

Solutions for a Better Quality of Life:
A Guide to Solving Neighborhood Issues

May 2004

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, we would like to give special thanks to Assemblymember Sam Hoyt, for this document could not have been produced without his efforts and his dedication of resources. Through his work in both the City of Buffalo and in Albany, we were able to engage in community conversations and utilize input from a variety of sources to gather information for this manual.

This manual also could not have been created without the tireless efforts of many concerned City residents. Most importantly, we would like to thank Stephanie Carter, from Assembly- member Hoyt's office, Michelle Graves, COPS Crime Prevention Manager, and Harvey Garrett, who serves both the West Side Community Collaborative and Buffalo Housing Court. In addition, numerous interns from both Housing Court and Assemblymember Hoyt's office researched the issues presented in this manual and crafted the proposed solutions; they include Angelo Gambino, Kristyn Cronberger, Victoria Boone, Kate Meyer, Kirsten Swanson, Laura Lombardo and Stephanie Novak. Also offering assistance on this project were Erie County Legislators Mark Schroeder, Demone Smith and Lynn Marinelli, Timothy Callan from Legislator Albert DeBenedetti's office, City Councilmembers Richard Fontana, Marc Coppola, Brian Davis, Antoine Thompson and Nick Bonifacio, Peter Savage III from Councilmember Bonifacio's office, Michael Kuzma, Esq. from Councilmember David Franczyk's office, Timothy Wanamaker, Executive Director of the City Office of Strategic Planning, Linda Chiarenza, West Side NHS, Bruce Williams, Broadway/Fillmore NHS, Alyce Cuddy, University Heights CDA, Nettie Anderson, Louise Bonner and Ada Hopson-Clemons, Masten Block Club Coalition, Shyrl Duderwick, South Buffalo NHS, Jerry Nagy, Kensington-Bailey NHS, Kathleen Peterson and Ruth Lampe, Parkside Community Association, Lydia Fernandez and Damicela Rodriguez, Hispanics United of Buffalo, Rosa Gibson and Renetta Johnson, Community Action Information Center, Rose Yager, West Side Neighborhood Partnership, Ian McDonald and Kevin Hayes, Richardson Towers Community Association, David Granville, Allentown Association, Elizabeth Triggs and Odease Brown, We Care Neighborhood Community Block Club, Kim Harman, East Side PRIDE, Ida Thomas and Annette Tatum, Ellicott District Community Development, Inc., Malika Muhammad, United Neighborhoods, Rose Yager, Gloria Jones, Mary Smith, Doris Corley, Bernice White, Ralph and Susan Guastafarro, and many other leaders of individual block clubs striving to protect the neighborhoods throughout the City of Buffalo.

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your interest in strengthening your community! Simply by reviewing this document, you have taken a positive first step toward enhancing the quality of life for you and your neighbors. If you are a property owner, you are also preserving your investment in the City of Buffalo.

There are several things you must understand in utilizing this document for concerns in your neighborhood. First, it is meant to be an ever-changing document, reflecting today's problems and remedies. Services change from time to time, and what worked to solve a problem last year may not work now. Also, problems are solved differently district by district - the appropriate resource to contact in University Heights may not work in Hamlin Park, and vice-versa. In order to ensure that this document remains effective, please contact the Court whenever you attempt any of the procedures, and let us know the results. We expect to update this document every six months, so we need to know what changes are necessary for the next version. Also, if a particular procedure is ineffective, the appropriate legislators can be notified to create a new remedy as soon as possible.

Second, be sure to exhaust every part of a particular procedure, and be prepared to follow up on your initial complaints on a regular basis. It is our experience that problems are moved to the top of priority lists after the same complaints are made a number of times to a number of different resources.

Finally, the procedures have been designed to protect the anonymity of those making the various complaints. There are a number of effective procedures to solve many of these problems that involve direct contact with property owners, but many active citizens have been reluctant to use such procedures for fear of retaliation. Please use your best judgment when attempting to solve neighborhood problems, and take advantage of the steps that protect the identities of those making the complaints.

