

# Community Boards: 35 years settling neighborhood feuds

BY BRIAN RINKER

THE Tenderloin and surroundings are among the most ethnically diverse and crowded parts of the city. It's not surprising that sometimes people don't see eye and conflicts arise.

But what happens when the conflict isn't a criminal offense and a civil suit will only make matters worse?

That's where Community Boards comes in.

Community Boards, a nonprofit Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) organization, helps settle disputes without courts, judges and lawyers. It's funded by the state, a host of foundations and individual donors. For 35 years it has offered citywide mediation services and training.

Community and neighborhood courts also fall under the ADR category. But unlike neighborhood courts, Community Boards cases are all voluntary disputants who agree to try to work it out. And Community Boards doesn't judge, it mediates.

Staff and volunteer mediators handle everyday problems: arguments between neighbors, loud all-night parties, inconsiderate roommates or other annoying flaps and worse.

Those problems sound small, but emotions run high.

"If you're in a problem, it's not small," said Jim Garrison, public education and communications manager, a 20-year Community Boards veteran. He explained the mediation process, which consists of three mediators who are trained to be neutral but empathetic with both sides.

"Our mediators don't tell people

how to solve their problems," says Garrison. The process is entirely voluntary. If either side doesn't want mediation, it can't work. Both parties set up the guidelines, which Garrison says can give them both a lift. The mediators help the clients come up with their own solutions, realistic ones they can fulfill.

Community Boards staff will take on any conflict except disputes that involve violence.

"We want people to feel safe in the room," says Mediation Program Manager Cordell Wesselink. "It's the one topic we won't touch."

Providing a safe atmosphere for clients to respectfully and productively discuss their conflict is the essence of what Community Boards does. Violence negates that assurance. All mediation takes place in their office at 3130 24th St.

Last year more than 400 cases were opened, but only about 100 went to mediation, said Wesselink.

How many of those cases came from the Tenderloin, Wesselink doesn't know. With overlapping ZIP codes and the confidentiality agreement attached to most settlements, he has no hard data, and if he did he probably wouldn't tell.

However, Sanaz Nikaein, a Community Boards client, was willing to share her experience. She signed a confidentiality agreement but waived her right to anonymity.

Nikaein, 32, is from Iran and is a practicing attorney. A few years ago she

moved into a new condominium complex near Civic Center with her husband and small dog. They chose a ground-floor condo, because it had a patio and Nikaein wanted to plant grass and have it be a nice place for her dog. She was so excited about moving to a brand-new place, she didn't pay much attention to the motel next door, though windows of 20 rooms faced her bedroom window and patio. Soon after they moved in, cigarette butts started showing up on the patio.

"Initially, we didn't give it much thought," says Nikaein, "until broken bottles were thrown over in the middle of the night."

That was only the beginning. Nikaein would be plagued for 1½ years with the motel's loud guests and the odd arsenal of objects they threw onto her patio.

At one point, someone threw fresh meat at her bedroom window, which slid down onto the patio.

Nikaein says the guests were young foreigners who like to party, get drunk and throw stuff out the window.

She was furious and, as president of her building's homeowners association, she had to do something. She complained to the motel manager and filed police reports, but to no avail. The manager was uncooperative and eventually banned Nikaein from his property.

During the filing of a police report, one of the officers referred her to Community Boards.

The majority of referrals to Com-

munity Boards come from police officers and visitors to their website. All other referrals are by word of mouth.

Nikaein contacted Community Boards, and mediation with the motel management was set up. The session lasted 2½ hours. Afterward, the motel manager became very responsive.

"Community Boards did a really good job mediating and making sure both sides heard each other," says Nikaein. There have only been a couple problems since mediation; on each occasion the motel manager was quick to remedy the situation.

Nikaein also found the mediation process very interesting from a lawyer's perspective. It's relatively cheap compared to attorney fees. Community Boards charges a total of \$15. And the people with the dispute solve their own problem. Nikaein thinks they should set up Community Boards offices in the Tenderloin.

"It's very cost-effective," she adds.

Garrison said Community Boards wants to reach out to more people in the Tenderloin, especially to the residents and management of SROs because that is where the majority of complaints come from.

Donald Proby is one of the 300 in a pool of mediators that Community Boards draws from. He lives in the Civic Center/Tenderloin area and has mediated cases there. Most cases are tenant/landlord disputes.

