

## Managing Aggression Program (within the Gold Coast City Council)

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Council recognises the difficulties faced by enforcement officers and some alarming trends within the public arena towards officers in these roles. These trends have resulted in aggression by the public which has manifested itself in loss of time, injury and more importantly loss of valued staff by the organisation.

This paper examines the review by GCCC of its experiences and the journey undertaken to develop measures to reduce risk, support staff and minimise the impact of this alarming trend developing in the community. We will identify and examine the problems being experienced and discuss how they can be resolved with the support of the organisation by providing tools for the individual to manage a situation.

### Background

There was a noticeable increase in down time due to aggression by the public in regulatory areas of Council but it was not limited to these areas and had in some cases been experienced by every level of Council interacting with the community. It was also realised that no formal process was in place to deal with these situations.

That is not to say there were no reporting mechanisms or the ability to respond to issues but rather to ask if they were working. It was quickly realised that officers were not reporting instances of abuse and even assumed it was just part of the role. This resulted in a build up of individual anxiety which finally became too much to handle. The consequences can be resignation, stress leave or a deterioration in the level of professionalism being delivered to the public.

As a consequence consultants were engaged to explore the extent of problems and perhaps develop some mechanisms to deal with them. The first step was identification of the problems and staff members were counselled regarding their experiences. A questionnaire was used for high risk groups. The feedback was collated and reviewed and it was decided there was a need to embark upon a project aimed at addressing the situations identified.

The important thing here was to have a program recognised at a corporate level and to start a positive journey by the promotion that the program was supported at this level. It was only with this acknowledgement individuals would realise they were supported and accept any changes that may be proposed.

### Finding

The questionnaire revealed the top four teams of officers reporting Physical aggression (PA) were:

- City Parking
- Animal Management
- Development & Compliance
- Local Law

The report further found the top four teams of officers reporting Verbal Aggression (VA) were:

- City Parking
- Administration
- Development & Compliance
- Environmental Health

It is possible the differing units noting VA and PA were as a result of the face to face involvement of the particular work.

The general findings of the questionnaire were that VA was experienced by 45% of those questioned while 27% experienced PA. The staff were asked if these experiences caused distress and it was realised that they were seldom distressed by PA possibly due to the low frequency and more often distressed by VA.

The questionnaire further explored what current methods existed, if any, to support officers and the level of help by colleagues were recorded as being helpful although only moderately high for VA and less for PA. The support by management was also moderately supportive when VA was experienced and less for PA.

↓ support

Training had been shown to be helpful sometimes and the policies had a moderate impact. Reporting of incidents and training in risk management were not felt to be of assistance.

### Definitions of Aggression

To develop policy the issues need to be defined and three categories were shown to have specific examples that required dealing with:

#### Physical Aggression against a person

- Threatening gestures
- Taking a swing
- Grabbing
- Striking
- Kicking
- Pushing
- Pulling hair

#### Verbal Aggression against a person

- Shouting
- Insults
- Cursing viciously
- Clear threats

#### Physical Aggression against property/objects

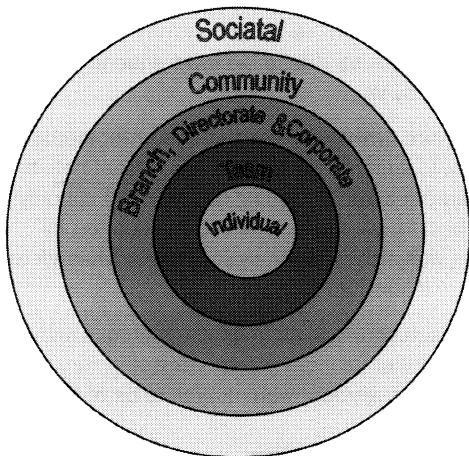
- Slamming doors
- Throwing objects
- Kicking furniture
- Breaking objects
- Smashing windows

The severity of the above was reflected in the questionnaire as follows:

- City Parking, spat on, kill threats, pushed and car attacked
- Libraries, hit with paper, books and water thrown at them
- Local Laws, gun gesture, cut off on road, shouldered
- Waste/Tips, bins thrown, grenade found
- Animal Management, met with rifle, tailgated
- Serial harassment experienced

**Proposed Model**

It was seen that any successful policy was going to be impacted upon by more than the individual. It had to cross over the team, Corporation, Community and Society itself. The Zero Tolerance (ZT) policy was endorsed by Council in June 2010. We were one of the first local governments in Australia to introduce a policy of this type, attracting national media attention



*Individual — also developed profiling tool; some just not suited to job role.*  
 The individual would require tools to assist them; technology could play an important part (Man down alarms, video recorders).

The ability to easily report an incident would allow early intervention to save them 'falling off the edge' or trying to deal with something alone. A tender has been awarded to Safety Strategies Inc. to conduct confidence building training. The training is designed to provide a full range of personal safety skills to prevent, avoid and defuse aggressive and threatening behaviour whilst still maintaining a professional image. Physical protection strategies are taught but only to be used as a last resort where exit is not possible.

**Team**

The team plays an important part and has traditionally been recognised as the support mechanism but as with anything it can be stimulated to have better results. Recruitment of the right people for enforcement type roles has been long identified as an issue. A job fit assessment template (psychological profile) is being developed for regulatory roles that will enable a better fit for potential candidates to these roles. The assessment will be used as a flag, not a discounting tool.

**Branch, Directorate and Corporation**

No policy can work without the support of management and a commitment at the highest level was identified as the only solution to achieve the outcomes sought by the project. A register and associated standards have been developed to administer reports, including information about places and persons of interest that may include alleged incidents of violence and aggression, and a situation of potential jeopardy. Council's legal branch has provided advice that the register is exempt from elements of the RTI (Right to Information) privacy legislation as Council is considered a law enforcement agency.

**Community**

To get the community behind a change in attitude it was necessary to develop a media strategy and put a more positive spin on the need for enforcement. The Local Laws and the officers enforcing them were after all delivering community expectation. Council's Corporate Communication Department have prepared a marketing and communications plan aimed at both an internal and external audience to support this project which will be rolled out over the next few months.

**Society**

It was identified that perhaps the State legislation needs to support the role of Council officers better. Some states have approval as community constables which can assist. The reality is though that the societal issues are deteriorating and those with more than enough powers are also still being impacted. A list of zero tolerance responses to scenarios and behaviours is currently being compiled with the aim of building consistent, appropriate and acceptable responses to be embedded across the organisation.

**Key Messages**

- Zero Tolerance
- Support at a corporate level
- Community attitude
- Attitude of the individual — *need right person in the job*

Council resolved to develop a policy that met the needs of the individual and espoused the support by the corporation. The policy has been drafted from the experiences of the officers and has defined the extent of the problems. We may have a way to go and the results will speak for themselves but we are pleased that this organisation has put into practice what a lot of organisations allude to and has now said we have Zero Tolerance of abuse of our officers.\*

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