Thank you again for your interest and dedication to your neighborhood.

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I. CRIME

A. Illegal Drug Sales

If you suspect that there is a drug house in your neighborhood, you should first call 911 and the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890). Be sure to tell them if you do not wish to be identified, and if you do not want an officer to come to your door to investigate the complaint. The next three calls you should make should be to:

- (1) the City of Buffalo Save Our Streets Program - Tiffany Perry (851-5094);
- (2) the Buffalo Police Department Tip Line (847-2255); and
- (3) your closest Community Oriented Police Satellite (COPS) Station:

- University Heights COPS, Gloria J. Parks Community Center, 3242 Main Street, 851-4112;
- Parkside COPS, 2318 Main Street, 851-4324;
- East Side COPS, CRUCIAL, 230 Moselle, 895-1810;
- International Marketplace COPS, 283 Grant Street, 884-7812; and
- Medical Campus COPS, 927 Main Street, 883-4104.

You also may contact Michele Graves, COPS Crime Prevention Manager, at 851-4112.

Any of these resources may refer you directly to the Narcotics Department at 851-4575, but they likely will process your information themselves, and may even be able to advise you of progress if you contact them again later. In addition, you should let your local Councilmember know the details of the problem property and the efforts you have made on behalf of the block club, and you should ask that he or she follow up to ensure that the house is investigated. Finally, you may report the property to be cited for Housing Court (see Section II (D), below) and explain the suspected drug activity as part of your report. If appropriate, the City prosecutor may request an Order to Vacate the property.

B. Illegal Business Activity

In general, any illegal business activity should be reported to the Buffalo Police Department by calling 911; remember to tell them if you do not wish to be identified. You should also contact your local representatives so that they may monitor the activity and follow up on your complaints. A list of your local representatives is attached as Appendix A.

If you believe that the activity is being conducted without a proper license, you should contact Patrick Sole at the City Licensing Department, at 851-4954. If the illegal activity involves the sale of alcohol, you should also notify the New York State Liquor Authority Enforcement Bureau in Buffalo at 847-5020. If the problem concerns a utility company, such as failing to repair a lawn after working on service lines, you should call the utility company first and file a complaint before contacting your local representatives.

C. Predatory Lending

If you believe that there are individuals or corporations engaging in predatory lending or rent-to-own scams in your neighborhood, you should immediately contact the New York State Mortgage Banking Department at 1-800-334-3360 Ext. 5599. You also should notify the State Attorney General's Office, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) and the Better Business Bureau:

New York State Attorney General, Buffalo Office
107 Delaware Avenue, Fourth Floor
Buffalo, NY 14202
(716) 853-8400

FDIC
20 Exchange Plaza
New York, NY 10005
(800) 334-9539 (Consumer Complaints and Inquiries)
(917) 320-2500 (Main Switchboard)

Better Business Bureau, Buffalo Office
741 Delaware Avenue, Suite 10
Buffalo, NY 14209
(716) 881-5222
info@upstatenybbb.org

Be prepared to provide descriptions of the loans or other products being marketed and the companies involved, and copy any relevant documentation provided or advertised by the companies.

D. Trespassing

If you believe there are squatters in a vacant house or building in your neighborhood, immediately call your Councilmember and the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890), and request that the property be cited for Housing Court. You should provide the address, the owner's name (if known) and a description of the individuals seen on the premises. Also, you should contact the Erie County Health Department at 961-6800 to investigate the property. You may then track the status of both cases through your Housing Court Liaison. Finally, it would be a good idea to contact your local COPS Station (see Section I (A), above) and advise them of the activity.

If there are individuals trespassing on your property, there are two ways you can handle the situation. For both, you need to know who the individuals are or have good descriptions of them. First, you can attempt to pursue the matter criminally by filing a police report for trespassing after calling 911. Second, you can call your local COPS station (see Section IA) and request that they contact the trespassers (and their parents if they are minors).

