

Cooperative drug enforcement units work with local agencies

by Andrew Sawmiller

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Public safety officials and offices must work across multiple jurisdictional boundaries and red-tape hurdles to help combat crime in today's world and satisfy the ever-watchful eye of a concerned citizenry. In Oakland County, including the lakes area, two such law enforcement programs operate to limit the reach of the criminal underworld — the Oakland County Narcotics Enforcement Team (NET) and the South Oakland Narcotics Intelligence Consortium (SONIC), which are each charged with their own tasks and work within their own guidelines.

Lakes area officials have helped in forming these localized task forces to crack down on drug distribution and usage in specific centers. The state of Michigan accepted the charge of shutting down drug distribution and purchases in Oakland County about 30 years ago, and the effort has grown in importance and stature ever since, with help from area agencies.

The NET is a multi-jurisdictional task force formed in 1971 to investigate any abusers, users and traffickers of drugs in Oakland County. The team is particularly charged with identifying and dismantling distribution organizations with connections to Oakland County.

"It's a multi-agency task force that's designed to counter drugs and like activities," said Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard.

As Oakland's top law enforcement official, Bouchard and his administration directly oversee NET operations, and the team leaders, in turn, advise the sheriff on their activities and operations.

"It's obviously made up of folks from my office, and is housed at our headquarters, but we have a host of local agencies that are an integral part of it — local police departments," Bouchard said. "Federal agencies are part of it, as well. The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) is directly involved with us, as well as the Macomb County Sheriff's Office."

The NET is lead by Lt. Joe Quisenberry, who couldn't be reached for comment prior to press time.

Police departments participating in NET activities don't necessarily have officers dedicated to the team, but all local police chiefs are members of NET under an agreement of participation. Participating communities and agencies don't provide direct financial backing, but those that do dedicate personnel to the team must provide a gun for each participating officer. Oakland County pays for all needed vehicles, radios, training and other necessities.

"The main focus of the team is to get dangerous drugs off the streets and to reduce — and if possible eliminate — the violence that often comes from drug organizations and their trafficking," Bouchard said.

The selection of personnel from participating Oakland County agencies is left to the discretion of local police chiefs, though specialized training is provided through the county. Basic narcotics training — the introductory program for future team members — involves interview and interrogation training and raid school. Trainees learn how to handle informants, recognize the presence of various drug substances and study the impacts of the drug trade in specific areas of the county. Advanced narcotics training involves instruction in investigating mid- to high-level drug organizations.

"Members often do work undercover and with anonymity," Bouchard said, not wanting to get too specific about team members and their local jurisdiction.

Neither county nor local officials wanted to divulge even a list of municipal departments that regularly participate in the NET program, let alone individual officers assigned to the unit, due to concerns about compromising undercover officers or investigations.

A new set of bylaws was created for NET and a new interlocal agreement was reached among participating departments

under the Michigan Urban Cooperation Act. The bylaws establish NET as a legal entity and regulate disbursement of forfeiture monies obtained through the team's drug raids.

The county spends about \$2.3 million a year to support the NET team, according to county officials. Of that total, about \$400,000 comes through federal grants. In addition, participating departments spend additional money on the program.

"Sometimes, though, that's not a total and complete picture," Bouchard said. "The local members and the federal agencies sometimes pay for their own personnel and then I pay for mine. There's some grants that we get that help offset costs, and then there's drug forfeiture (funds) that we ... share back with the communities that are involved."

NET members originally paid dues to the county when the program was first organized about 30 years ago, to cover start up costs. In the following years, NET has been primarily funded through Oakland County General Fund dollars appropriated to the sheriff's department. These funds are used in part to house the unit at an undisclosed location and pay heat, water and lighting costs, according to the sheriff's department.

Cases assigned to the specialized NET team come from a variety of sources and reach the team in many different ways.

