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Nancy E. Gist, Director

Chelsea, Massachusetts: A City Helps Its Diverse People Get Along

By Chadwick Bash, Maria Amato, and Michele Sacks, BJA

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Sammy Mojica's job is to make angry people happy. Chelsea, Massachusetts, a small, crowded city 2 miles north of downtown Boston, pays him to intervene in those intensely personal neighbor-against-neighbor disputes that have a way of turning ugly and sending otherwise nice people to court or jail.

Mojica operates Chelsea's Conflict Intervention Unit (CIU), and he and the other 36,000 people who live in the city face some big-city problems. Chelsea is the poorest city in Massachusetts. Nearly half of the city's children under the age of 4 live in poverty. Chelsea leads the Boston region in unemployment, has the state's highest crime rate, and is home to an estimated 10,000 undocumented Hispanic and Southeast Asian immigrants. These problems are compounded by the fact that Chelsea's population is squeezed into fewer than 3 square miles. More than 30 percent of the population lives in one 10-block area of cramped, rundown dwellings.

That the people here argue and fight, call the police, and take one another to court is



The crowded city of Chelsea, Massachusetts—the Commonwealth's poorest—sits just 2 miles from downtown Boston.

no surprise; people everywhere do. But in Chelsea, keeping low-level civil disputes from escalating into violence and lawsuits is much more difficult because neighbors speak different languages and do not realize that their behavior might offend the cultural norms of the family next door.

The city of Chelsea created CIU as an experiment. Ed Flynn, the city's former chief of police, wanted to find out if individuals from the community could be trained to help people solve the types of conflicts that often escalate into assaults or

litigation. At the same time, Flynn hoped to improve the quality of life in the city's poorest neighborhoods and free police officers' time for crime problems.

The program, Flynn said, "acknowledged the reality that the criminal justice system is a blunt instrument with limited ability to deal with ongoing neighborhood disputes."

According to Pat Ryan, Chelsea's Director of Administration, before CIU was developed the Chelsea Police Department talked about finding ways to help people solve their own problems. But the reality was that Chelsea officers were still pulling up to the same doorsteps week after week to listen to the same complaints about barking dogs and unruly children.

The experiment worked. Of the 111 disputes CIU mediated from May 1998 through August 1999, only 5 have gone to court. The program has saved the Chelsea police department thousands of dollars and hundreds of patrol hours. Officers who were initially skeptical of the program now refer cases to CIU nearly every day. And most important, CIU has reduced crime and racial tension in minority communities by giving residents a peaceful way to settle disputes without involving the police or the courts.

Chelsea City Manager Guy Santigate, a native of the city and son of Italian immigrants, believes CIU engages people who have felt alienated from the police and other government institutions. "CIU is giving our citizens a new perspective on how to handle conflict," he said.

The Old Chelsea: A Lot of Conflict, Little Cooperation

That this city is even thinking about quality-of-life issues amazes people who have lived through Chelsea's recent history. At the beginning of the decade, the city was completely mired in conflict. Problems ran rampant from the neighborhood streets right up through a demoralized police department and a corrupt mayor's office. Everybody in Chelsea, it seemed, was fighting a lonely battle to survive.

In local government, the city's severe economic, political, and financial hardships prompted the Massachusetts legislature to place Chelsea into receivership in 1991. It was the first time since the Depression that a state government had taken such drastic action against a municipality.¹

In Chelsea's streets, conflict was fueled by ethnic tensions that began flaring in the mid-1970s when waves of immigrants dramatically shifted the

ethnic makeup of the city's population. One of Massachusetts' original gateway communities, Chelsea was a blue-collar suburb of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants. By 1998, Chelsea's population had become more than 40 percent Hispanic and 10 percent Asian and African-American. Students now speak 39 languages in Chelsea's public school system, and 75 percent of its student population are minority students.

The Chelsea Police Department was slow to respond to this demographic shift, and officers' relationships with the city's minority communities deteriorated to the point that a riot broke out against the police in 1983. The department had no Spanish-speaking officers on its force until 1992. Only recently, as new lines of communication opened between law enforcement and the community, have tensions dissipated.

