activity,” said police Capt. Steven M. Sargent, commander of the vice unit. The program will focus on the men and the women, he said. “You can’t have one without the other. It’s supply and demand.”

Police have conducted stings regularly, during summer and winter months. Last year, from Jan. 1 to Dec. 16, police arrested at least 190 people for offering to engage in sex for a fee. Of those, 128 were females and 62 were males.

“These arrests have deterred prostitutes somewhat, but there is clearly an observable problem that exists,” states a police mission statement on the new program. “Prostitutes are visible in the area and johns continuously cruise the area, often soliciting law-abiding citizens.

“The quality of life of citizens in the area is greatly reduced due to these habitual offenders.”

As part of the new effort, police will continue with regular stings, thanks to a community policing grant that will fund extra patrols through June. Police will also begin using new surveillance equipment to aid in prosecution.

Still, police say other efforts are needed to attack the cause of prostitution and to deter those willing to pay for sex.

Under one program, police will mail a “Dear John” letter to anyone arrested for soliciting a prostitute, as well as to the owner of the car used in the crime. The letter, signed by the chief of police, will warn of the seriousness of the crime, the possible punishment, and the risk of contracting diseases including HIV, hepatitis and syphilis.

Capt. Sargent said those arrested are often not from the area and will attend court and face their charges without family members or loved ones knowing about it. The letter will bring the seriousness of the charge to the defendant’s home, and to the home of whoever’s car he or she was using.

Police see the letter as a way to embarrass those they arrest, and as a way to educate them about the diseases.

On another front, police will begin towing cars used in the crime. Typically, police leave a defendant’s car on the street as they continue with their stings to avoid bringing attention to the police presence in the area. Not towing the cars has also been considered a courtesy.

But now, anyone arrested for soliciting a prostitute will have his or her car towed and tagged as part of a police inventory. Police see the strategy as a deterrent because of the cost of retrieving a car from a tow yard. Also, only the registered owner of the car will be able to retrieve it from the tow yard, and police believe that will be another deterrent because johns often use other people’s cars while on patrol for prostitutes. Police say inventory searches of cars could also lead to other charges, for example if a defendant has drugs or other contraband in the car.

Other cities have implemented programs that hold a defendant’s car for a set period of time, but constitutional issues have been raised in those programs that could result in court challenges. In Worcester, the car will be towed as it would be in any other crime, and will be available for retrieval as soon as a fee is paid.

The final strategy is to have johns complete an anti-prostitution course as part of their punishment. Prostitutes are already referred to Developing Alternatives for Women Now, a program that helps build self-esteem and self-determination to help them escape abuse and addiction. Participants have access to social services counselors as well as detox centers.

Police will model the john program after DAWN. It will offer courses on transmitted diseases as well as the social infection of prostitution, the way it plagues neighborhoods and promotes other crimes such as robbery and drug abuse.

Police Chief Gary J. Gemme praised the initiative developed by the vice squad as a more “comprehensive approach” to curb prostitution. For too long, johns and prostitutes have been arrested, only to return to the streets for reasons that extend beyond sex. There are drug addictions and mental health issues. And through it all, neighborhoods suffer, particularly Main South, a place that’s long been known as a haven for the sex trade.

“What you’re seeing is a more aggressive approach to deal with a negative thing that has plagued a neighborhood in our community,” the chief said. “It’s really about educating as well as enforcement.”