

NEWS RELEASE

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Addressing abandoned properties is key to reducing crime:

Group's focus is transforming crime centers into positive community pillars

SAN BERNARDINO – Crime in a distressed area of the city have brought together some unlikely partners.

One year ago analysis of crime hotspots by the Institute for Public Strategies (IPS) revealed a strong connection between abandoned properties and crime in a half-mile central area of the city near the DMV, and IPS began developing an approach to address these properties.

In December IPS convened housing experts to address problems related to abandoned properties as a way to reduce crime. The group – including Habitat for Humanity, Neighborhood Housing Services of the Inland Empire (NHSIE), Hope through Housing, and the County Housing Authority – has been meeting regularly to share information and coordinate efforts to tackle a distressed central area of San Bernardino.

“It’s critical for all of us to work together to solve these problems, and that has really started to happen around housing issues,” said Sandra Espadas, regional director with IPS. “We’re not in the business of rehabbing homes or helping people become homeowners, but our research pointed to the need to address abandoned properties and build stability in order to address hotspots of crime and violence in this neighborhood.”

“Abandoned homes can quickly attract the homeless, become havens for drug use, theft, and all sorts of other illegal activity,” said Espadas. “And that threatens the safety and security of neighborhoods.”

A study in Austin, Texas found that blocks with vacant buildings had more than three times as many drug calls to police, nearly twice as many theft calls, and twice the number of violent calls as blocks without vacant buildings according to a 1993 article in the Journal of Criminal Justice.

Vacant homes – including those in San Bernardino -- are often subject to fires, many from arson.

When IPS shared the map of crime and violence hotspots in the area with the group, the Housing Authority had already started purchasing abandoned properties, but not necessarily with a goal of curbing crime.

The Housing Authority then asked IPS for a list of abandoned properties related to crime hotspots, and worked to strategically acquire those properties. The data identified five hotspot properties within the target area. The Housing Authority has now acquired all five of them to revitalize as homes for new resident owners.

“Our involvement here is leveraged as part of a larger effort to help reduce crime and violence that often centers around abandoned properties,” said Gus Joslin, senior vice president of the Housing Authority of San Bernardino County. “This joint work to revitalize abandoned homes results in a huge win for the community as well as the homeowners.”

According to a door-to-door survey IPS conducted last year, only 10 percent of people in the neighborhood own their homes, the rest are renting.

“We know there is strong evidence to support the common wisdom that more home ownership contributes to greater neighborhood stability,” said Dennis Baxter, San Bernardino Habitat for Humanity director. “Each owner occupied home becomes an anchor for that block by having another family financially and emotionally invested in the quality of life there.”

Problems related to abandoned properties are just one of many costs that drain city coffers. One in 10 homes in the City of San Bernardino is vacant, compared to one in 14 for California, according to the 2010 US Census. Local governments spend \$5,000 to \$34,000 to maintain and secure each abandoned property, according to a Harvard University study.

“Getting these properties occupied again -- or at least maintained -- not only means they are no longer a blight on the neighborhood, but they also begin contributing to the overall safety and appearance of the city which could ultimately affect home ownership and lead to the improved financial health of the city itself,” Baxter said.

The half-mile-square target neighborhood of the IPS Byrne Project is located south of Highland Avenue and west of Waterman Avenue bordered by Baseline to the south and Arrowhead/Sierra Way to the east. It has twice the number of crimes than other comparable high-crime areas of the city, according to police. This area is not only one of the most violent in the city, but also one of the most transient.

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