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Violent Crime Impact Teams (VCIT) Initiative:

Focus on Partnerships

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"For the past 4 years, the President has challenged the Department of Justice to work with our federal, state, and local law enforcement partners to drive down the rate of violent crime, crimes committed with guns, and trafficking in illegal drugs. We have met the challenge. Today crime is at a 30-year low….The VCIT initiative has shown how we can fight crime better, expand freedom, and open new opportunities in communities that had lost all hope. To date, our ATF-led Violent Crime Impact Teams have moved into 15 cities in need of anticrime reinforcements…. The progress thus far in our 15 cities in just the first 9 months has been outstanding."§ *Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez*

§ **Prepared remarks of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Hoover Institution Board of Overseers Conference, February 28, 2005, www-hoover.stanford.edu/research/conferences/02282005.html.**

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Introduction

"Justice Department Announces New Violent Crime Reduction Initiative." U.S. Department of Justice, United States Attorney, District of Nevada. www.usdoj.gov/usao/nv/home/pressrelease/june2004/vcit062404.htm.

"The violent-crime rate has plunged to the lowest level in 30 years, but we view these impressive results as just the beginning. We are determined to drive down violent crime everywhere — especially in those places where habitual offenders are concentrated and communities live in fear of the violent and predatory. Our goal is to make an immediate impact in these communities by targeting repeat offenders with tough prosecutions and tough sentences. The Violent Crime Impact Teams will shift the balance of power in crime-plagued neighborhoods away from habitual offenders toward the law-abiding citizens who live and work there." *Former Attorney General John Ashcroft*

In June 2004, then-Attorney General John Ashcroft, then-Deputy Attorney General James Comey, and Carl J. Truscott, director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), announced a federal initiative aimed at reducing crime in 15 communites in the United States through the development of Violent Crime Impact Teams (VCIT). VCIT is an ATF-led initiative where local, state, and federal law enforcement and prosecutors collaborate to remove the most violent criminals from the community. It was designed to identify, target, disrupt, arrest, and prosecute the worst-of-the-worst criminals responsible for violent crime in targeted hot-spots through the use of innovative technologies, analytical investigative resources, and an integrated federal, state, and local law enforcement strategy.

VCITs were launched in 13 cities in June 2004 and two more cities were added in July 2004:

1. Albuquerque, New Mexico
2. Baltimore, Maryland
3. Chattanooga, Tennessee
4. Columbus, Ohio
5. Greensboro, North Carolina
6. Las Vegas, Nevada
7. Los Angeles, California
8. Miami, Florida

9. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
10. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
11. Richmond, Virginia
12. Tampa, Florida
13. Tucson, Arizona
14. Tulsa, Oklahoma
15. Washington, D.C.

In March 2005, Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez announced the selection of five additional cities to participate in the VCIT program:

16. Hartford, Connecticut
17. Houston, Texas
18. Fresno, California
19. Camden, New Jersey
20. New Orleans, Louisiana

These 20 cities were chosen because of their high rates of violent crime and the opportunity for law enforcement to make a significant difference in the communities they serve. The goals of the initiative are to decrease the number of homicides, the number of violent crimes, and the number of violent firearms crimes in a six-month time frame by removing violent criminals from the communities and restoring those communities into safe and desirable places to live and work.

VCIT Initiative Six-Point Approach to Reducing Crime

1. Use technology and human intelligence to identify geographic areas experiencing violent crime.
2. Identify and target the worst violent offenders, the criminal organizations that support them, and determine how many are armed career criminals.
3. Use criminal investigations as well as investigative tools and resources to disrupt and dismantle criminal activity being perpetuated by the targeted individuals and organizations.
4. Arrest and prosecute the targeted individuals and their associates in the federal or state jurisdiction that lends itself to the most appropriate penalty.
5. Work with community leaders to cultivate solid and sustained commitment between the community's residents and law enforcement.
6. Evaluate results monthly to assess VCIT progress toward achieving the initiative's goals.

The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) is interested in the partnerships that were formed through the VCIT program and the lessons developed by these collaborative efforts to reduce crime and to create a safer nation. This document offers basic background information on the program and, through informal interviews, what was learned by those who are most involved in the program. It should provide guidance to those hoping to replicate these efforts in their own jurisdictions. Since not all site supervisors were available to provide comments, not all VCIT cities are not included in this report.

Background

The VCIT initiative builds on the success of Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a comprehensive nationwide strategy geared toward combating gun crime in communities across the country by bringing together federal, state, and local agencies. Through PSN, VCIT builds on partnerships with the federal, state, and local agencies to improve prevention efforts through targeted outreach efforts within at-risk communities. Since its inception in 2001, more than $1 billion has been devoted to the implementation of PSN to hire additional prosecutors, provide training, hire research and community support staff, as well as to develop and promote effective deterrence efforts.[§] VCIT emphasizes proactive and aggressive use of state-of-the-art technology in identifying the worst offenders and the areas in which they operate.

