

MIDTOWN PONCE SECURITY ALLIANCE
June 2006 Public Safety Report

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I. PUBLIC SAFETY MEETING REPORT

IN ATTENDANCE:

- **Moderator:** MPSA President/MNA Safety Chairperson Peggy Denby
- **Atlanta Police Department:** Lt. Hedley (Commander of the Midtown Mini-Precinct), Lt. Boyce from HOPE Team (Homeless Outreach and Panhandling Enforcement), Detective Lindsey (Investigating the assault of the woman on 7th Street),
- **Public Officials:** Nancy Boxill (Fulton County Commission), Jay Tibby (representing City Councilman Kwanza Hall), Sharla Jackson (Fulton County DA's Office)
- **MPSA Patrol:** Coordinators Sgt. Miller and Sgt. Cooper
- **St. Paul's Presbyterian Church:** Michael Lott
- In total around 70 people attended the meeting. This may be a record turn-out.

INTRODUCTION

This meeting focused on vagrancy issues because many residents and business owners have noticed a distinct increase in aggressive panhandling, urban camping and aggressive/irrational behavior among vagrants. In Piedmont Park women and children have recently been accosted by vagrants masturbating, often with threatening demeanor. There has also been a noticeable increase in urban camping, sleeping in doorways, urinating/defecating, and littering. During a recent neighborhood cleanup one **truckload** of vagrant bedding and other litter was hauled off from one property on Piedmont alone and reappeared in short order.

ST PAUL'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Word was going around the neighborhood that this new church, which recently purchased the former Abbey Restaurant at Ponce & Piedmont, had plans to open another homeless service. The possibility of yet another such service makes Midtown residents very nervous. The MPSA has been in dialog with this church, and invited them to send representatives to this safety meeting.

Michael Lott, an Elder in this church, assured those in attendance that they have no concrete plans to feed the homeless out of that building. Their immediate priorities lie in raising funds to

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renovate the building, with particular attention to the front entrance facing Ponce. They want to restore the doors and lighting at that entrance, and cut back shubbery to keep vagrants from camping on the property. They are working on criminal trespass notices for that property. In the last month or so they have had two break-ins - one was caught and the other scared off.

While this church has no short-range plans to feed the homeless, it may come into play later on. The kitchen needs considerable work, they would need to train volunteers in things like cooking, and work out other issues. One possibility includes cooking and preparing the food on site and then delivering to other facilities. At some point they may also decide not to set up the kitchen and use the space for other purposes.

At any rate they will only operate a homeless service only if they see a need. They are highly willing to work with other existing groups and programs, such as the City of Refuge (www.cityofrefuge.cc). This organization has a program for people "in transition." Mr. Lott also pointed out that this mission also has large facilities. Mr. Lott described "in transition" as meaning "having made a commitment to job training." He described the City of Refuge as geared toward "transitional" and poor who legitimately need assistance and/or are willing to commit to some kind of self improvement, rather than indiscriminately dispensing hand-outs to vagrants.

Midtown residents are urging this church to very carefully consider the programs they develop and to be mindful of the impact that their work can have on the surrounding community. Mr. Lott assured those in attendance that the church will speak to the neighborhood again when planning anything related to homeless services. They will also advise their members of the general concerns of the Midtown community and its history of crime problems.

ATLANTA POLICE HOPE TASK FORCE

Mayor Shirley Franklin asked The Atlanta Police to establish the HOPE Team (Homeless Outreach and Panhandling Enforcement) to address homeless issues. This special task force of 5 officers headed by Lt. Boyce works varying daytime hours. There is also internal discussion within APD to extend operation into evening and nighttime hours. This task force covers the entire city but certainly spends considerable time in the downtown and Midtown areas.

