

# **Vacant Housing: The Cancer that Promotes Crime, Lowers Property Values and Causes distress in Our Neighborhoods.**

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## **Abstract**

*The plague of urban blight continues to affect neighborhoods across the state of Florida as well as the country. Through research of previous articles, county statistics, surveys and government documents, a better understanding of this issue and how to battle its effects on our communities can be seen. This information can help in determining who has the primary role in dealing with vacant housing. There are some programs funded through government grants to assist state and local governments in funding such projects. An additional gain from this research can be to give law enforcement agencies avenues to assist their communities in combating the decay that promotes criminal activity and reduces property values in their neighborhoods.*

## **Introduction**

There is a major problem that faces communities throughout the United States today. The problem being referred to is the overwhelming number of vacant homes. Vacant houses are a cause of concern for many reasons such as, lowering the values of the surrounding properties, inviting and harboring crime and criminal behavior, increasing the opportunity for disease and pests, adding extra costs to the community and put a strain on local law enforcement and code enforcement agencies. The cause is simple; there are more houses than homebuyers due to the economy, which was devastated from the recession that began in 2008. Over the last three years people have been unable to maintain the occupancy of their homes; in many cases several of these homes are in the same neighborhoods.

Since there is very little that law enforcement agencies can do to fix the economy, we must focus on attacking the problem of so many vacant homes. It is this that this research will focus on. What have other agencies done to combat the criminal issues created by this influx of vacant houses? What strategies have other agencies attempted to use in order to increase occupancy of them and have any previous attempts to reduce the number of vacant houses in different areas been effective? If so, how did it work? In doing so, hopefully some tactics will be identified, that could provide ways to use available resources, which would not put an economic strain community programs. One could assume that the best solution is to increase occupancy of the vacant homes so that they are taken care of, which will improve the appearance and value of the neighborhoods their in.

This research will look into the possibility of using programs, such as, Habitat for Humanity, tax rights/laws and other potential ways to gain control of these vacant properties and make use of them through placing occupants in them or removing the vacant buildings all together. In doing so, it would help communities by reducing crime, improving property values and potentially getting low-income families homes to live in and eventually own.

## **Literature Review**

Counties across Florida are facing a huge problem with vacant houses and no way to fill them. In 2008 Brevard County had its lowest residential projects permits applied for or issued since 1975; there were only 1,550 permits applied for. In 2009, from January through October the monthly foreclosure rate exceeded 746 in Brevard County. In 2010 Brevard County had approximately 15,000 vacant homes that were unable to be absorbed. This is the same picture for most communities across the State of Florida and there is no quick fix in sight for the foreseeable future. However, there is a potential bright side for some counties in Florida. Brevard County was rated one of the five best places to retire in the United States in 2010. This was due to the cost of living, number of doctors, lower crime rates, recreation available and taxes. (Housing, 2010) Although the State of Florida is one of the top retirement states in the country, we cannot expect that this is the complete solution to our vacant housing problems. Retirees who move into our communities do not want and will not move into old dilapidated homes or in neighborhoods that are unsafe or have the appearance of urban blight. Retirees look for security in their homes and neighborhoods for their golden years. Seniors also like to congregate with others similar to their age and life style. Therefore, gated communities, over 50 years of age condominiums villages, modular home parks are attractive to this group.

For a lot of areas in the nation the primary motivation in attacking the numbers of vacant houses is strictly based on the crime they bring and allow in a neighborhood. The primary crime is related to drugs and the dealers who deal them. When traditional methods fail, people are forced to become more innovative and “think outside the box”, as they say, in dealing with these issues. A community in Baltimore did just that and found an old law on the books. This law was a self-help nuisance abatement law that allowed the community to claim the rights to vacant properties and absorb them and improve their neighborhood. Not all states have this law, but it did work for at least one community and that gives hope to other communities who are fighting the same battle. (Sarbarnes, 1995)