§ **"Justice Department Announces New Violent Crime Reduction Initiative, 15 Communities to Receive Violent Crime Impact Teams," June 24, 2004. http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2004/June/04_ag_438.htm.**

The VCIT strategy applies technologies to identify hot spots and to target and arrest criminals. ATF's National Tracing Center, Crime Gun Analysis Branch, Regional Crime Gun Center, and other technologies such as the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network and Geographic Information Systems, are used to pinpoint problem areas. This program, based on the careful analysis of gun seizures and their sales, develops leads that will point to the current owners of weapons.

The partnerships are an essential component of the success of this initiative. According to many VCIT supervisors, existing relationships with other agencies and the communities they serve were strengthened and new, solid relationships were formed. Federal agencies

and local law enforcement are actively working together in patrol and in conducting proactive investigations. The positive relationships are proving to be very beneficial.

"The way VCIT is currently configured it is not a short-term fix but will be successful in the long term in reducing violent crime in the targeted areas." *Brian R. Swann, Resident Agent in Charge, ATF, Richmond III Field Office*

During the 6-month pilot period of operation, VCITs have recovered more than 3,000 firearms and arrested more than 500 of the 900 identified serious offenders. In addition, more than $2 million has been seized, 2,500 other offenders arrested, and nearly 400 felony fugitives apprehended.[§]

§ **"Gang Deterrence" Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony. Statement of Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois. Committee on House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. April 5, 2005. http://judiciary.house.gov/HearingTestimony.aspx?ID=261.**

Problem-Solving Partnerships

§ Boba, Rachel, Ph.D., (2002) Problem Analysis in Policing. Police Foundation, Washington, D.C.

> "The greatest success of our VCIT initiative has been the cooperation vested and partnerships formed in making VCIT a success." *Sigberto F. Celaya, Resident Agent in Charge, ATF, Tucson Field Office*

Law enforcement agencies traditionally have been responsible for crime control and prevention strategies. "As crime problems have gotten more complex and expectations of the police have increased, traditional responses are becoming less adequate. The need to examine the characteristics and causes of crime and disorder problems prior to developing responses to them has been recognized by academics and practitioners alike."[§]

Each city involved in this initiative is dealing with its own unique crime issues. The VCIT program is rooted in the problem-solving process, whereby the team must routinely and systematically analyze problems before developing solutions. The key to realizing future goals hinges on the ability of each city to analyze its distinctive problems and develop solutions capitalizing on the unique expertise of every partner. This initiative brings together the most unique assets, capabilities, and cutting-edge technologies of each participating agency.

According to the supervisors who participated in the interviews, teamwork and an integration of local intelligence, knowledge, skills, and investigative resources of the VCIT partners are essential. The most successful VCIT task forces include and use the valuable resources within communities, including Neighborhood Watch programs, community meetings, and social events to identify problems and to aid in the development of solutions. City agencies may include the board of education, the sanitation and graffiti removal

departments, and local housing authorities. Partnerships often are developed with community leaders, social service agencies, nonprofit community assistance agencies, faith-based groups, schools, and private businesses to promote comprehensive and coordinated community action plans.

> "On a daily basis we in law enforcement are faced with the challenge of making our communities a safer place to live and work. Alone, this can be extremely challenging; however, when we combine our efforts and enthusiasm as a team and focus on a specific mission, positive results can be accomplished." *Mark W. Potter, Special Agent in Charge, ATF, Philadelphia Field Division*

In community policing, it is essential to gain citizen support and involvement.[§] The news media can play a key role in this effort through their wide dissemination of information. The ATF makes an effort to broadcast VCIT success stories to the community through local media. An effective media campaign broadcasting the arrest and severe penalties of individuals who commit violent acts within a community is viewed by the members of the VCIT team as a strong and convincing deterrent for those contemplating crimes of violence.