This task force places heavy emphasis on steering the more problematic vagrants into appropriate treatment programs by way of the Gateway Center (www.gatewayctr.org). Even though the City has spend millions on this new center, it is still operating at less than half of its capacity. Many of the churches and other services have ignored the Gateway Center and insist on their own programs. Also, many of the chronic homeless will not use the Gateway Center because it does have certain rules. Most of the street people do not want rules to live by - only handouts and drug money

The HOPE team certainly cannot simply walk up to someone appearing to be homeless and make them seek treatment. The HOPE Team kicks in only in response to a vagrancy-related incident involving contraventions like disorderly conduct, public drunkenness, or aggressive panhandling . The violator is given the possibility of pursuing an appropriate treatment rather than

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going straight to jail. For more serious offences the subject is taken to jail but in many instances a diversion may come later.

The HOPE Team is also working to significantly reduce the number of problematic vagrants, such as a regular character at Ponce & Boulevard frequently talking and shouting at the sidewalk, threatening people, and occasionally even assaulting people for no apparent reason.

Discussion ensued about the role of outlying jurisdictions dumping homeless in Atlanta, mostly at Grady and at the Peachtree Pine shelter. Police departments and other agencies in outlying areas frequently solve their homeless problems by dropping them off at Grady and at Peachtree Pine. Suburban hospitals call services in Atlanta seeking to get rid of the homeless. Anyone with any information about dumping should report this to Lt. Boyce.

Mental illness is a significant factor in homeless issues. At least 80% of the homeless have some sort of short- to medium-range condition. 10% have some kind of serious chronic mental health problem while at least 30% have some kind of serious substance abuse problem.

Grady's mental health services are already overloaded, and there is insufficient long-term care beds for mentally ill and substance abusers. There are insufficient mechanisms for monitoring and keeping homeless on drug treatments. The National Mental Health Association of Georgia lobbies for expanded and improved mental health care.

There has been a noted increase in homeless women and children. Also on the increase are 18-21 year olds becoming homeless.

The HOPE Team needs help from the community. Any aggressive, irrational, or sick individual should be reported to 911 immediately. Patterns can also be reported to Lt. Boyce at tboyce@atlantapd.org and the MPSA (info@midtownponce.org).

Earlier this year The New Yorker ran an excellent article about the homeless issue titled *Million Dollar Murry*. We highly recommend reading this article which can be found online at http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060213fa_fact.

GENERAL ISSUES

The discussion with Atlanta Police centered mainly on the vicious assault on the woman on 7th Street. The woman got into her car parked on 7th Street and started driving off. A thug on the street approached her vehicle, smashed in the window and hit her. The suspect then snatched her purse and fled.

To date the Atlanta Police have not caught the suspect but he is believed to frequent the Midtown area given the abundance of homeless services, street drugs, and other factors. Detective Lindsey passed around a flyer about the subject - who is *"described as a black male to be in his late 20's or early to mid 30's, about 5'11" to 6'3" tall, with a thin build. The suspect has a dark brown skin tone with stubble or scruffy facial hair. He was last seen wearing khaki pants, a white*

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tee shirt, and black tennis shoes. The suspect has also been described as having a narrow oval / long face." Any information about this individual should be directed to: Investigator Lindsey, 404-658-6636 or 404-853-3434, with reference to complaint #06-156-0661.

Questions emerged as to whether APD could get out an alert about rashes of criminal activity. Lt. Hedley explained that APD Public Affairs normally handles press releases, and by the time they recognize a pattern the crime spree has blown over or the suspect has been caught.

MPSA Note: We have a well-developed E-mail network with which to disseminate lookout notices in digital form. It is currently a tedious process (delivery, writing up, scanning and preparation). With the right software a lookout notice can be printed to a PDF file and quickly sent to neighborhood organizations for forwarding. Also, the Atlanta Police website (www.atlantapd.org) has a fugitive list, but is limited to the "top ten" - there are scores of other fugitives with which the public may be of assistance. Other communities use creative approaches such as Cincinnati's Wheel of Justice (USA Today article at http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-06-08-crime-show_x.htm).

Atlanta Police has been working on drug dealing and hustlers in Renaissance Park. The transvestite prostitutes have also been in full force lately in Midtown, and show no signs of abating. Residence should continue calling 911 when they see prostitutes. APD may not be in a position to respond effectively but resources are allocated according to patterns in calls for service.