But receivership and the possibility of annexation by Boston forced Chelsea's residents to become more involved in finding solutions to the city's crime, poverty, education, and housing problems. Residents and city officials organized neighborhood crime watch groups, calmed unrest in minority neighborhoods through community policing programs and the hiring of bilingual officers, opened a local youth center, and formed a partnership with Boston University to help manage Chelsea's public schools.

This series is dedicated to the exploration of vital issues in criminal justice program development and management. Case studies highlight the work of progressive, innovative people and programs in state and local criminal justice systems. Although a case study may include a detailed description of the operational aspects of a program, it is not a scientific program evaluation. Rather, it is a document designed to explore the interaction of factors such as collaboration, politics, resources, culture, and others that play a part in successful public management.

Getting the Program Started and Building Trust

In September 1997, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), a grant-making agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, awarded \$75,000 to the Chelsea Police Department to start CIU. The unit, which consisted of a director and an assistant director, began accepting cases in May 1998. From the outset, CIU was designed to address noncriminal disputes. It was not designed to handle domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, or divorce cases.

BJA's award covered 90 percent of the staff's salaries and fringe benefits. The city of Chelsea contributed in-kind support that provided office space, paid overhead costs, equipped the staff with radios for use in the field, and sponsored training in mediation for city workers and community leaders. The Chelsea Housing Authority offered office and mediation space at each public housing site, and the Health and Human Services Department made staff available from the city's refugee program to provide translation services in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Cambodian.

The first important test for CIU was whether it would be embraced by officers in the Chelsea Police Department and the Chelsea Housing Authority. Officers responding to nuisance calls would be the most likely source of referrals to the program, but they wouldn't refer cases to CIU if they didn't view the unit as a viable option.

Mojica and CIU's first director, Ginny Burnham, introduced the program to



Sammy Mojica (center), Chelsea's conflict intervention specialist, talks to a resident who stopped him on the street seeking help in a landlord-tenant dispute.

Chelsea's police officers at roll call in spring 1998, and the officers were skeptical. An officer who was on the force at the time recalled that many of her colleagues were concerned that CIU's approach was not legitimate police work. The officers also didn't like the idea of asking for help in cases they felt they should be able to handle on their own.

Convincing officers that the program could make their jobs easier was critical to the program's survival. In 1998, when Rafael Hernandez took over the department as the state's first Hispanic police chief, CIU was struggling to get up and running. Hernandez' predecessor, Ed Flynn, was the program's early driving force and his departure to become chief of police in Arlington County, Virginia, delayed CIU's implementation. That changed as Hernandez and Capt. Donald Robitile, both of whom were committed to the idea of using trained civilian mediators, pushed the department to incorporate the unit into its daily operations.

Even with the support of police management, Chelsea's officers were wary of referring cases to civilians until Burnham and Mojica gained their trust. "Our officers cooperate with the program," Capt. Robitile said, "because Sammy is very diligent about letting them know the outcome of the cases. Without that trust, this program wouldn't work."

Mojica estimates that 70 to 80 percent of officers in the department now refer disputes to the unit, and the department allows dispatch to track Mojica on interventions to ensure his safety.

Chelsea police officers assigned to elementary, middle, and high schools are very supportive of the program, as are the department's officers assigned to domestic violence and child abuse cases.

Forming a Referral Network

When Chelsea formed the Conflict Intervention Unit, the city didn't

launch a mass media campaign to publicize the program's services. Doing so, Ryan said, would have overwhelmed CIU's small staff. Instead, CIU focused on developing relationships with city agencies such as the Chelsea Housing Authority and the Chelsea Health and Human Services Department that serve populations with the greatest need for conflict intervention.

The city also sponsored training in mediation for a cross-section of city agencies that refer disputes to the police: animal control, public housing, building inspection, parking, water and power companies, senior citizen centers, and human rights and refugee advocates. The training not only increased awareness of the unit throughout the city, it also gave these agencies the tools to defuse conflicts before they escalated.

Paul McCarthy is the director of Public Safety at the Chelsea Housing Authority, and he knows firsthand how quick some tenants in Chelsea's public housing are to fight. "Friction is inevitable," McCarthy said, "when people of different cultures are crowded together like this." At least 70 percent of the calls he and other members of the housing police respond to are nuisance calls, often at the same addresses.

