

# Holyoke mayor, police chief stand with landlords to combat drug gangs

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Mayor Joshua Garcia stands with local and state law enforcement and Holyoke landlords outside 296-298 Elm St. on Wednesday. (Dennis Hohenberger photo)

By **Dennis Hohenberger** | **Special to The Republican**

**HOLYOKE** — Mayor Joshua A. Garcia and Police Chief David Pratt put drug dealers on notice Wednesday, especially along the Elm Street corridor. Both were joined by local and state law enforcement and landlords fighting to rid their buildings of illegal activity.

The group stood outside 296-298 Elm St., a place known for high-volume drug activity, according to Holyoke Police Capt. Matthew Moriarty. A joint task force recently launched a [series of operations](#) at the location, which led to arrests and drug and gun seizures.

Garcia said he grew up in a community where people thrived and sought a better life “when down and out on their luck.” The mayor said he would not tolerate the amount of drug trafficking underway in Holyoke today.

“The bottom line is this, if you suffer from the disease of addiction, we are here to help you because Holyoke is a community of compassion and second chances,” Garcia said. “If you’re caught up in gangs and drug dealing, we’re here to help you because Holyoke is a city of hope and opportunity.”

The mayor’s invitation stopped with the drug dealers who continue to destabilize neighborhoods. “We’re coming after you. There’s a place in my heart for the sick and the sinners, but I have no tolerance for the cruel and heartless dealers pushing poison in our streets,” he said.

Garcia said people with addiction problems can find help with local agencies, including the Behavioral Health Network, which works with Holyoke police at street level.

“City Hall, the police department, and property owners represented here are aligned to preserve, protect and grow the quality of life in the city that we all love,” Garcia said. “Property owners, make no mistake, property owners have a responsibility, too.”

Pratt said the police department offers wraparound services for citizens who need help, including opening a Community Policing Service Center on Race Street. Police team up with addiction and mental health professionals who meet with at-risk individuals. The department

also works with troubled youth and formerly incarcerated persons returning to the community.

“For those people who are going to try and poison our neighborhoods and get involved in gang violence, gun violence specifically, we at the police department will take care of those people as well,” Pratt said.

Over the years, the department has formed a partnership with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies that regularly participate in gang and drug roundups. The state police will provide high-visibility patrols in downtown neighborhoods.

“We want to make sure those types of activities don’t return,” Pratt added.

The chief thanked the landlords for their support and collaboration.

“We want to say to all citizens and all landlords, please reach out to us,” he said.

Moriarty described a month-long wiretapping operation helmed by an FBI task force and including the state police and Hampden County Sheriff’s Department. With the information obtained through the wiretaps and information culled from landlords and other sources, raids followed at 296-289 Elm St. Additional information led to more arrests after the primary operation.

“It’s a continuing battle to fight off these drug dealers,” Moriarty said. “We are here to help the people in need. But, when people decide they want to push this poison onto our residents, to endanger these citizens and people in this neighborhood, we will go to all extremes to end that.”

[Arthur Naatz](#), who owns 291 Elm St. across the way, said drug dealers once occupied and controlled his building, making life unbearable for law-abiding tenants. Shortly after Naatz and his wife, Carey, took over the building, they gave Holyoke police access. Carey Naatz said the drug dealers lived in tenant’s apartments, forcing some to sleep on the floor.

“We’ve done a lot of renovations of the apartments for the people who live here,” she said. “We also made it safer by special locks where only the residents have keys.”

Before taking over the building’s management, Carey Naatz said the drug dealers charged residents a toll for simply walking up the stairs.

“If you haven’t been to one of these buildings, you don’t realize that somebody comes through the door literally every 30 seconds or more,” she said. “It’s that frequent of a turnaround. That very much surprised us.”

Carey Naatz often called employers of buyers who showed up in company trucks to buy drugs in the building.

“I’ve taken pictures of people in their work vehicles. Maybe it’s the owner. I don’t know. People from all walks of life were coming in 24/7,” she said.

Change happens with local landlords who want to invest in the community and don’t treat a building as a cash cow, said Carey Naatz.

“It’s a service you’re providing, and the tenants are your customers. You need to treat them right and give them a healthy place to live,” she said.