Attrition has been very high at Atlanta Police. In April alone the force lost around 100 officers, mostly to other jurisdictions, 5 of which from Zone 5 alone, and 16 officers went to the new Sandy Springs Police Department. 75% of the police force has been around for less than 5 years; therefore the overall level of experience is very low compared to other police departments. Current and former officers often cite the following:

- Too little staffing and inadequate staffing
- Pay is low - Atlanta Police salary increases have been frozen for several years
- The quality of resources is rather low and in short supply
- The type and volume of criminal is extremely high in the city
- The judicial system is overloaded and City Court judges are sympathetic toward criminals rather than the community that they serve
- Overloaded and insufficient jail space, resulting in pressure not to lock up criminals.
- Overall low morale

City Council is currently considering a 3.5% raise for police officers, which is still not enough to make our police department competitive with surrounding jurisdictions. **Citizens should urge City Council to support improved police pay and resources.**

Sgt. Miller contrasted policemen and firemen. During his career almost 40 years (and counting) 5 firemen have died in the line of duty while around 40 police officers were killed on the job. Numerous officers have been left crippled or permanently injured.

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Atlanta Police officers experience considerable job encroachment. Officers often face lawsuits, some of which are frivolous, and have to hire their own attorneys. Atlanta police officers and officials spend considerable time in court on their own time, much more so than other jurisdictions.

CONCLUSION

Ironically, several people attending the meeting were accosted by a highly belligerent and irrational vagrant when returning to their cars. MPSA Coordinator Sgt. Miller immediately restrained the suspect, with support from other officers on hand for the safety meeting, and arrested him on a disorderly conduct charge.

WEBLINKS RECAP

- National Mental Health Association of Georgia <http://www.nmhag.org>
- Pathways Community Network <http://www.pcni.org>
- Atlanta Gateway 24/7 Homeless Services Center <http://www.gatewayctr.org>
- City of Refuge www.cityofrefuge.cc
- Atlanta Police Department www.atlantapd.org
- Midtown Ponce Security Alliance www.midtownponce.org
- New Yorker Magazine article *Million Dollar Murray*
http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060213fa_fact ("required reading")

II. MPSA ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT CRIME TRENDS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Although overall crime is down, the MPSA needs continued support of the Patrol Program and other efforts.

We are sustaining a lower frequency of burglaries. We are seeing about 2 such reports a month, often noted "*no forced entry*" and occurring in places that the patrol does not address (most notably at or near Highlands on Ponce). We used to see about 10-20 such incidents per month.

Street robberies are down too - in the MPSA Patrol area there are 3 or 4 a month now compared to about 10-12 before. Every once in a while there are surges. Though street robberies are down, the number is still too high for us, since a street robbery is always a step short of a homicide.

Car break-ins persist but it is nearly impossible to combat that problem. Street criminals can always count on people leaving everything from tollway change to expensive items like laptops in their cars. Even the safest of Canadian and European cities have high levels of car break-ins.

Quality of life & nuisance issues are in high tide right now.

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There has been a dramatic increase in prostitution activity, which in turn brings in a bad element. The area westward from Myrtle Street is most affected.

Night cruising, drug activity, and public sex are at high levels near the park. More thugs are hanging around, creating an intimidating atmosphere during nighttime hours, particularly when the park is closed.

Vagrant activity is also at high levels. Aggressive panhandling, urban camping, and irrational conduct have been observed more lately. This is most noted along the boundaries of the patrol area (Ponce, Juniper, 10th Street).

Caveat: crime stats are based on data from the Atlanta Police website. While this gives us a general feel for what is happening, this information does not give much precision such as time of occurrence and circumstances of the incident. Only a dot noted with a crime title and date of report (not necessarily the actually date of occurrence). This information applies only to the MPSA Patrol area - we have not assessed the greater part of Midtown.