In the past, when a dispute became hostile and potentially violent, it was next to impossible for a public housing manager to intervene and not to be accused of taking a side. Now when residents want to beat each other up or go to court, McCarthy can call someone who is not a police officer and not an employee of the Housing Authority.

Mojica learned quickly that this perception of neutrality is the single most important factor in the process of getting people to cooperate with one another. "When I go to someone's house, they don't talk to me the same way they would a cop," he said.

Christopher Myers, the Chelsea Housing Authority's director of Housing Management, believes the benefit of having mediators available to public housing residents is much greater than bringing peace to one floor of an apartment building. The most important result of ending these quarrels, he said, is raising the quality of life for everyone in Chelsea's public housing system.

Diana's Story

Diana is a quiet woman who moved into one of Chelsea's housing developments 2 years ago with her 3-year-old child. Almost immediately, she became the target of harassment by the woman living next door, Amy.² The two had never met. Yet for some reason unknown to Diana, Amy yelled obscenities at her, tried to pick fights, and even tried to hit Diana with her car as she crossed the street.

The perception of neutrality is the single most important factor in the process of getting people to cooperate with one another.

After 2 years, Amy's behavior was so unpredictable that Diana lived in constant fear. She felt torn over how to handle the situation. Diana was

afraid to confront Amy, and she feared she might be evicted for causing trouble if she went to the housing manager. She was reluctant to call the police, believing she would drag her neighbors into the conflict and into court. What Diana really needed was someone who could find a way to get Amy to talk without antagonizing her.

Finally, a neighbor suggested that she ask CIU for help. The first time Mojica called Amy, she hung up on him, but he kept calling. Slowly, he gained her trust and made her realize that without mediation Diana would be forced to go to the police or take the case to court.

Amy could not speak English well, so Mojica served as a translator at the meeting. Diana would say something in English, Mojica would translate it into Spanish, Amy would respond in Spanish, and Mojica would translate it back to English. This process went on for hours.

At first, Amy refused to cooperate. She would not explain her behavior. But by the end of the session, she conceded that Diana had done nothing to prompt her hostility. Amy said that she sometimes gets mad at her children and takes it out on other people. Diana just happened to be the other person.

Eventually, they reached an agreement and signed a contract drafted by Mojica. The contract was simple. It stated that the two women did not know each other and had no reason to have problems, now or in the future. The contract stipulated that they stay away from each other and respect each other's property. Since that day, Diana and Amy haven't talked, but

they haven't had any problems either. They stay away from each other, and when they pass each other on the street, each woman behaves in a civil manner.

Diana believes that CIU works because Mojica is serious but friendly and well liked in the community. "He does not push mediation on you and is really patient, and after the mediation he makes you feel secure by making frequent followup calls and visits," Diana said.

For Diana, the best thing about CIU was that she and Amy had a safe, neutral environment in which to sit down and talk face-to-face. Going through the police or the courts, she said, would have been much more confrontational, drawn out, and expensive. She left the mediation feeling as if she had just come out of a counseling session. "I felt so relieved, like I wasn't closed in anymore. The courts are stressful. Had we taken this to court, I would have left with little relief and a lot of hostile feelings," Diana explained.

The Bottom Line: Is CIU Worth Its Cost?

Between May 1998 and August 1999, the unit responded to 111 referrals. According to the Chelsea Police Department, having an officer respond to these types of disputes costs an average of \$150 per visit. If the police had been called to intervene in the 111 cases the CIU has handled, the cost, at minimum, would have been nearly \$17,000. This figure is likely much too low, though, because it does not take into account that many of

these disputes may have required repeated police visits.

In comparison, CIU staff needed \$43 per case, or less than \$4,800, to mediate the 111 cases in which they intervened. Accordingly, it cost the city of Chelsea at least \$107 less per case to have CIU, rather than the police, respond to these disputes.

The most important benefits of CIU are difficult to calculate. Because CIU helps get to the root of a problem before it requires litigation or grows into criminal conduct, the program saves its participants court costs, legal fees, lost wages, medical costs, babysitting fees, and a host of other hidden expenses. CIU also prevents significant costs to the Chelsea criminal justice system by providing an inexpensive alternative to lawsuits. Each time a dispute is mediated out of court, all of the costs of hearing a case—from the judge's salary to the electricity running the courtroom's lights—are avoided.