§ **"Marketing Community Policing in the News: A Missed Opportunity?" July 2003. U.S. Department of Justice, Office Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.**

Sample Success Stories

Albuquerque, New Mexico

> "There is good news for Albuquerque in that crime is going down. But there is also bad news. There is a cancer in Albuquerque, and that cancer is homicide. The treatment for this cancer is the Violent Crime Impact Team." *U.S. Attorney David Iglesias*[§]

The Albuquerque VCIT team's mission is to lower homicides and firearms-related violent crimes. To measure performance, the team leaders measured overall homicides and violent crime as well as homicides and violent crimes committed with a firearm. These measures of crime were compared with past years during the same months of the VCIT pilot project to account for seasonal variations. As a result, they have witnessed a 72 percent reduction in homicides and in just two months, 60 arrests were made and 24 firearms seized, offenses ranging from firearms possession to narcotics to shootings.[§§]

When Albuquerque was selected as one of the 15 original sites for the VCIT initiative, data were collected on violent crime, violent crime with firearms, and the homicide rate for each area command of the city. The information was obtained from the following sources:

- Uniformed Crime Reports for Albuquerque
- Albuquerque Police Department's (APD) Crime Statistics Unit
- Mapping data for the previous two years pertaining to possessors of firearms and the number of recoveries from ATF's Crime Gun Analysis Branch
- Federal firearms licensees in the target area and multiple purchases of firearms
- New Mexico Board of Parole and Probation intense supervision list of probationers

§ **Asher, Ed. "Feds to help cut city's violent crime." Albuquerque Tribune Online. Web. abqtrib.com/archives/news04/062404_news_impact.shtml.**

§§ **"Gang Deterrence," Federal Document Clearing House, Congressional Testimony. Statement of Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois. Committee on House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. April 5, 2005. http://judiciary.house.gov/HearingTestimony.aspx?ID=261.**

- U.S. Marshals Service information on fugitives in the area
- Drug Enforcement Administration databases on target list of midlevel drug dealers
- Intelligence from the APD Gang Unit and the Repeat Offender Unit
- Weed & Seed neighborhood associations.

The statistics revealed that the southeast area of the city had the majority of violent crime with firearms and homicides. Its homicide rate was about twice the national average in the two years prior to the beginning of this initiative.

Albuquerque VCIT Partners:

- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
- Albuquerque Police Department
- U. S. Probation Office, Albuquerque
- New Mexico Corrections Department, Probation & Parole Division
- Drug Enforcement Administration
- U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Mexico
- U.S. Marshals Service for the District of New Mexico

These partners work with community leaders to cultivate positive relationships between law enforcement and the community and to evaluate results every month. Community meetings such as Weed & Seed are held regularly, whereby the community members voice their concerns and provide valuable information to VCIT partners. The ATF Resident Agent in Charge attends the meetings to obtain feedback from the members about high drug trafficking areas, shots fired, individuals with firearms, and individuals selling firearms. In addition, through these meetings, members of the community

provide locations, vehicle descriptions, physical descriptions, and other information about individuals who threaten or intimidate neighbors and individuals who have outstanding arrest warrants.

> "From a supervisory point of view, another contributing factor of success is having multiple agencies, such as the Albuquerque Police Department, United States Marshals Service, Drug Enforcement Administration, and New Mexico Probation & Parole Division, working toward a common goal of reducing violent crime. Although each agency has a different mission and method of investigating crimes, we are all committed to focusing our best resources toward the apprehension and confinement of violent criminals." *Wayne L. Dixie, Jr., Resident Agent in Charge, ATF, Albuquerque Field Office*

Camden, New Jersey

The Camden VCIT consists of 15 personnel from seven agencies housed in ATF's Camden Field Office. The Camden Field Office, in cooperation with the Camden Police Department (CPD), identified the Third Police District as the focus of the VCIT initiative. The Third District, on the east side of Camden, accounted for approximately 35 percent of the city's population. Crime statistics received from CPD indicate that the Third District accounted for 30 percent of overall violent crime in the city, 34.5 percent of firearms-related violent crime, and 38 percent of firearms related to homicides. In addition, between January 1, 2004 and May 29, 2005 there were 79 homicides in the city with 58 by use of a firearm. The Third District accounted for 39 percent of all homicides, with the Fourth District coming in second by accounting for 25 percent. On average, using statistics for the last four years, the city recovered approximately 234 firearms. Typically, the Third District accounted for about 23 percent of all recovered guns.

With the assistance of an ATF special agent, the city of Camden and Camden County currently trace all recovered and properly identified crime guns through the ATF National Tracing Center. Updated crime mapping of CPD firearms recoveries is received from the ATF Crime Gun Analysis Branch, which further demonstrates the violence prevalent in the VCIT area. The CPD selected this area of Camden because they felt that this program would have the most impact there and would remove the worst–of–the–worst from the community.

Based on the experiences of the early VCITs, the Camden VCIT team determined that an operational strategy would need to be developed that was intelligence driven, coordinated effectively with the numerous other initiatives, and would reduce recidivism by focusing on the worst–of–the–worst.