MPSA Patrol is working hard on these issues. We are also reviewing budgetary and logistical issues, and how we can most effectively deploy the patrol.

We need residents to report observations on all of these things. Please report suspicious people to 911. A great many criminals are caught because someone was suspicious enough to call 911. Street criminals rely on people who feel that the police have better things to do. Response may not always be optimal but the more people report incidents and suspicious activity with good information and descriptions, the more police will be in our neighborhood.

Please also share insights and observations with us. We need to be aware of patterns and incidents. We also need to know locations of vagrant encampments.

As always, the Midtown Ponce Security Alliance is very grateful for the hard work of Atlanta Police Department in making our neighborhoods safer. We feel they do an excellent job in light of the limitations and challenges they face.

III. EXCERPTS FROM *EYE ON MIDTOWN* 6/02/2006

ROBBERIES IN THE MPSA PATROL AREA

The recent robbery attempt, in which a former Marine defended himself, prompted us to take a good look at robbery stats for our area. We looked at the stats for robberies in our area using the crime mapping at the Atlanta Police website. We isolated the incident reports for the MPSA Patrol

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area. Little is known other than where robberies were reported and a report number. For those interested we will send a spreadsheet with our data.

We usually find that the robbery count holds around 3 to 5 incidents per month but we found a significant spike in robberies, particularly street robberies, during the month of April. The stats often do not show up on the Atlanta Police website until weeks later, so there may be a delay before we find out of such a surge.

MAY

- 2006: 3 counts (incomplete - only through May 28th). The robbery attempt of the former Marine occurred on May 30th and is not counted in this figure.
- 2005: 5 counts
- 2004: 6 counts

APRIL

- 2006: 11 counts
- 2005: 4 counts
- 2004: 6 counts

MARCH

- 2006: 4 counts
- 2005: 3 counts
- 2004: 4 counts

NOTABLE MPSA PATROL ARREST

On Tuesday evening MPSA Patrol stopped a man driving a scooter on 5th Street at 2am, with no lights. This man, 24 year old Britton Hayes of Piedmont Avenue, was arrested for possession of stolen credit cards (from different people!), and crystal meth. When he was checked for outstanding warrants, it turns out that he was a fugitive wanted in Marietta.

As of this writing he remains in the Fulton County on various felony charges, with a hold from Cobb County. Way to go MPSA Patrol!!

NO CRUISING SIGNS

We have received word from Kwanza Hall's office that the needed no-cruising signs are on the way. Once they are installed Atlanta Police and MPSA Patrol will aggressively enforce this ordinance. This operation will target the area bound by Piedmont, Juniper, 3rd Street, and 5th Street. Suspected johns and other violators of the cruise ordinance will go to jail and have their cars impounded. We are expecting that this will put a big dent in the prostitution activity.

IV. MPSA MAILBAG ON HOMELESS/VAGRANCY ISSUES

(These do not necessarily represent the views of the MPSA)

Response 1:

I am writing to voice my concern over the church's planned feeding program of the homeless at North & Piedmont. I will be unable to attend the meeting on June 12th but as a resident of [...] Myrtle Street I would like to have some input into this situation.

The problem of homeless people in Atlanta is a sufficient problem and of significant interest to me. I currently reside in the neighborhood in which this program will take place. Additionally, there are several other existing support groups in our neighborhood that currently feed the homeless such as the Pine Street Shelter and the Outreach Ministries on Courtland. I would like to know if these programs are not sufficient and why additional services and another location are necessary. The major concern I want to express is the attraction of homeless people to a gathering place (to feed or shelter) and the impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. It seems that these programs are contemplated and enacted without any consideration for the residents of the Midtown community. I have been the victim of several crimes as a result of the high density of homeless people in our neighborhood and am a victim of harassment frequently when going in and out of my residence.

The greater question is what the church's plan is to minimize or eliminate the impact of attracting additional homeless people to the Midtown area. It is essential, that as part of this plan, the Church provide a plan to minimize the impact on the neighborhood including resident safety and trash removal. We already experience significant amounts of litter and debris left along Myrtle Street by the homeless and vandalism to our cars and threats to our personal safety. If the Church wants to provide support services to the homeless they should also contribute to the other residents of Midtown in the way of trash pickup and safety patrols.