Why Is CIU Working in Chelsea?

Chelsea's city manager, chief of police, and director of administration were all asked the same question: Is there something special about Chelsea that made this program succeed? Their answers were the same: No. They believe that a team of intervention specialists could have success in any community, regardless of size or ethnic makeup. They cautioned, however, that for an intervention unit to be successful, a community must ensure that its program has the following fundamental elements:

- ◆ **Rapport with the community.** Chelsea's CIU staff work and live in the community they serve. It has been vitally important, for example, that Mojica understands the language and customs of Chelsea's Hispanic community. "The hardest part of my job is finding ways to get people to talk,"



Children play in Chelsea's Quigley Park, a site once feared in the neighborhood as a hangout for drug dealers.

Mojica said. “People won’t tell their story to someone they don’t trust.”

- ◆ **The right staff.** Recruiting the right people to serve as mediators has been crucial to CIU’s success in Chelsea. According to Mojica, a successful mediator must have excellent listening skills and a willingness to help people make healthy decisions for themselves. “To do this job right,” he said, “you can’t make choices for other people. They must believe in the agreement.”
- ◆ **Flexibility.** When police officers respond to noncriminal disputes, their options are limited. A typical police officer has little time to devote to a nuisance call. If no crime had been committed, the best he or she can hope to do is calm people down and refer them to counseling and health and human service agencies. Chelsea’s intervention specialists are paid to do what a busy police officer cannot: find a time and a place that are convenient to the disputing parties and hammer out an agreement.
- ◆ **Independence from the police.** Although CIU works out of an office at the Chelsea Police Department, the unit is an independent group. Mojica drives his own car and wears street clothes. As a result, people still view him as a friend from the neighborhood. This independence has been critical to gaining people’s trust in Chelsea’s poorest neighborhoods.

- ◆ **Independence from the courts.** This program works because it is an alternative to litigation. Mojica has found that people are most often motivated to reach an agreement by their desire to keep disputes out of court.
- ◆ **Feedback.** For CIU to be a legitimate option for officers when they are called to intervene in a dispute, they need to know that the program works. “Officers need feedback,” Capt. Robitile said, “for their peace of mind. They need to know that the intervention unit will do something when they call.”
- ◆ **Followup.** In most cases, Mojica knows that working out an agreement is only the beginning of his involvement. To make sure the parties don’t backslide, he makes weekly phone calls or drops by for a visit. “If you don’t follow up with people,” Mojica said, “conflict intervention won’t work.”

CIU’s Future

In fiscal year (FY) 2000, BJA will supplement the city of Chelsea’s award to expand training in conflict resolution to more community agencies and residents. The city of Chelsea is committed to the program and will provide more than half (\$42,550) of its operating costs in 2000. Moreover, Chelsea is developing a strategy to sustain the program once federal funds have been exhausted.

CIU’s biggest challenge is to reach more people than it does now with one intervention specialist. The program will truly mirror Chelsea’s diverse communities when its staff includes women and incorporates the backgrounds and languages of the city’s most recent immigrants into it.

One way to meet this challenge is to train groups of community residents and public housing residents to serve as mediators. In FY 2000, building on CIU’s successful collaboration with the Chelsea Housing Authority, CIU staff will begin an effort to teach all new housing residents how to manage conflict within their homes and with their neighbors. CIU also plans to establish offices at each housing development to make mediators available to residents twice a month.

By its most basic measure, CIU is an effective program. It has reduced calls for police service in civil disputes. But the program is making a bigger impact on people’s lives than on the police department’s budget. Among the residents of Chelsea’s poorest neighborhoods, CIU is confirming a growing feeling that the Chelsea city government is working to improve the quality of their lives.

Notes

1. In 1994, a revitalized Chelsea adopted a new city charter that gave policy and legislative authority to an 11-member city council led by a city manager. Under this new government, Chelsea pursued an aggressive economic development plan, adopted the city's first capital improvement plan, completed a \$110 million school project, renegotiated labor agreements, restructured city agencies, and added new administrative leadership in key staff positions.
2. Diana and Amy's names have been changed to protect their privacy.

For More Information

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