

Central American Police visit Florida Weed and Seed Sites

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Though often separated by borders, language, politics and sometimes culture, the issues of peoples everywhere are essentially the same. Ask anyone, anywhere in the world, about the problems of their respective community and listen to the stark similitudes - education, jobs, housing, health, and public safety. This is why a delegation of police officers from El Salvador, Central America recently visited the United States - to learn effective community policing strategies that would improve the quality of life among the citizens of their own country. In partnership with the U.S. Department of State and Florida Regional Community Policing Institute at St. Petersburg



Pictured: San Salvador Metropolitan Police Agents (front row), William Daniels-USAO/MDFL, Sgt. Mike Bush-St. Petersburg Police, Teketa Marshall-Weed & Seed Safe Haven Coordinator (back row)

College, this delegation was part of a continuation project, introducing Central American countries to both traditional and non-traditional strategies in combating gangs and violent crime. And what better model to deliver the goods than Weed and Seed?

With so much to learn and much more to share, the week-long training was facilitated by a team of three renowned instructors - Tony Rolon (formerly of St. Petersburg Police Department), William Daniels (U.S. Attorney's Office, Middle District of Florida), and Ed DeVelasco (Florida Department of Law Enforcement). Addressing three deputy chiefs, six commanders, two interpreters and a U.S. Department of State Liaison, William "Will" Daniels began his remarks by saying, "We are here to learn from you as well." While Rolon focused on the specific problem-solving processes of community policing and DeVelasco presented specific cases on successfully dismantling criminal gang organizations, Daniels was specifically recruited by RCPI Executive Director Eileen LaHaie to expose the delegation to the Weed and Seed strategy. "Win-Win. Not Win-Lose. Not Compromise, but a higher, better, Third Alternative." Those were the choices Daniels offered the group during day one of his community partnerships and collaborations training block. "Weed and Seed is doing together what we cannot accomplish alone," he said. "Tomorrow, when we go out into the community, you are going to see its benefits."

By day two of the 5-day intensive instruction course, the delegation saw exactly what he was talking about. A trip to Clearwater, Florida breathed life into the theory when the team was greeted at the city's "*Operation Joining Hands - Apoyo Hispano*" by Chief Anthony Holloway, a former police commander during the early Weed & Seed days. An alumni Weed and Seed site since the 1990s, CPD initiated the outreach project in 2001, as a response to their under served, but growing Hispanic population. As a result of the effort, several major criminal cases have been identified, investigated and resolved successfully, utilizing police-community and advocacy partnerships. Another flagship collaboration showcased during the visit was the CHIP (Clearwater Homeless Intervention Program) Shelter. This facility, a response to Clearwater's burgeoning homelessness issue, was forged in partnership with police, government, and NGOs - once again demonstrating a tailored solution for a specific problem. "Community Policing is part of everything that we do," stated Chief Holloway. Police ride-a-longs provided the visitors with a personal view of close police-business partnerships, as bilingual officers stopped to chat with business owners along their beat. "Park, Walk and Talk" is their philosophy - getting officers out of the cars and directly involved with the residents of the community.

A bright Florida sun greeted the police escorted van of delegates, on day four, as it passed the domed Tropicana Field, headed downtown towards St. Petersburg Police Headquarters. Visits to the communications, street crimes, investigations, and community policing units were just the beginning, before heading out to comb St. Petersburg's neighborhoods. The Davis-Bradley Drug Treatment Center has its evolution deep within the community. When a young steering committee member suggested that mental health and substance abuse issues were influential contributors to high crime statistics in south St. Petersburg, things began to happen. Prevention, Intervention and Treatment agencies collaborated with Weed and Seed to refurbish a historic building and provide a plethora of services to the community. Now, located in the Midtown area, is a 64,000 square-foot center, along with a new drug court, to provide offenders with viable treatment alternatives to incarceration. Thinking about icing on the cake? St. Petersburg is the only known Weed and Seed Community in the nation to successfully convene a Mental Health Community Forum for the African-American Community for the past nine consecutive years.

These international officers got a chance to see real visionaries at work. Coordinated by Site Director Janis Ford and accompanied by Daniels, members of the mayor's economic development team, safe haven coordinator Teketa Marshall and Sergeant Mike Bush, the group frequently paused to pose meticulous questions to service providers and program specialists at the sites' two community safe havens and along the route. The tour wended through the 49th Street Business Corridor Project and the Neighborhood Stabilization Program in Childs Park - the city's newest designated area. "I've even learn something new today," replied Sgt. Mike Bush, referring to the growing services among partners within the neighborhoods. Working well beyond their scheduled class time each day and speaking mostly through the use of interpreters, three words needed no further translation, by day five - "Weed and Seed." Addressing the delegation for a final time, before their graduation, Daniels reinforced his belief in

the “Third Alternative” by saying, “We don’t have all of the solutions to our problems our yours. The best solutions will come from you and the citizens of your community. You just have to believe that it’s possible.” While shaking hands with each member of the delegation, one commander gave Daniels a crisp smile, thumbs up and said with firm conviction - “Win-Win!”