I would also be interested in hearing if the Church has any long term approach to solving the issue of homelessness rather than taking a band aid approach to this cause.

Before implementing a plan of this nature, I would encourage the Church to meet with neighborhood residents and members of the community to present a plan to control and resolve these issues.

Please let me know if I can be of additional help or if there are other agencies we can contact to resolve these issues.

Response 2:

Quoting Heather McDonald, Dec 2002 in City Journal

But let's say we ignore society's claim on safety and property rights, and dedicate all our resources to "helping the homeless," as the advocates would have us do. What sort of insane philosophy calls it "help" to let mentally ill addicts and alcoholics remain perpetually on sidewalks and back alleys, losing limbs to gangrene and frostbite, drinking and injecting themselves to death, under constant risk of attack from each other and from teen thugs? Give the "advocates" credit for this: they may not have done a thing for the "homeless," but they have accomplished a conceptual tour de force—turning cruel neglect into self-righteous virtue.

Contrary to what the advocates would have you believe, arresting a street bum who violates the law will often be the best thing that could happen to him. First, it pays him the respect of holding him to the same rules and expectations that the rest of society lives by. Second and more important, it may prod him finally to get control of his life. Go to the city's drug courts, and you will hear ex-addicts thanking their arresting officer for triggering their self-reclamation.

Now me: Churches need to be responsible members of their neighborhoods. Not facilitators of lawless, irresponsible and unchristian behavior.

THANKS to the MPSA for all they do for our neighborhood.

[MPSA Note: The full article from which the above was quoted can be found at http://www.city-journal.org/html/eon_12_3_02hm.html.]

Response 3:

While I agree with the writer below that many of the people getting the services of the church soup kitchens commit no crimes except that of being poor, there is a percentage of this group which are either on drugs or are crazy (or both). So I do hope you continue to work with the churches to find a solution to keep the mentally ill or drugged out element away from our neighborhood yet allow them to serve the truly neediest in our community.

Response 4:

I volunteer with my church's outreach program for the homeless and I am quite proud of our work. We serve hot meals to around 200 people per day. I am not so naive as to think that most of them are saints because most of them are drug users and alcoholics and criminals. But among those hundreds we serve every week are a very small handful, and I mean very small, that genuinely need some kind of assistance. What's important is that in feeding all those people we also reach the precious few who really need us. That's what counts. As for they crime they cause - that's life in the city. That's what security systems and insurance policies are for and that's why you should not leave things in your car. People living in Midtown theoretically can afford those things.

Response 5 [In response to an E-mail sent in our last e-blast]:

1. Suburban mentality [addressing the comment "it's sad that people ostensibly move to Midtown for the character of the neighborhood, and then do everything possible to turn the neighborhood

into the suburb from which they fled".]: Most of the homeless services are supported and operated by people who live in the suburbs. You can be sure that these people would not want a high volume of homeless near their subdivisions. It is like they feel sorry for a stray cat, yet they place the food in a neighbor's yard so that it does not hang around their house.

2. [In reference to *"This NIMBY mentality has no place in Midtown."*]: On Midtown having a NIMBY mentality [=Not In My Back Yard]: In light of the forgoing I would describe us more like WAIMBY - Why Always In My Back Yard?. We already have a disproportionate volume of vagrants in our area, who are often dumped here by people and agencies in the suburbs. When the City of Atlanta asked for help from surrounding communities for the new Gateway Center most did not want any part of it. Since outlying communities dump this problem on us, they do not feel that they have a homeless problem.