Camden VCIT Partners:

- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
- Camden Police Department
- New Jersey Division of Criminal Justice
- New Jersey State Police
- Camden County Prosecutor's Office
- U.S. Marshals Service
- Drug Enforcement Administration
- Camden County Sheriff's Office
- New Jersey State Police Forensic Science Laboratory Bureau
- High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area task force
- New Jersey Juvenile Justice Commission Office of Parole and Transitional Services
- New Jersey State Parole Board
- U.S. Attorney's Office

The VCIT proactively investigates, arrests, and prosecutes violent criminals by identifying and targeting specific geographic areas in Camden with the goal of decreasing the homicide rate and having a measurable and sustainable impact on violent firearms-related crime. The group supervisor provides monthly statistics on the accomplishments of the VCIT in the format prescribed by ATF Headquarters.

To the extent possible, the group supervisor works with CPD crime analysis personnel to compare current real-time statistics with past years to gauge the impact of the VCIT, and to aid in recognizing the need to reallocate personnel or alter the enforcement strategy. These reviews focus on violent crimes carried out with firearms in the delineated geographic area. The group supervisor also works in concert with the United States Attorney's Office in connection with Project Safe Neighborhoods and with the CPD's crime statistics personnel to ensure accurate statistical reporting.

Columbus, Ohio

The Columbus Division of Police, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, and the Office of the Franklin County Prosecuting Attorney lead the initiative for the local agencies in Columbus, Ohio. Other agencies participating include the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Ohio Bureau of Criminal Identification and Investigation, and the Ohio Adult Parole Authority.

> "The single most significant accomplishment of VCIT in the city of Columbus was the ability of ATF to partner with local officers to develop a proactive strategy involving the purchase of drugs and weapons in specific areas of the city that local officers have never been able to penetrate." *Commander Bill Mattei, Columbus Division of Police*

As a result of this partnership, 70 individuals were named in 23 indictments on drug and gun charges as part of the VCIT initiative dubbed "Operation Hardcore." Some of the charges carry potential life terms and all but four defendants, if convicted, face mandatory minimum sentences of at least 5 years in federal custody.[§] A roundup in April 2005 led to the arrest of 70 individuals. The last defendant was taken into custody on June 13, 2005. A majority of the cases have worked their way through prosecution and have resulted in 50 guilty pleas and two guilty verdicts by jury. Seven of the defendants have been sentenced to jail terms ranging from 50 to 120 months, with an average sentence of 73 months.

§ **"70 Indicted on Federal Gun, Drug Charges." FindLaw, April 1, 2005 http://news.findlaw.com.**

Fresno, California

The Fresno VCIT team includes the Fresno Police Department, ATF, Fresno County Sheriff's Department, U.S. Marshal's Service, the High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area task force, and the U.S. Attorney's Office. The Fresno VCIT examined the success of the original initiatives and is proactively investigating criminals and the organizations with which they are associated. Currently, the team is investigating individuals who are supplying firearms and narcotics to other prohibited individuals. The target area includes the

entire southern section of the city, which is composed of three police districts. Two agents are assigned to each police district.

> "The officers love this program because it allows them to investigate crimes further as opposed to just taking someone down to the booking area for processing. The agents love it because they are gaining a lot of tactical experience that would take years as an ATF agent to acquire. It is truly a win-win." *Raymond E. Fragoso, Resident Agent in Charge, ATF, Fresno Field Office*

The VCIT supervisor is seeking to conduct community outreach in the target area. "People we have come into contact with all know about the VCIT. The media did a great job covering the start of this program and they are monitoring our progress," said Resident Agent in Charge Fragoso. He has assigned each agent in the office to a community outreach service project and he attends Community Watch meetings to address whatever needs the community may have. Some of the suggested outreach projects include spending a day playing sports with at-risk children, working at a soup line, cleaning up a neighborhood, working with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, spending a day at a summer camp, or "anything where we can give something back to the community."

Houston, Texas

The Houston VCIT team, initiated on June 1, 2005, includes the Houston Police Department, Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Attorney's Office, U.S. Marshals Service, Texas Department of Public Safety, Harris County District Attorney's Office, U.S. Probation Office, and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. ATF has been involved with the intervention team of the Mayor's Anti-Gang Task Force and is

planning to use the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program and work with the Boys and Girls Clubs of America in the Houston area to address violence and gangs.

Team members are collecting data from the following resources:

- Crime mapping from the Houston Police Department
- Statistics from ATF Crime Gun Analysis Branch relating to firearm recoveries
- Information from the ATF Houston Field Division Intelligence Group.

The Houston Field Division Intelligence Group is working with the Houston Police Department Crime Analysis personnel to compare real-time crime statistics with previous statistics gathered by the department.

