



THE IMPORTANCE OF CODE ENFORCEMENT

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There is a saying among those connected to the realm of Code Enforcement that little children rarely ever say that they want to be a “Code Enforcement Officer” when they grow up. The fact of the matter is that Code Enforcement remains a confusing and misunderstood profession that most people know very little about. However, the role of the Code Enforcement Officer within modern-day municipalities is integral to the daily operations, and essential to enhancing quality of life by helping to sustain safe, healthy living conditions for residents and businesses of the municipality.

WHAT IS A CODE ENFORCEMENT OFFICER?

Code enforcement officers are often asked to embody so many roles within the context of their duties. In any given day, they may function as problem solvers, communicators, mediators, researchers, and educators within their role as a code enforcement officer. In the community, code enforcement officers also perform a variety of functions related to their role as public servants.

The most obvious function of code enforcement within communities is controlling the battle of the blight. Code enforcement officers have a very visible role in the community from the standpoint that the decisions they make and how effectively they perform their duties can have a major impact on the property values and image of the community. A commonality among all municipalities is that they have buildings, homes, and properties that will age over time. Code Enforcement Officers support and enhance property values through effective enforcement of property standards, while working to keep aging buildings, homes, and properties from deteriorating and becoming “eyesores” to the community. Every community faces struggles with vacant buildings, trash, tall grass and weeds, graffiti, and inoperable vehicles. Studies have shown that communities that have areas of blight and deteriorated properties may eventually see an increase in the amount of crime and a significant decrease in property values. Code enforcement

officers provide the first line of action in making sure that these issues are managed in a responsible and effective way.

Safety is another one of the primary ways that code enforcement officers positively impact communities. Communities have legislative bodies that enact ordinances for the good of the entire community. These ordinances include rules and regulations that take into consideration the safety and wellbeing of the public, such as fire codes, building codes, and general property standards. Enforcement of these ordinances can be essential to the provision of safe and healthy living and working conditions for the members of the community. Code enforcement officers are called upon to ensure compliance with these ordinances and codes. They are also called upon to provide input when the legislative body of a community is working to develop these ordinances and codes. Based upon their valuable experiences and “real life” situations in the community, Code Enforcement Officers can help to shape the ordinance provisions and the overall codes of their jurisdiction.

The recent financial and housing crisis has made code enforcement officers even more necessary and essential to communities. As the rates of foreclosed properties and bankruptcies continue to soar, communities are struggling to find ways to manage these properties and the various code and ordinance violations that may be connected to the growing number of vacancies. This has affected, and significantly expanded, the role of code enforcement officers within communities. In the 2006 Fannie Mae Foundation article *The External Costs of Foreclosures*, authors Dan Immergluck, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, and Geoff Smith, of the Woodstock Institute, estimate that a single foreclosed property could directly cost a city government over \$30,000. Code Enforcement Officers spend substantial amounts of time and effort establishing current ownership to initiate and ensure compliance of these vacant properties.

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Effective code enforcement initiatives seek to achieve voluntary compliance as a means of avoiding other punitive methods of enforcement, while still accomplishing what is best for the community in terms of public health and safety. It can be, and often is, a very arduous and intensive task.

CODE ENFORCEMENT AND COMMUNITIES

Communities should consider approaching code enforcement in a more proactive manner. A proactive code enforcement approach involves addressing issues that may become code enforcement cases or complaints before they escalate to a point of mandated abatement or referral to the court system. This can be achieved by implementing many different techniques, but the primary means to achieving a more proactive code enforcement approach is through education. Educating the community about what the ordinance and code requirements and standards are is one of the best ways that communities and code enforcement officers can prevent violations from occurring or reoccurring. Education should be the first step to providing effective and proactive code enforcement and will generally garner more favorable results on behalf of the property owner and the community as a whole.

It is important for communities to take code enforcement seriously and to value the code enforcement officer within their community. Code enforcement is often a difficult job. It is a highly visible position and they, typically, interact with a variety of different people and agencies. Code enforcement officers regularly interact with various county and state agencies, such as health departments, child and family services, and highway departments. They tend to work closely with various city departments, such as fire, police, building, planning and zoning, and legal, as well as having interaction, at times, directly with the legislative body, board, or commission members. Code enforcement officers also have interaction with various members and resources within the community, such as senior service organizations, economic development commissions, mortgage companies, businesses, and residents. It is not uncommon that code enforcement interaction is a

resident's first association with the municipality. The professionalism and approach of the code enforcement officer could shape community notion of local government and municipal experience. Building relationships and knowledge of the community is so integral to a proactive and professional code enforcement approach. It could be challenging for a community to establish effective code enforcement presence and efficient case management and follow up without having a code enforcement officer as part of their day to day staff.

CODE ENFORCEMENT PROFESSIONALISM

Code enforcement officers have a very intricate, challenging, and demanding role. It is a job that is constantly evolving and changing. The Illinois Association of Code Enforcement (IACE) is a non-profit organization established in 1993 that provides training and support for those providing the services of code enforcement. This year marks the 20th Anniversary celebration of the association and IACE has chosen the slogan, "20 years of Success, Safety, and Service" to portray the essence of the Association's history, as well as IACE's vision for the future. Code enforcement can be a very demanding and misunderstood role, however, it can also be a very rewarding and effective career. Code enforcement officers provide communities with intrinsic and tangible benefits which can profoundly impact and enhance the quality of life, health and safety of the residents. With the support of community members, legislators, businesses, residents, and fellow employees, others can come to understand, appreciate, and respect the contribution and service that code enforcement officers provide to society and to their communities.

For more information regarding the profession of Code Enforcement or the Illinois Association of Code Enforcement, please visit IACE online:

www.i-ace.org