The federal government has also set up some assistance for states, counties and cities to reclaim some of these properties and fix them up for resale or convert them into other useable properties. In 2008 the Department of Housing and Urban Development enacted the Housing and Economic Recovery Act, 2008. This act has supplied moneys to most states and further lists counties

and cities that have been approved/granted some of these funds. All of these funds are under the direct supervision of HUD in each area of distribution. For example the State of Florida received 91,141,478 million dollars of available funds for its state programs, in which, HUD of Florida monitors this money. Any group, agency, investor or any other qualified potential recipient of the federal money must apply through HUD and report the uses of the money to them. (Development 2008)

Some states have passed and enacted laws requiring property owners to register vacant properties. This law included trustees and lien holders as well as the property owners. If the responsible party fails to report the vacancies, they could face fines and/or criminal charges. The vacant property registration laws work well if the leaders of the registration program keep up with the program. The more, creative thinking, people do, the more efficient and effective programs will be created to battle this on going issue. (Shilling, 2009)

One other form of creative thinking that has helped some communities is the forming of Community Development Corporations (CDC). This group would obtain and manage properties as a non-profit organization. Some may know this program as "Scattered-Site Properties Project". In using a system like this, communities can reduce the number of vacant houses while placing low to moderate income families in the homes to occupy and care for them. This reduces the number of homeless while filling vacant properties with little or no cost to the communities. This process works best when the CDCs are large and have a good deal of experience in dealing with the challenges of management and finances. However, all CDCs do better when they partner up with other non-profit organizations. (Levi, 2009)

Larger cities or counties with densely populated areas may find large apartment buildings vacant but salvageable. In Harlem, New York there is a program that houses ex-convicts and low-income families in an old apartment building. There are very strict screening guidelines to be accepted as an ex-convict. There are also very strict rules and behavior codes for the residents of the building. The building also has a live-in superintendent as a full time job. This person has the responsibility of maintaining the building and ensuring adherence of the rules. This program has worked well and remains successful for that community. (Finn, 2011) This type of building, Florida, could be converted into a condominium complex for retirees moving into the state.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this research is to identify strategies in dealing with vacant properties in cities and counties throughout the state of Florida. All agencies in Florida are forced to deal with problems associated with vacant properties in one way or another. Today's economic crisis will likely be an example of what financial resources we will have available to us for several years to come. Knowing that, it is likely that agencies across Florida will have to continue to deal with the issues regarding crimes and other concerns due to vacant properties, we

must find innovative ways to deal with this problem. All agencies will need to find strategies that work in their area to reduce and/or eliminate neighborhood blight and other concerns caused by vacant properties. The information in this research can assist agencies in developing strategies for the problem areas within their jurisdiction without a heavy financial impact on their budget.

The data collected in this research was done by sending out surveys to several municipal and county agencies within Florida. The survey data was intended to give a varying view of how different agencies perceive this problem, as well as what actions they are taking to combat and relieve the issues. Different ideas and strategies that agencies use may help to find a common theory, in order to develop a plan of action for others to use and improve the quality of life within their respected communities.

Additional information was gathered by conducting a telephone interview with a representative from Housing and Community Development Planning Office. Due to the limited response of the surveys I also spoke with mid-level managers from different agencies within Florida. Further information was obtained by searching articles and housing related websites on the Internet.

## **Results**

The surveys for this research were sent to Florida Pac Accreditation via email. Out of all the surveys sent there was one survey completed and returned. The question is; why did the surveys not receive any attention or responses? Upon reading the response of the returned survey and speaking to several middle managers of police agencies across Florida, it appears that the issues related to or that arise from vacant houses are dealt with in a reactive way. Of all the law enforcement personnel contacted, there were no agencies that have a unit or person assigned to deal with or monitor vacant houses or the issues related to them. It was also discovered that law enforcement agencies do not track the number of vacant properties in their respected jurisdiction. The only numbers tracked by communities is the number of foreclosures in the counties and some cities.