3. While we cannot stop groups from carrying out their ministries, we expect them to consider the full impact of what they are doing. Very often churches want to help the less fortunate, in itself a very noble thing, but they often resort to the logistically easiest thing - just give hand-outs indiscriminately. Also, the people and volunteers do not see the full cycle of homeless activity. They come just in time to set up the kitchen, do their work, clean up and leave again. The people running these groups fail to see the full cycle of events in a vagrant's way of life - they eat at a church or feeding station, panhandle and break into cars to buy drugs, camp and defecate on private property, and then go to another church to eat again.

Response 6 [Excerpt after writing increased prostitution activity]

I have mixed feelings on how to address concerns about vagrancy resulting from the poor. In general, I wish the shelters would check for those with a warrant and not serve people on drugs, but I do not think it is fair to say that homeless programs are not welcome in our area.

Response 7

I have the "privilege" of traveling down Juniper/Courtland every morning on my way to work downtown on Mitchell Street (near the fed courthouse), so I have a pretty good perspective on the residual effects of feeding programs and the tourist triangle. Also last night at around 9 I drove the same route to go down to GSU and what I saw was appalling. People camped out on the sides of the street, piles of "possessions" and people laying around in the vacant lot at Pine street. No way would you want to be a pedestrian taking a stroll if you looked as though you had "means."

Unfortunately, this situation will be duplicated at Ponce/North and Piedmont if it is not nipped in the bud. Plus we have the double whammy of the property going off the tax rolls yet requiring more city services because of their activities. So the group precipitating the mess pay no taxes and the group creating the mess pays no taxes to deal with it. It would seem to me that a feeding program will set this area back 20 years.

Response 8

I'm a resident of [Midtown] and I'd like to comment on one aspect of this [May Safety Meeting Report]. While I certainly don't want crimes to increase in our neighborhood, I think it's both ridiculous and socially irresponsible to try to prevent churches from offering services to homeless and poor people. Most of the people the churches cater to have committed no crime except for the crime of being poor. In fact, if we fight soup kitchens and other church services that provide poor people with food, we can expect an increase in crime. Sure, people rob for drug money, but they also rob to get something to eat. I don't think we have any right whatsoever to dictate what neighborhood churches can or cannot do. I think it's sad that people ostensibly move to Midtown for the character of the neighborhood, and then do everything possible to turn the neighborhood into the suburb from which they fled. This is a city, yes, and there is crime. Be vigilant and careful, but also be a little more open-minded. This NIMBY mentality has no place in Midtown.

Response 9

Please, please, please do not increase the vagrancy attractions in this neighborhood. Midtown neighbors are active in volunteering to improve the quality of our neighborhood. Vagrancy is the essence of the most important quality of life issue that plagues our community. As a longtime Midtownner, I have had too many negative experiences with vagrants, and no positive ones. People who have not lived for many years with these same negatives do not have the credibility with us to dismiss this community's concerns. A few of the negatives in my own experience with vagrancy:

- *Repeatedly cleaning vagrants' feces from my lawn or sidewalk;*
- *Cleaning their liquor bottles, drug syringes, drug baggies, food wrappers (they do seem to have plenty of food), and discarded clothing from my yard and front steps;*
- *Cleaning car window glass from my sidewalk.*
- *Being robbed and thrown to the sidewalk.*
- *Being hit.*
- *Being spat upon.*

As another outrage, I was there to hear a director of nearby shelter invite Midtown homeowners to volunteer to clean up the vagrant's mess from the shelter's property! We already do too much for the vagrants, but we don't have a choice, so I guess we cannot call it "volunteering."

Programs to feed or house vagrants essentially enable the criminals and drug addicts to continue to pursue crime and addiction. I hope these people with the new church can find a way to make a real contribution to improve our community, because there are many, many ways to actually help our community. Why not create a program to clean up our streets and yards after vagrants have littered? Why not volunteer to help the local prosecutor's office to prosecute more crimes and achieve greater criminal penalties? Could these would-be service providers perhaps turn their attention to prison populations, where the criminals might possibly be receptive to making changes? What about providing vagrants with transportation to a reputable rehab program, the Union Mission, the Salvation Army, the Gateway Center, OR A NICE NORTHSIDE ATLANTA CHURCH?