"They come in a host of ways," Bouchard said. "Sometimes they come from officers in local departments that are assigned to the team, who may get information from fellow officers. Let's say a West Bloomfield officer assigned to the team gets a call from another West Bloomfield officer saying that he or she believes a certain house is involved in drug trafficking. That will be the origin, if you will, of information.

"Other times they may be working in an area and actually seeing evidence of drug trafficking and take some initiative," Bouchard said. "Sometimes — a number of times actually — I've had people call me directly and want to be anonymous or leave me information and name a person or a house and say they're involved in drug trafficking. Then I'll obviously bring it to the narcotics team and off they go."

There currently are no Oakland County Sheriff's Department Commerce Township Substation deputies assigned to the NET task force, according to Substation Commander Lt. Clay Jansson.

Operating with some county support is another agency that tackles cases within a little larger crime spectrum in and around the lakes area.

The South Oakland Narcotics Intelligence Consortium (SONIC) is responsible for locating and apprehending fugitives, as well as dealing with other drug-related criminal activity and even some property crime stings.

SONIC team members are also utilized not only in long- and short-range investigations, but can be called in to quell crimes in progress. As such, the SONIC team has a variety of tools at its disposal.

The SONIC task force consists of officers from the Farmington Hills, Novi, and West Bloomfield police departments; and the Oakland County Sheriff's Department. The task force investigates drug operations, locates and apprehends suspects and fugitives. The SONIC personnel receive specialized training and are used so patrol officers aren't taken off the road. Local police officers assist in investigations by sharing information and leads with SONIC members.

In total there are six dedicated officers from participating communities assigned specifically to the SONIC unit, according to West Bloomfield Police Lt. Carl Fuhs.

Also, the West Bloomfield Police Department serves as the SONIC team headquarters. West Bloomfield provides two officers from the department to serve on the SONIC team, which includes oversight by West Bloomfield Police Lt. Tim Diamond. However, a West Bloomfield police sergeant oversees day-to-day operations.

"The team's office is actually located here," Diamond said. "It used to be in Farmington, but about a year ago it was decided to switch things over to here. It still has the same team members.

"SONIC's primary focus, actually, is surveillance," Diamond said. "That can range from all sorts of things and operations.

The narcotics component is also another aspect, but the team is really geared toward various surveillance operations."

"It's a partnership between (the participating communities)," said Novi Police Chief David Malloy. "It's a co-operative effort divided into two teams. One is focused on narcotics and the other is focused on surveillance. The narcotics effort is targeted mostly at street to mid-level dealers. We also have a partnership with the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Narcotics Enforcement Team."

SONIC works in several instances with the county's NET. The teams often share and utilize each other's resources to get the job done, according to Malloy.

SONIC has been responsible for hundreds of narcotics arrests and thousands of dollars worth of drug operation money being forfeited to various agencies.

Most often, the SONIC unit is used so patrol officers aren't taken off the road, according to West Bloomfield's Fuhs. The local police officers assist in investigations by sharing information and leads with SONIC members.

"I don't know of an exact budget, but each department that's part of the team is responsible for their officers and equipment," Fuhs said. "Each department handles their own (monetary) aspect for the team."

Although communities might not be directly involved with SONIC, that doesn't preclude them from receiving assistance from the team if the situation meets certain criteria.

"It's not that it's not allowed, but (the community) would just have to have a case that somehow leads down to our area," Malloy said. "Then, they would either turn it over to NET, or they could turn it over to SONIC."

"The SONIC group gets cases referred to it from all over the state," Malloy said. "Several different law enforcement agencies will provide information to them on things that might be working in our particular area of the county here."

Cases are often referred to the group if a case is beyond the resources of a particular local department, or if an investigation would involve crossing jurisdictional boundaries to eradicate a threat, Malloy said. However, there isn't a specific set of guidelines on how cases reach the SONIC team.