One success has been of a firearm recovered in the VCIT area that was linked through fingerprints to a homicide in Houston. The Houston Police Department is using the information to help solve its homicide case. The police also found a direct link between gang members who traffic in narcotics and firearms between the Houston VCIT and Victoria, Texas.

Los Angeles, California

As of April 2005, the Los Angeles VCIT initiated 26 investigations. Thirty-five suspects were arrested on federal or state firearms and/or narcotics violations. Authorities seized 32 firearms and approximately 940 grams of narcotics.[§] A comparison of crime statistics in Los Angeles during the first 5 months of 2004 (pre-VCIT) with the first 5 months of 2005 (during VCIT) show a decrease in the number of homicides, homicides by firearms, and violent crimes.

§ **"L.A. Is Among 15 Cities Selected to Deploy Violent Crime Impact Teams" http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/cac/pr2004/092.html.**

> "The greatest success of this initiative has been the statistical reduction of firearms-related violence within the highest crime areas of the city of Los Angeles. Secondly is the strengthening of working relationships with the Los Angeles Police Department." *George T. Gillett, Jr., Resident Agent in Charge, ATF, Los Angeles Field Office*

On June 1, 2004, ATF Los Angeles Field Division Special Agent in Charge Donald R. Kincaid and United States Attorney Debra W. Yang were joined by representatives of the Los Angeles Police Department, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the U.S. Marshals Service, the California Department of Justice, the U.S. Probation Office, the Los Angeles County Probation Department, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Los Angeles Office of the City Attorney in announcing the rollout of the VCIT initiative.

The Los Angeles VCIT focuses on both the city and county of Los Angeles, where VCIT members review and screen all police reports of firearms-related violence. Team members work in tandem with the gang, robbery, and narcotics units to ensure that firearms evidence is traced and, when possible, imaged through the National Integrated Ballistics Information Network. These enforcement efforts focus on the LAPD Division areas having the highest rates of crime, namely the Southeast, 77th, and Rampart Divisions. The community is involved on a fundamental level in its daily interactions with the LAPD. Communication and information is routed through the community to the LAPD and when applicable and as problems are identified, information is coordinated with the VCIT team.

Las Vegas, Nevada

ATF Director Carl Truscott reported that 154 guns and 58 of the worst-of-the-worst criminals were arrested as a result of the VCIT initiative.[§] An example is the arrest of a man whom federal authorities had been investigating since 1996. The investigation led to the discovery of 15 homemade machine guns following the controlled purchase of four from the suspect. At the time of this writing, this case is pending trial in U.S. District Court. An interstate murder-for-hire plot was also uncovered by the VCIT initiative and led to federal charges against a man who had several pipe bombs in his house. According to Daniel Bogden, U.S. Attorney for Nevada, VCIT and Project Safe Neighborhoods are the reason that the homicide rate has decreased in Nevada by nearly 10 percent between 2003 and 2004.

Las Vegas VCIT Partners:

- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
- Drug Enforcement Administration
- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- U.S. Marshals Service
- U.S. Probation Office
- Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department
- North Las Vegas Police Department
- Henderson Police Department
- Nevada Department of Public Safety, Division of Parole and Probation
- Nevada Air National Guard
- Housing Authority of the City of Las Vegas

§ "Authorities tout success of anti-crime initiative." March 3, 2005. Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Before the VCIT was initiated in Las Vegas, the ATF's National Tracing Center assessed firearm recoveries for the entire city and forwarded the statistics to its Crime Gun Analysis Branch for gun-mapping. ATF's regional Industry Operations field office identified three high-volume, licensed firearms dealers and compared their records with tracing information from the firearms recovered in Las Vegas. Each local police department provided its violent-crime statistics, specifically the location of homicides, robberies, and related violent gang activity. These assessments were used to identify high-crime areas, including areas infested with gang and narcotic activity. The VCIT team targeted those areas using a number of investigative methods including purchases of narcotics and firearms. They also embeded confidential informants, housing them in facilities provided by the Las Vegas Housing Authority. Participants included the Drug Enforcement Administration, ATF, U.S. Marshals Service, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's Gang Unit, U.S. Probation Office, Nevada Air National Guard, and the Las Vegas Housing Authority. Manpower shortages limited several agencies' participation to a case-by-case basis.

> "I regard ATF's relationship with local law enforcement as critical to any success." *Armando Salas, Resident Agent in Charge, ATF, Las Vegas Field Office*

Miami, Florida

The Miami VCIT program focused efforts on Miami-Dade County as a whole. Despite a 51.4 percent reduction in firearm-involved violent crime between 1996 and 2003, firearm violence at the county level remains approximately double the national per capita average. The VCIT program identified and targeted specific hot spots using a year of geocoded, firearm-involved arrest data

from the Miami-Dade County State's Attorney's Office. Overall execution of the Miami VCIT initiative was coordinated through biweekly meetings of the partner agencies. Command-level participants set overall goals and strategies while line personnel collaborated on active firearms violators and case-related details.

