

Tacoma police cracking down on prostitution

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TACOMA, Wash. — Tacoma police have launched another crackdown on prostitution in the South End and other parts of the city.

Commanders hope the effort has a long-term effect.

“We have a serious prostitution problem and we are working on it,” Assistant Chief Bob Sheehan said. “Our goal this time is to do some sustainability.”

Complaints from residents and citywide efforts to fight crime prompted police commanders to begin special missions, targeting working women and their customers, and to look at other ways to curb the problem.

The missions, which use officers working their regular patrol shifts and others on overtime, began Sept. 21 and will continue indefinitely. Commanders are using \$50,000 from a federal grant to pay for the overtime.

So far, officers have run five missions, arresting 28 teenage girls and women on prostitution-related charges. Stings aimed at customers are planned but haven't yet been launched.

The enforcement activity — involving about 20 department employees — is part of a broader plan to address prostitution in the city. Commanders are banking on the beefed-up patrols, help from community members and new ideas from a coalition of city workers to stamp out the activity.

Prostitution has been a long-standing problem in parts of Tacoma, particularly sections of Tacoma, Portland and Puyallup avenues, South Tacoma Way and Pacific Avenue in the southern end of the city.

Over the years, the problem has ebbed and flowed. Police crackdowns quell the activity for a time, but it eventually returns.

Two years ago, the Police Department used \$100,000 in federal grant money to pay for overtime patrols on highly traveled Pacific Avenue. Officers arrested dozens of women and made even more contacts.

The problem dried up for a time but has returned. Community members and business owners have reported conspicuous prostitution activity on their streets. They say they've seen drug activity, found discarded needles and condoms and other trash.

"It has been (blatant), especially at night," said Gloria Ripola, owner of Gloria's Bar & Grill at 8201 Pacific Ave. "During the day, it's not as visible as it used to be."

Police say many of the prostitutes working in Tacoma are coming from other cities to earn money. Some are teenagers. Some operate alone. Many others work for pimps.

While police make arrests, others are trying to send a message to those engaged in the activity.

A group of city employees has been working to limit prostitution as part of Tacoma's Safe and Clean initiative.

The team, working with police officers in the South End and South Side of Tacoma, created an anti-prostitution sign that community members and business owners can display.

"(Citizens) can put their own message out that they are not going to stand for this," police community liaison officer Dan Hensley said. "It really gives them a voice."

The signs, which Safe Streets paid for, were unveiled at last month's March Against Crime in the South End. Twenty residents have displayed the sign so far. Four businesses, including Gloria's Bar & Grill, covered the costs of larger, 4-by-4-foot versions to post on their properties.

"It's not good when families are driving down the road and they have these girls half dressed walking down the road," Ripola said.

The city's Safe and Clean team also is looking at how other cities combat prostitution and how Tacoma can implement a new state law that allows officers to impound the vehicles of customers arrested on suspicion of soliciting prostitutes.

It also is considering ways to publicize the names of those engaged in the illegal activity.

Ripola said she's optimistic this latest city and police effort against prostitution will stick.

"I really think we will discourage them from being in this area," she said. "If we all stick together and keep fighting then we really will clean up this area."