

Cleaning up Antioch, one house at a time

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Posted: 09/15/2012 12:00:00 AM PDT

Updated: 09/15/2012 11:03:17 AM PDT



Antioch code enforcement is back in action

After a morning of speaking with squatters and people living with code violations, code enforcement officers Mike Aguirre, left, and Ryan Graham remove their bullet proof vests and place them in the trunk before breaking for lunch in Antioch, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 10, 2012. The once robust program to combat neighborhood blight was completely gutted three years ago because of budget cuts. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff)

ANTIOCH -- Slowly but surely, the city is revving up its fight against neighborhood blight.

After laying off its entire code enforcement division three years ago, and after months of residential complaints, Antioch leaders put money late last year toward restarting the battle against problem homes and excessive trash on properties.

There have been some delays in hiring, but the city is now actively cracking down on violations.

"It's a start. There's definitely been a missing link," said Ryan Graham, Antioch's deputy director of community development.

At one time, Graham had 10 people working on code enforcement issues.

"There's a lot of work to be done," said Mike Aguirre, a consultant hired by the city after its initial attempt to hire for the code enforcement position yielded no results. Six new calls for problem houses came in over the weekend, he said.

Graham and Aguirre, both former Antioch police officers, checked up on eight properties one recent morning. The pair strapped on black and neon yellow bulletproof vests that read "City of Antioch Code Enforcement," and fired up a mobile computer tracking system and radio communication with police as they started their rounds.

Their tasks include making sure boarded-up homes and apartments stay empty and secure; following up on possible substandard living conditions; checking if properties have an inordinate amount of trash and debris piling up and working with police to usher squatters out of residences that are uninhabitable.

One of the first stops on Monday's run was a fourplex complex on Sycamore Drive.

Walking up the stairs to the unit, Graham explained that the uninhabitable spot had been part of a recent SWAT team operation. He points out that the two downstairs rooms were boarded up and the nine squatters previously found in the unit were told to leave.

Properties are deemed uninhabitable if they do not have running water or other utilities such as power and trash service.

When Graham knocked on the door, he found the apartment wasn't empty. The pair was granted consent to enter, which is needed for inspections whether the occupants are there legally or not. If consent is denied, code enforcement can apply for a inspection warrant.

Graham, Aguirre and Antioch police officers Mitch Schwitters and Powell Meads spoke to the group of people inside for about an hour, a situation Graham described as "possibly volatile." The team works in tandem with police on high-risk code checks.

Some dangerous situations call for code enforcement to make "tactical retreats," Graham said.

Graham contacted the property owner and found they were squatters.



Code enforcement officers Ryan Graham, left, and Mike Aguirre leave a home after warning occupants the trash alongside the home needs to be cleaned up in Antioch, Calif., on Monday, Sept. 10, 2012. The once robust program to combat neighborhood blight was completely gutted three years ago because of budget cuts. (Susan Tripp Pollard/Staff)

The property was boarded up later that day.

A squatter was also removed that morning from a red-tagged multi-family complex off Spanos Street.

Code enforcement does not kick squatters out of home, but works to make sure properties deemed uninhabitable are empty.

"We don't care what the living status is of who's in there," Graham said.

Police say that having an active code enforcement department again is already paying dividends on fighting crime, as the problem houses are magnets for criminal activity. The two sides share information about what they observe.

"It's a great community policing tool. They're helping us to revitalize some areas and hold property owners a little bit accountable," Capt. Steve McConnell said.

Code enforcement has more time and access to property owner information than a patrol officer, and can get that owner's attention by issuing fines and citations, he said.

Antioch has laws on the books establish the use of citations and fines. However, it hasn't had the manpower to enforce them until now.

Several of Graham and Aguirre's stops Monday, including seeing if trash had been removed from the front yard of a home on Putnam Street, were to establish contact during "correction periods" and show it is serious.

"With the gap in code enforcement, I'm sure a lot of people thought we would show up once and wouldn't come back," Graham said. "They think we're bluffing, but it's not a bluff."

Individuals who violate city's building codes can receive three citations and are given 10 days in between each follow-up inspection to clean up their act. Nonresponsive property owners are issued progressively higher fines of \$100, \$200 and \$500 per violation if the noncompliance continues.

After three citations, the city pursues a warrant from Superior Court to abate the property.

Much of Aguirre's afternoons are spent doing the more mundane paperwork of the job, while Graham handles his other city responsibilities.

One resident outside a home on Woodbridge Way, who declined to be identified, lauded Graham and Aguirre for their work in keeping a squatter out of a home across the street.

"You go on that guys. I'm glad you're back," she said.

Though water was shut off in the two-story home, Graham explained that the man had been trying to "put in a jumper" in the meter near the sidewalk to get free water from others.

Antioch has about 100 cases open, including 40 red-tagged properties, though it "could open thousands" if it had the manpower, Graham said.

"They're making great strides in starting to clean up some areas," McConnell said.

Antioch continues to look to hire for the full-time position, along with a couple part-time spots.

"I would love to get back to the point where we're responding to citizen complaints within one to two days and being more proactive," Graham said. "For now, I think we're already making a difference. Something is better than nothing."