In Miami, the greatest impact of the VCIT initiative related directly to continuing and expanding three main areas of enforcement:

- *Undercover investigations:* Continued efforts to identify and interdict groups of individuals engaged in armed robberies of narcotics operations through proactive undercover investigation yielded significant numbers of cases and defendants for federal prosecution. Proactive undercover investigations into four violent narcotics-trafficking gangs operating in the targeted areas developed into a significant ATF-led Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force case that culminated in November 2005. Complementing these efforts were reactive undercover investigations into both domestic and international firearms traffickers and federal firearms licensees who were involved in firearms trafficking.

- *Use of confidential informants:* In all undercover investigations, confidential informants provided key information and access to the targeted criminal organizations.

- *Focused prosecution of referrals:* The existing collaborative partnerships established under Project Safe Neighborhoods were continued. The Miami-Dade County State's Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office continued to actively support both the VCIT and Project Safe Neighborhoods initiatives in the review of firearm-related arrest

cases throughout the county. This screening process was enhanced by the direct referral of cases from local agencies when suspects were arrested. VCIT task force members responded to the scene of firearm-related arrests made by partner law enforcement agencies. These timely referrals were facilitated by assigned full-time task force officers and often resulted in federal probable-cause arrests.

The Miami VCIT Partners:

- U.S. Attorney's Office
- Miami-Dade County State's Attorney's Office
- ATF Miami Group II – Street Gangs
- ATF Miami Group IV – Firearms Trafficking/ Project Safe Neighborhoods
- ATF Miami Group V – High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area/Street Terror Offender Program
- The City of Miami Police Department
- North, Central, and South Patrol District Commanders
- Organized Crime/Narcotics Unit Commander
- Crime Suppression Teams Lieutenant
- Tactical Narcotics Team Lieutenant
- Gang Unit Lieutenant
- Homicide Bureau Lieutenant
- Miami-Dade County Police Department, Robbery Intervention Detail Commander
- Florida Department of Corrections Parole and Probation Field Services
- North Miami Police Department
- Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (U.S. Department of Homeland Security)
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of the Inspector General
- U.S. Marshals Service

A measured, balanced strategy, including a corresponding prosecutorial commitment to complement the law enforcement activity, was a cornerstone to the success seen in the program. Many of the VCITs built on existing collaborative partnerships established under Project Safe Neighborhoods. For example, the Miami-Dade County State's Attorney's Office and the U.S. Attorney's Office continued to actively support both the VCIT and Project Safe Neighborhoods initiatives in the review of firearm-related arrest cases. The inclusion of the prosecutorial resources throughout the process was important to the success in Miami.

The Miami-Dade County State's Attorney's Office collected the required data needed for geographic targeting for the VCIT initiative, playing an integral role from the project inception. The office had taken a lead role in screening state firearms arrests by assisting the U.S. Attorney's Office and ATF in coordinating federal, state, and local agencies in a unified offensive to combat gun violence. Through the collaborative efforts of ATF, the Miami-Dade County State's Attorney's Office, and the U.S. Attorney's Office, a decision was made about the most appropriate venue for prosecution for each firearm-involved violent crime. This relationship was instrumental in having an impact on reducing firearm-related homicides in Miami.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

On September 10, 2004, Senator Arlen Specter announced that the U.S. Department of Justice would provide six additional federal agents and prosecutors and $1 million in increased funding to boost community-based crime-prevention efforts in Philadelphia.[§] The funding was dedicated to addressing juvenile crime and to making available additional training and technical assistance to the communities and law enforcement agencies in those agencies that received the funding.

§ **"Specter announces more manpower and funds to fight violent crime in Philadelphia", September 10, 2004. http://specter.senate.gov/.**

The Philadelphia VCIT team studied the violent crime and firearms statistics for each police division in the city and each district within the divisions. Statistics showed that the Police Department's Southwest Division had the highest overall numbers of violent crime as well as the highest number of firearm recoveries, and that the 16th Police District had the highest per capita rate of violent crime.

According to Deputy Police Commissioner Patricia Giorgia Fox, between July 1, 2004 and March 31, 2005, there were nine homicides, including six by firearm, in the 16th District. This was down from 17 in the same period the year before, representing a 47 percent decrease in homicides overall and a 65 percent decrease in homicides by firearm. The VCIT team recently shifted its area of operation to the 12th Police District to replicate the success of the 16th District.