E. Abuse and Other Quality of Life Concerns

If you encounter threats against neighborhood residents, loud noise, rowdy behavior, and/or loitering, call 911 immediately. Do not try to take the matter into your own hands.

After each incident is over, document the details of what occurred, including dates and times, individuals involved, and damages incurred. Your next calls should be to the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890) and your local COPS station to report the activity (see Section I (A), above, for a listing of the various locations). Between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., you should be able to reach a Site Coordinator, and after that, you can leave a

message and your name and number. The Site Coordinator can be contacted again to track the progress of the case.

Suspected child abuse or maltreatment should be reported. The law requires that you have "reasonable cause to suspect" that the child is being abused or neglected in order to file a report. To make a report, call Child Welfare and Protection Services at (716) 858-6437, or toll free at 1-800-342-3720. You may also contact Crisis Services (834-3131) for further assistance.

An "abused child" means a child which is 18 years old or less whose parent/guardian:

- Inflicts or allows infliction of physical injury upon the child that is not accidental
- Creates or allows substantial risk of physical injury
- Commits or allows to be committed a sex offense against the minor

Adult abuse is defined as the abuse or mistreatment of an adult 18 years or older. Unexplained injuries, decrease of appetite, decrease of financial resources suddenly, and sudden changes in mood or behavior are just some signs that the adult is being mistreated. You can report adult abuse by calling Adult Protection Services at (716) 858-6901, or toll free at 1-800-342-3009. You may also contact Crisis Services (834-3131) for further assistance.

II. NEIGHBORHOOD CONDITIONS

A. Abandoned Houses

If one of the houses in your neighborhood is vacant and boarded up, and is a blight on the neighborhood, you should report the property to both your Councilmember and the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890). The Erie County Health Department (961-6800) will also investigate problems relating to accumulated garbage, trash and debris on properties.

It is helpful if you are able to determine the owner of the property (see Section III (A), below, for instructions), and find out if there is a Housing Court case already pending against that property owner (see Section III (B), below). If so, you can ask your Housing Court Liaison to find out the status of the property. If not, be sure to request that the case is written up for Housing Court as soon as possible (see Section II (D), below). You should provide the address, the owner's name and a description of the problem. If you or another neighbor would be interested in acquiring the property, you can contact the owner directly or through the Housing Court Liaison.

B. Rodents

The Erie County Health Department provides free rodent baiting. The property owner needs to call 961-6800 and fill out a permission form. You also should call Citizen Services at the City of Buffalo at 851-5307. They will arrange for the setting of traps and other measures to eliminate the rodents.

C. Abandoned Cars

If the abandoned cars are on City property, call Parking Enforcement at 851-5832 to request that the vehicles be towed. If the abandoned cars are on private property, they can be removed free of charge by Riverside Towing. You will need to contact the property owner and ask him or her to call Riverside Towing at 825-5578. The property owner does not need to have the title to the vehicle, but must sign a permission slip, and the car will then be removed.

If you do not have cooperation from the property owner, have the property written up for Housing Court (see Section II (D), below).

D. Property Violations

If you believe there are violations of the New York State Building Code or the Buffalo City Code at a property in your neighborhood (such as a damaged roof or gutters, high grass or weeds, debris, foundation problems, etc.), immediately call both your Councilmember and the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890) and request that the property be cited for Housing Court. You should provide the address, the owner's name (if known) and a description of the violations or problems at the property. The Erie County Health Department (961-6800) will also investigate problems relating to accumulated garbage, trash and debris on properties.

E. Vacant Lots

If one of the vacant lots in your neighborhood has debris or overgrown grass and weeds, the first thing you need to do is to find out who owns the property (see III (A), below). If the property is owned by the City of Buffalo, contact Steve Stepniak at 851-5661 and request that the lot be cut. If you or another neighbor is interested in purchasing the lot from the City, you should contact John Hannon at the City of Buffalo Real Estate Department at 851-5275.