"The Tenderloin's mental health and drug addiction problems and the amount of SROs are unique in San Francisco," Proby says. "But at the heart of it, these are the same basic human emotions and basic human conflicts that can be found anywhere in the city." ■

**The mediators help the clients come up with their own solutions, realistic ones they can fulfill.**

## Hastings cops want to be armed

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Station in the event of a crisis might be problematic.

Law enforcement emergency response strategy post-Columbine has changed, Palmini noted. "It's no longer first priority to clear and control the area. Now, it's take out the shooter ASAP," he declared.

A board member told Palmini that state Penal Code section 830.4(d) prohibits arming the officers. "Security officers of Hastings College of Law" are not authorized to carry a gun either on or off duty, the code says. Board member Tina Combs, a UC deputy general counsel, said the Legislature would have to change the law before Hastings could grant the officers' request to bear arms.

Palmini disagreed. He argued that the Hastings directors have the authority to arm his officers without changing the law. But he cited no authority for that assertion.

Ron Gordon, spokesman for the Hastings Public Safety Officers Association, told the directors that arming the officers could be "an insurance policy against the risk of an armed, active shooter on campus." Gordon recalled Charles Whitman, the 1966 Texas Tower gunman, who picked off 16 and wounded 32 others before police shot him — a toll caused partly because the Austin Police Department took more than an hour to bring Whitman down, time he spent continuing to kill.

Should Hastings be similarly attacked, Gordon said, "we could not respond." Nor would the SFPD's response be much better, Gordon opined.

If city police were the only option in such a crisis, they would need to amass enough officers, study campus floor plans on the fly, and on the spot come up with a plan of counterattack,

Gordon said. This would take precious time while the shooter continued to have his way. Arming Hastings' officers is the "one tool that could make a difference," he added.

"Lives would be lost waiting for an SFPD response," he argued. "Why rely on the SFPD alone? Surrounding community opinion should not influence your decision, only what is best for your students."

Board member Bruce Simon asked Robert Glenn, vice president of the Hastings Public Safety Officers Association, whether the primary need to arm the officers was to combat neighborhood crime or to counter an active shooter on campus?

"Neither — it's officer safety that's primary," Glenn said. He reminded the directors that a catastrophe such as his colleagues had been describing brought considerable liability issues because Hastings' officers must now respond to danger without the protection of firearms. Glenn recalled his own call to respond to a domestic violence incident on campus last year. He, unarmed, had to control a knife-wielding assailant.

Hastings Chancellor Frank Wu brought the board a new concern — finances. Granting the officers' request would entail reclassifying about 20 campus staffers. The pay and benefit increases for armed personnel would include compensation "at or above security service pay market levels," Wu said.

He reminded fellow directors that the campus is already facing layoffs. "Fewer people will be employed at UC Hastings next year than now," he said. "The issue of arming our officers must be resolved by financial data, a stable budget and a sound fiscal plan."

The Board of Directors said they would rule on the officers' request Dec. 2, their final public meeting of the year. ■

# TAC PAC

## Endorsements

**Your vote counts on November 8th**

**Remember to vote for leaders that support renters rights.**

**Ranked choice endorsements from TAC PAC**

Rank choice endorsements

<p><b>Mayor Candidate</b></p> <p><b>Jeff Adachi</b></p> <p>1st choice</p> <p><b>John Avalos</b></p> <p>2nd choice</p> <p><b>Leland Yee</b></p> <p>3rd choice</p>	<p><b>District Attorney</b></p> <p><b>David Onek</b></p> <p>1st choice</p> <p><b>Sharmin Bock</b></p> <p>2nd choice</p> <p><b>No Endorsement</b></p> <p>3rd choice</p>	<p><b>Sheriff</b></p> <p><b>Ross Mirkarimi</b></p> <p>1st choice</p> <p><b>David Wong</b></p> <p>2nd choice</p> <p><b>Paul Miyamoto</b></p> <p>3rd choice</p>
--	--	---

**Tenant Associations Coalition Political Action Committee (TAC PAC) endorsement slate is by Tenant / Civic Leaders who have resided in District 6 neighborhoods for over fifteen years and engaged in preserving affordable housing. Each of us won many victories on behalf of our community. When hearing about other endorsements ask yourself if these people even support the most basic need we all share, which is decent housing for everyone.**

Your vote counts on Nov. 8, 2011

This is a paid advertisement not affiliated with any candidate campaign. Paid for by TAC PAC (advocating since 1998) October 24, 2011 last day to register to vote in this election.