The proactive response in dealing with and working to reduce the number of vacant properties appears to come from Community Development Organizations. In a telephone interview, Jody Quinlivan, the Housing and Community Development Planner for the city of Melbourne, Florida, gave a lot of insight on how several communities deal with the problem of vacant housing. Ms. Quinlivan explained that there are several avenues that communities can take to address the number of vacant houses in their areas. One direction is to use non-profit funds or government grants to purchase the property from the lien holder and demolish the building and either make a park out of the property or let it remain vacant and be maintained by the roads unit of the community. Another possibility is to get Habitat for Humanity involved. However, there is a limit with Habitat for Humanity on the number of houses they will purchase and remodel. According to Ms. Quinlivan, Habitat for Humanity feels that they will take jobs

from construction workers by taking on too many remodels so they keep their focus primarily on new construction projects. They do, however, take a small percentage of homes, to remodel, for their program.

Nonprofit organizations also obtain some of these houses, remodel them and place low-income families in them for low rent. This is where Community Development Organizations and other non-profit groups come in. They are, generally, in communication with HUD and other government funding avenues to fund such projects.

## Discussion

There are several issues that can be derived from this research. To begin with, this is a complex issue and each geographical area may have different concerns and need different approaches to combat the problem of vacant properties. Federal grants are a good and strong possibility to assist in acquiring some vacant properties, remodel them and place occupants in them. This has some potential problems in itself such as “The Red Tape” a lot of paperwork that can be quite confusing to small groups or communities without the availability of knowledgeable professionals to complete it. There are also timelines that may prevent some communities from being able to comply with the government standards.

Investors can purchase several of these homes for a very low price, have them remodeled and rent them through HUD programs. They may also acquire them for fixing up and re-sale or rent on the open market. Any of the avenues that are available to public or private response can only be found if they are actively being sought after or investigated.

The following is the list of monies that was allocated for the counties and cities in Florida. This was taken from the Housing and Economic Recovery Act, 2008:

<u>City/County</u>	<u>Dollars</u>
Miami Dade	62,207,200
Orange County	27,901,773
Palm Beach County	27,700,340
Jacksonville/Duval	26,175,317
Pasco County	19,495,805
Hillsborough County	19,132,978
Lee County	18,243,867
Broward County	17,767,598
Polk County	14,586,258
Tampa	13,600,915
Port St Lucie	13,523,132
Miami	12,063,702
St Petersburg	9,498,962
Miramar	9,312,658
Pinellas County	8,063,759

Hollywood	7,534,603
Collier County	7,306,555
Sarasota County	7,140,861
Cape Coral	7,065,484
Seminole County	7,019,514
Miami Gardens	6,866,119
Orlando	6,730,263
Deltona	6,635,909
Marion County	6,324,055
Hialeah	5,385,046
Manatee County	5,283,122
Brevard County	5,269,667
Volusia County	5,222,831
Palm Bay	5,208,104
Tamarac	4,772,218
Escambia County	4,565,918
Pembroke Pines	4,398,575
Pompano Beach	4,366,175
West Palm Beach	4,349,546
Lauderhill	4,293,288
Ft Lauderdale	3,700,096
Sunrise	3,494,986
Coral Springs	3,378,142
Lake County	3,136,967
Boynton Beach	2,963,311
Homestead	2,887,010
North Miami	2,847,089
Kissimmee	2,371,749
Ft Myers	2,297,318
Margate	2,106,555
Plantation	2,016,309
Lakeland	2,005,781
Deerfield Beach	2,005,699

This list represents all of the monies allocated for Florida communities. This money was set up as a non-profit fund, stating any profit made from acquiring, remodeling and selling homes must be reported to HUD, who would then make the determination if and where the profit would be paid. In some cases the profit could be rolled into more or future investments and sometimes it would be paid back to the federal program. (Development 2008)