If the lot is privately owned, you should immediately call both your Councilmember and the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890) and request that the property be cited for Housing Court. You should provide the address, the owner's name and a description of the problem. The Erie County Health Department (961-6800) will also investigate problems relating to accumulated garbage, trash and debris on properties. You may then track the status of the case through your Housing Court Liaison (see III (B), below).

If you are interested in turning a vacant lot into a community garden, you can contact Jim Pavel, President of Keep WNY Beautiful, at 851-4370. Mr. Pavel can direct you to various individuals and departments depending upon the extent of the work.

To convert a vacant lot into a parking lot, several Code provisions would need to be met, such as those concerning paving, lighting and drainage. Call John Hannon at the City of Buffalo Real Estate Department, at 851-5275. He can explain the process to you.

F. Loose Dogs

If you there is a loose dog in your neighborhood and you would like to have it taken away, you should call the City Pound at 851- 5694 during weekdays before 3:00 p.m. If it is after 3:00 p.m. on a weekday or during a weekend, call 911, and the Buffalo Police will address the problem. You may also contact the S.P.C.A. serving Erie County (875-7360) to report other animal problems, such as dog fighting or illegal breeding activities.

G. Graffiti

If one of the buildings in your neighborhood has graffiti, you should call both your Councilmember and the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890) and request that the property be cited for Housing Court. You also should contact Jim Pavel, President of Keep WNY Beautiful, at 851-4370.

H. Snow Removal

For snow removal of private and public sidewalks and streets, call the Mayor's Complaint Line (851-4890) and ask to speak to someone in snow removal department. You will be transferred to a representative, and you will be asked your exact location such as your street address, city, and zip code. After giving this information to the person, they will ask exactly what you need, so be prepared to give detailed instructions.

III. COMMUNITY INFORMATION

A. Ownership of Property

There are several ways to find out who owns a particular piece of property in the City of Buffalo. First, you can go to the Erie County Clerk's Office at 25 Delaware Avenue, and ask at the Information Desk on the second floor - they will walk you through the procedure.

Also, you can call the City Assessments Department at 851-5733. If you have access to the Internet, you can check on line at the City of Buffalo's web site, www.city-

buffalo.com. Under "City Services," you can click on "Property Information." From there, you will be able to input the property address and can learn:

- the owner's name and home address;
- the date they obtained the property; and
- the assessed value of the property.

In addition, you can check Erie County's Internet Mapping Project at erie.gis.co.erie.ny.us/website/erie_help/help.htm. Once there, you can click on "Internet Mapping System," which will take you to a separate page showing you a map of the County. From there, you can click on "Locate Property" (at the bottom) and search by property address.

Once you know the owner's name, you can input that at either the City or County web site to determine what other properties he or she owns in the City of Buffalo.

B. Housing Court

Housing Court cases are now scheduled by district, and each district has one or more Housing Court Liaisons, who are appointed by the City Councilmembers. The Councilmembers and the Housing Court Liaisons receive the Court docket before each of their scheduled days, and appear in Court to offer input and assistance when appropriate. You should have a good working relationship with your Liaison, and should communicate with him or her regularly to track the status of any cases in your neighborhood. Also, you should let your Liaison know when you report a case to the Mayor's Complaint Line so that they can look for it once it is called for Court. The current Liaisons are:

| | |
|---|---|
| North District (Monday-9:30 a.m.) - | Joseph Golembek, North District Councilmember (851-5116) |
| Niagara District (Monday-2:00 p.m.) - | Harvey Garrett, West Side Community Collaborative (603-9762) |
| Masten District (Tuesday-9:30 a.m.) - | Robin Young, CAO/FLARE (838-6740); Antoine Thompson, Masten District Councilmember (851-5145) |
| Ellicott District (Wednesday-9:30 a.m.) - | Annette Tatum, Ellicott District CDC (856-3262, Ext. 13); Damicela Rodriguez, Hispanics United of Buffalo (856-7110); Joseph Delaney, Heart of the City (882-7661); Brian Davis, Ellicott District Councilmember (851-4980) |
| Lovejoy District (Wednesday-2:00 | Richard Fontana, Lovejoy District |