Philadelphia VCIT Partners:

- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
- U.S. Marshals Service
- Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General, Bureau of Narcotics Investigation and Drug Control
- Philadelphia Police Department
- First Judicial District of Pennsylvania, Bench Warrant Unit
- U.S. Attorneys Office
- City of Philadelphia District Attorney's Office

Some of the relationships were entirely new, while certain existing relationships were increased to full-time commitments and others acquired a designated liaison. The ATF, for example, had an existing relationship with the Philadelphia Police Department. New relationships

were developed with the U.S. Marshals Service, Pennsylvania's Bureau of Narcotics Investigation and Drug Control, the First Judicial District of Pennsylvania Bench Warrant Unit, and the Philadelphia Probation and Parole Department of the Court of Common Pleas of Philadelphia County.

§ www.usdoj.gov/usao/paw/task_forces.html.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

On June 9, 2004, the Pittsburgh interagency effort led by the ATF targeted enforcement efforts on the worst–of–the–worst. Participating were the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Division, the U.S. Marshals Service, the Pennsylvania State Police, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, and the Allegheny County Sheriff's Office.

The Pittsburgh VCIT initiative began with the identification of the most violent offenders and targeted geographic areas. The analysis required close coordination with homicide detectives, violent crime units, firearms tracking units, the Allegheny County Injury Surveillance System, National Integrated Ballistics Information Network, and the ATF Crime Gun Analysis Branch. Both the ATF National Laboratory Center and the Allegheny County Coroner's Office Division of Forensic Laboratories are integral partners in the success of VCIT in Pittsburgh.[§] According to Resident Agent in Charge Louis J. Weiers, "we are encouraging community involvement through tips and daily contact with the residents of the areas we are targeting."

"The VCIT strategy was unique. ATF agents paired with local officers in their patrol cars, working side–by–side, conducting street-level enforcement. Other federal task forces had traditionally focused on investigating historical cases." *Chief Robert W. McNeilly Jr., Pittsburgh Bureau of Police*

In its first 4 months of operation, the Pittsburgh VCIT made 105 arrests, primarily for illegal firearms possession, state violations of the Uniform Firearms Act, and illegal possession of heroin, crack, and marijuana, and recovered 34 out of 45 reportedly stolen firearms. There was a 61 percent drop in overall homicides with firearms when compared with the same 6-month period the prior year.[§] In a letter, Special Agent in Charge Mark W. Potter, ATF, Philadelphia Field Division thanked Sheriff Peter R. Defazio for his "undaunted support and commitment to VCIT," and to commend detectives from the Allegheny County Sheriff's Office for their "invaluable contributions to the ATF's mission to reduce violent crime through the deployment of the VCIT project in Pittsburgh."[§§]

Tucson, Arizona

> "Tucson, Arizona, is fortunate to be one of the cities selected to participate in this program…the goal of this effort is to make a difference in the lives of the this community and to send a clear message to violent offenders in Tucson. We don't want you here."[§§§]
> *Paul Charlton, U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona*

The Tucson VCIT implemented a three-prong enforcement strategy that includes the following:

- Firearms Trafficking Initiative
- Proactive Street Enforcement Initiative
- Targeted Repeat-Offender Initiative.

The Repeat Offender Initiative identified the top 52 repeat offenders who returned to the Tucson area. ATF, the Tucson Police Department, the U.S. Probation Office, and the Arizona Parole Board worked together both proactively and reactively to arrest these offenders

§ **"Gang Deterrence" Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony. Statement of Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois. Committee on House Judiciary Subcommittee on crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. April 5, 2005. http://judiciary.house.gov/HearingTestimony.aspx?ID=261.**

§§ **"U.S. Department of Justice Commends Sheriff's Office for Involvement with Violent Crime Impact Team" www.sheriffalleghenycounty.com/dea_tyltr.html.**

§§§ **"Justice Department Announces New Violent Crime Reduction Initiative" www.usdoj.gov June 24, 2004.**

when they were caught in possession of firearms or ammunition. Alerts have been placed in the Tucson Police Department computer system, identifying individuals and providing orders to contact ATF or the Tucson Police Department VCIT detectives if these individuals are found in possession of firearms. Thus far, 14 defendants have been arrested on federal or state charges. During the VCIT pilot period, Tucson VCIT made 159 arrests and seized 578 firearms. Through constant evaluation and communication, the Tucson VCIT will continue to focus its efforts on areas having the highest rates of firearm-related violent crime within Tucson city limits.