## Recommendations

Recommendations for law enforcement agencies combating this problem are varied. First and foremost, building a strong relationship with each neighborhood is very important and essential for all law enforcement agencies that are responsible for them. It requires a great deal of communication between the residents and law enforcement. One way of getting started in a positive relationship with these neighborhoods is to encourage them in beginning neighborhood watch programs. Not only should we encourage these groups to get together as a neighborhood watch program, we need to be involved in the program. This does not require a great deal of time from an agency. At first it may require an analyst to pull up some crime statistics for each area within the neighborhood watch group, a person from the agency, usually some one from crime prevention, to organize a first meeting. It is good to have at least one supervisor who is responsible for the specific area to attend the meeting also. It is advisable to have a supervisor with the rank of Lieutenant or higher attend also; this shows the group that the agency has buy in on the project. It also gives the perception that the agency cares enough for a Lieutenant or higher rank to take time out of their busy schedule and meet with them after hours to assist them in making their neighborhood a safer place to live in. In this meeting there are several issues that should be discussed to inform the residents what is expected of them and what they should and can expect from law enforcement. The residents should be empowered to be the eyes and ears for the agency. You must develop an open line of communication for each watch group, usually with a supervisor who will be responsive to their calls. In order to encourage the residents to call for law enforcement assistance it is important to establish the fact that they can call and remain anonymous. It is also a good idea to set it up so they can have an officer call them after the response to a call and let them know the outcome, and still remain anonymous.

Along the same lines, inmate labor or roads and bridges may be used to go in, mow the right of ways, pick up the trash and clean up the side walks in front of the vacant houses. Once you have ensured that you can get this accomplished, let the neighborhood watch group that you are going to do this and let them know that, not only can they maintain these areas, but also it is important for them to do so if possible. When a neighborhood sees an agency get their walkways cleared and cleaned it will demonstrate the commitment of the agency and usually encourage more commitment from the residents.

Other ways for agencies to be involved may not be through manpower or active law enforcement activities. Instead, it requires a partnership with the other programs discussed in this research. The most knowledgeable agency is probably HUD. Law enforcement agencies should get in communication with them and encourage a proactive and aggressive approach to acquiring vacant properties, remodeling them and placing families in them. HUD may have programs available that are not advertised or known about, some of which include the community action as well as additional monies available to be used.

HUD may also be able to assist in getting Community Development Programs organized and involved in neighbor projects.

There are other agencies that law enforcement agencies can contact and encourage to get involved in cleaning up vacant properties. These agencies are Code Enforcement, Road and Bridge, Health Departments and other enforcement agencies. A law enforcement supervisor usually will have a more direct path of communication to these agencies' supervision and can set up meetings with all of them together. This allows a combined effort and, in some cases, encourages an almost competitive spirit within the agencies to be the most involved. Also by getting these groups together new ideas can be formed for improving the neighborhoods.

Lieutenant Joe Jenkins has worked for the Brevard County Sheriff's Office since 1991. Joe has work as a patrol deputy, K-9 handler, general crimes agent, K-9 sergeant, patrol sergeant, investigative sergeant and a patrol lieutenant.

## References

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## **Appendix A**

# **Vacant Housing**

## **A Law Enforcement Problem?**

**This survey is in reference to houses that are vacant due to foreclosure, abandonment or any other reason that they would be vacant. In most cases, this does not include homes that have recently been constructed and are waiting occupancy.**

*Please return by May 24, 2011.*

- 1: **Name of agency?**
- 2: **Type of agency and number of sworn officers?**
  - County
  - Municipality
- 3: **Does your agency have an individual or unit that is responsible for dealing with issues related to vacant properties/houses?**
  - Yes
  - No
- 4: **How many vacant houses are in your community? (This may be found on your community web site).**
- 5: **List the top three issues your agency/community faces with regard to vacant houses.**
- 6: **How would you rate the amount of concern has with the vacant houses in your neighborhoods?**
- 7: **What actions/strategies have your agency taken to deal with the issues caused by vacant housing?**
- 8: **What success has your agency had? (Give a brief explanation).**