The surveillance aspect of the SONIC group can involve many different scenarios. It can range from a truck or vehicle parked outside a house or particular area, or even a simple operation to gather intelligence to attain information on, for example, an area where there has been a rash of home invasions in a SONIC community. Such information could also be paired with the results of investigations conducted by a particular department. If a target is selected out of that work, the surveillance team would then continue to generate information in order to determine if a more involved operation is needed, or possible.

"It's basically done with unmarked cars and with cooperative work with other agencies," Malloy said.

One of SONIC's most recent and noteworthy busts came last January, when a Commerce Township couple was arrested and charged with multiple drug crimes following action by the SONIC task force.

Photis Nicolaou, 41, and Yuliya Nicolaou, 28, were arraigned on marijuana possession charges, and possession with intent to deliver cocaine charges. The latter is a felony carrying an up to 20-year prison sentence.

A raid by the SONIC team on the couple's home in the 8300 block of Tamarron uncovered over \$80,000 in cash, along with drugs.

The two are also reported to own Aqua Salon shops, one of them located in West Bloomfield Township.

Photis Nicolaou pleaded no contest to the possession with intent to deliver charge and is expected to be sentenced today, Wednesday, Sept. 3. The other charge was dropped. Yuliya Nicolaou, who is also slated for sentencing today, Wednesday, Sept. 3, reportedly pleaded no contest to both charges.

More recently, SONIC's services were helpful in a violent purse snatching incident at a local grocery store. West Bloomfield Township police, in conjunction with other police officials in the area, arrested a man in connection with the strong-armed robbery, which occurred Thursday, Aug. 21.

According to reports, a 47-year-old West Bloomfield woman was in the parking lot of the Kroger store at 4395 Orchard Lake Road loading goods into the back of her vehicle when a maroon Ford Escort pulled up. The driver of the car got out, approached the victim and asked for directions to Rochester. After the victim said she didn't know how to get there, the suspect reportedly pushed the woman aside and grabbed her purse, which was in the back of the car. The suspect then drove off, according to West Bloomfield's Fuhs.

An off-duty Detroit Police officer happened to see the incident and followed the car long enough to provide a description of the suspect, the car and a license plate number. A bulletin on the incident went out to surrounding departments. It was also discovered the suspect's vehicle license plate was registered to a person with a Pontiac address. However, when officers arrived there, they discovered the home had been vacated and the suspect's vehicle wasn't there.

A Bloomfield Township patrol officer also recognized the suspect's name as a man who had recently moved to Bloomfield and who had previous brushes with law enforcement officials.

Police were then able to create a photo line up, and the victim picked out 33-year-old Robert Houle as the suspect who allegedly attacked her.

Houle was picked up by the SONIC team and brought to court to face charges.

However, Malloy said that most recent SONIC efforts have been targeted on the ever-increasing problem of larcenies from automobiles, where a group of individuals is targeting cars, trucks, and vans in residential areas throughout the area.

"Novi, like many other of the participating communities and other communities here in Southeast Michigan, is experiencing larcenies from automobiles," Malloy said. "SONIC is ever vigilant in targeting those locations where we are experiencing those crimes. So we not only have our own men and women in plain clothes and using investigative tactics, but also the SONIC team assists in that."

While both the NET and SONIC teams seem flooded with requests and investigation referrals, some local communities have not needed such assistance from the highly specialized groups, though such services are available to them.

One such community is White Lake Township, where Police Chief Ronald Stephens said it's been sometime since NET or SONIC were called in to work in the community.

"We're not members of NET, but they're a countywide agency and we can call upon their services and they will come and work with us," he said. "It's been a while since we called NET into the township."

Once in a while SONIC members may be working on an investigation that leads into White Lake, but Stephens said details were hard to come by as there was no particular operation to speak of.

"I might add, though, that I have people assigned to work on narcotics complaints and (those officers) may be calling (those teams), as they work cooperatively; and there may be some communications and some assistance granted to each other."