Participants in the Tucson VCIT include seven state, local, and federal agencies. The most significant commitment came from the Tucson Police Department, which co-located three detectives and a sergeant into ATF office space. Additionally, the Drug Enforcement Administration assigned one special agent full time to the VCIT and support is received as needed from U.S. Attorney's Office, U.S. Marshals Service, Pima County Attorney's Office, the U.S. Probation Office, and the

Arizona Parole Board. Four Tucson Police Department detectives serve as a clearinghouse for screening the department's firearms cases in the three target areas. They often respond to crime scenes involving the use of firearms, are accompanied by ATF agents, and make on site arrests for firearms violations.

The Tucson VCIT team combined data from gun traces and violent crimes to identify the geographic area or areas that would yield the most benefit. The areas identified within the city were the North Oracle Corridor, the South Sixth and South 12th Street Corridor, and the East 29th Street Corridor.[§] Tucson VCIT responds to all firearm- and explosives-related violent crime 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to provide rapid response to firearms recoveries, prohibited persons in possession, shooting incidents, felony assaults with firearms, homicides, and other violent crime. Every effort has been made to identify, establish, and sustain open lines of communication with community leaders, seeking their assistance in obtaining community support in the investigation of firearm-related violent crime in their neighborhoods.

§ Briefing Pamphlet, May 2004-March 2005, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Phoenix Filed Division, Tucson Field Office, Violent Crime Impact Team.

Tulsa, Oklahoma

"During the last half of 2002 and the first half of 2003, Tulsa was experiencing a gang war of unparalleled proportion... ATF developed a multi-pronged strategy for disabling the gangs. The plan of short-term enforcement while simultaneously conducting a long-term investigation into the gang leadership was the blueprint for what became the Violent Crime Impact Team. The ATF plan has been a resounding success. Homicide and violent crime rates are down significantly. Most of the gang leadership is in prison or awaiting trial in federal court on racketeering and conspiracy charges. The most positive secondary benefit from the ATF efforts has been the improved relations between the Tulsa Police Department and federal law enforcement. The working relationship with the ATF was so positive that the Tulsa Police Department is now calling ATF for solutions to other crime problems." *Doug Horn, Chief of the Criminal Division, United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Oklahoma*

As a result of a more than year-long investigation, the first Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization Act (RICO) indictment was handed down in the U.S. Courts Northern District of Oklahoma. Thirteen defendants and 147 counts were included in the indictment. Citywide, there was a 59 percent drop in homicides committed with firearms compared with the same six month period the prior year.[§]

§ **"Gang Deterrence," Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony. Statement of Patrick J. Fitzgerald, United States Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Illinois. Committee on House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. April 5, 2005. http://judiciary.house.gov/HearingTestimony.aspx?ID=261.**

Tulsa VCIT Partners:

- Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives
- Tulsa Police Department
- Federal Bureau of Investigation
- Drug Enforcement Administration
- Tulsa County Sheriff's Department
- Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs
- Tulsa Fire Department Arson Task Force
- U.S. Marshals Service
- U.S. Probation Office

The team synthesized data from gun traces provided by the ATF's National Tracing Center and local violent crime reports to identify geographic hot spots. Targets were obtained by identifying the two most violent street gangs whose activity had almost doubled the murder rate from the previous year. The main source of data collected was police reports dating back five years, which helped to link gang members who were involved in assaults, shootings, and possession of firearms.

Conclusion

§ **"Authorities tout success of anti-crime initiative." March 3, 2005. Las Vegas Review - Journal.**

On November 15, 2004, then Attorney General John Ashcroft hailed the VCIT program as a great success during a speech to the International Association of Chiefs of Police. He stated, "The VCIT Initiative, like many of our other cooperative efforts, is making our communities safer and expanding the freedom of our citizens. Together, we are proving to our citizens that they do not have to move in order to live in a safe community." Since the inception of the program, more than 3,000 arrests and more than 3,000 guns have been seized in cities such as Los Angeles, Tucson, Miami, and Baltimore.[§]

According to ATF Director Carl J. Truscott, during the six-month pilot project, 13 of the 15 areas where the VCIT program was active reported decreases in homicides committed with firearms. In total, VCIT areas witnessed a 17 percent decline in homicides committed with guns, 500 targeted individuals were arrested, 3,000 firearms were recovered, more than $2 million was seized, and 2,500 gang members, drug dealers, felons in possession of firearms, and other criminals were arrested. Initially, these statistics point to the fact that this initiative is an effective tool in reducing violent crime in the target areas. True long-term success, however, lies in the strength of the partnerships that have formed as a result.

"In the end, the VCIT program is about partnerships and the power of sharing a single goal. It is a lesson that the solutions to our problems can be found within our own organizations if operational employees are empowered through clear goal setting to produce dramatic results." *Special Agent David H. Chipman, Chief of ATF Firearms Programs Division*

For More Information

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