| | |
|--|--|
| p.m.) - | Councilmember (851-5151) |
| Fillmore District (Thursday-9:30 a.m.) - | Christina Van Ghle, East Side PRIDE (897-4522); Marlies Wesolowski, Lt. Col. Matt Urban Services Center (893-7222) |
| South District (Thursday-2:00 p.m.) - | Pamela Tait, South Buffalo NHS (823-1010) |
| University & Delaware Districts - (Friday-9:30 a.m.) | Amber Lusk, University Heights CDA (832-1010, Ext. 232); Kathleen Peterson, Parkside Community Center (838-1240) |

You also should know about a web site where you check the Court docket on line. At this site, you can search by the defendant's name and by the date of the Court calendar. Unfortunately, you cannot search by the property address, but we are attempting to modify this site so that you can do so in the near future. The web address is:

portal.courts.state.ny.us/pls/portal30/HSES_DEV.MENU_HOUSING_COURT.show

The easiest way to provide information to the Court about a given property or defendant is through your Housing Court Liaison, especially if you fear retaliation by the property owner (the Liaison refers to all complaints as coming from "concerned residents in the neighborhood"). You also may appear in Court yourself on the date the case is called. You can learn the date and time through your Liaison or through the web site.

Another way is to write to the Court directly. However, for the Court to consider the information, you must copy the property owner and the City of Buffalo on all correspondence. You can obtain the identity and address of the property owner by following the instructions under Section III (A), above. In order to send a copy of your letter to the City of Buffalo, you may send it to Peter Savage III, Esq., City of Buffalo Law Department, 1101 City Hall, Buffalo, New York 14202.

C. City Auctions

The City prepares a foreclosure list in advance of each auction, and a block club may request a foreclosure list by calling Bruna Michaux at 851-5734.

Also, you may search online by taking the following steps:

- go to the City's web site, www.city-buffalo.com;
- Under "City Services," click on "Property Information."
- At the left side of the page, click on "In rem 37 Property Foreclosure Site"

Once there, you may search for individual properties by street name or zip code.

D. New York State Building Code

The New York State Building Code is an eight volume set available at the Erie County Public Library. It is not available to be viewed on line, but can be ordered on line for approximately \$300.00 at electricalcontractor.net/The_Store/NY_Codes.htm.

An easier way to learn some of the more common housing violations is to speak with your Housing Court Liaison, your local housing inspector, or Housing Court Judge Nowak. Judge Nowak will be willing to meet with block clubs and invite the inspectors and/or the Liaisons who service your area. Also, you can review the Erie County Housing and Health Codes by calling 961-6800.

E. How to Start a Block Club or Tenant Council

Block Clubs are formed on streets that have single and double homes, and small apartment buildings while Tenant Councils are formed with residents of municipal housing and affordable housing projects. Both serve the same objectives:

- to insure the safety of the residents
- to keep the neighborhood clean
- to beautify the neighborhood
- to keep the property values up
- to seek funding for beautification projects
- to have a stronger voice in the city government, by expressing concerns as a group

To organize such a group you must find interested neighbors, discuss most pressing and concerned problems, set date for a meeting, and invite everyone. If help is needed to organize your club you may contact the following groups:

United Neighborhoods
1092 Main Street
Buffalo, NY 14209
(716) 882-7814 Telephone
(716) 882-7554 Fax

Masten Block Club Coalition, Inc.
118 East Utica Street
Buffalo, NY 14205
(716) 882-2055 Telephone
(716) 882-3060 Fax
Louise Bonner, Program Director
Nettie Anderson, President

After you have successfully organized your first meeting the next step is to register your block club or tenant council with United Neighborhoods (above) and the Board of Block Clubs of Buffalo, 1319 City Hall, Buffalo, NY 14202, (716) 851-6500.