

City of Warren, Michigan**Location:** Macomb County**Population:** 134,000 (2008)**Ethnic composition:** 81% White, 12% Black or African American**Median age:** 37.9 years**Adults ages 45 to 64:** 34,906**Adults ages 64 and older:** 20,250**Percentage of adults ages 45 and older compared with total population:** 41%**Median household income:** \$45,775 (2007)**Other key information:** Warren is Michigan's third-largest city. Its population is one of the oldest among large U.S. cities (100,000+).

MOBILITY | COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Industry: Local Government Agency**CHALLENGE**

Since 1970, Warren's population has consistently been declining faster than that of other U.S. cities. From 1980 – 1990, the city lost 10% of its population. It continued the trend by losing another 4.6% by 2000. As residents left, older neighborhoods were affected disproportionately. Blight and neglect in these neighborhoods posed public health and safety risks.

The mayor of Warren recognized that blight in Warren's older neighborhoods led to lower property values and higher crime rates, and contributed to the rising number of residents moving out of the city. And as people left, blight grew even worse. It became a vicious cycle. In an attempt to slow the decline of these neighborhoods, the city funded various projects through Community Development Block Grants, but made little progress.

Older neighborhoods in Warren consist of post-World War II wooden-frame housing on small 40-foot-wide lots. Streets are narrow, with very little open space. More older adults live here than in other sections of the city. Because of the rampant property neglect, many residents felt unsafe walking in the area or working in their own yards. Abandoned vehicles and overgrown weeds blocked sidewalks and other pathways, while rising crime kept older people trapped inside their homes and isolated from the community. Several people contacted the City of Warren about deteriorating conditions in these older neighborhoods. They wanted action.

SOLUTION

The mayor decided to create "Operation: Clean Sweep," a neighborhood-by-neighborhood, street-by-street, house-by-house cleanup project. Adding teeth to this project was the city's rental ordinance, which requires an inspection of rental property every two years.

The mayor established a task force that brought together representatives from various city departments, including police, public works, building, property maintenance, sanitation, and communications. Together, the departments coordinated a weeklong "sweep" through Warren's older neighborhoods with the goal of identifying and addressing blight conditions. Included in the sweep were a number of activities:

- Police would patrol neighborhoods looking for inoperable and unlicensed vehicles.
- City inspectors would walk house to house distributing warning letters for a variety of code violations, such as:
 - accumulation of waste, debris, and rubbish;
 - residences that housed businesses (e.g., trucking, snow removal) and equipment storage;
 - illegal signs (e.g., neon business signs), fences, and sheds;
 - improper storage of rubbish;
 - vacant buildings that are eyesores;
 - houses and garages in need of repair;
 - storage of metals, woods, vehicle parts, and discarded household items; and
 - residences with evidence of rodents.
- The sanitation department would pick up large appliances and other discarded items, such as furniture, tires, and carpeting, on the regularly scheduled trash collection day.
- The city would strictly enforce a new ordinance limiting the maximum allowable grass height to 6 inches.

The city looked for ways to involve local residents in Operation: Clean Sweep. It published a brochure describing the project, which was mailed to residents and distributed through a local supermarket. It promoted the project on local cable television stations through news releases and a series of public service announcements (PSAs). It set up a 24/7 hotline for residents to report blighted conditions, problems, and violations. And it trained a number of residents as volunteer inspectors to work with city staff in evaluating and reporting potential violations.

Operation: Clean Sweep was relatively inexpensive for the city. It did not spend significant funds to set up and publicize the program, nor did it need to request an appropriation of additional funds from the city council. Mailing the brochure to community members was the only “extra” expense for the city.

RESULTS

The city sent out more than 700 property maintenance code warning letters, and follow-up inspection showed 95% compliance. More than 150 vacant buildings were “posted” as requiring city certifications. Because owners were required to bring their property to code, the number of building permits rose, generating more than \$10,000 in new city revenue compared with the total for the same month in the previous year. Police officers identified blighted properties and referred those properties to the city’s maintenance division for follow-up. More than 75 buildings were cited as “unfit for human habitation” and scheduled for demolition at the property owner’s expense. Although tearing down these buildings lowered property tax revenue for the city, it also helped boost property values for other buildings in the neighborhood.



The city also removed nearly all the junk and inoperable vehicles from the neighborhoods. Police ticketed more than 500 vehicles that were inoperable or had expired license plates.

As an added bonus, the community volunteers trained at the beginning of the project stayed involved beyond the initial cleanup effort and continue to watch for problem areas in the neighborhoods. Richard Sabaugh, the city's director of public service, reports that "a couple of community volunteers from the sweep were hired by the city as part-time inspectors" because of their dedication to improving the neighborhood.

AGING WELL BENEFITS—MOBILITY/COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Cleaning up a neighborhood significantly improves life for residents of all ages, but especially for older residents.

Clearing sidewalks and curbs of debris, such as garbage, abandoned vehicles, and overgrown lawns, removes potential obstacles and enhances "walkability" for older residents. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, older adults prefer to get their exercise by walking. Safer sidewalks and cleaner streets help spur greater physical activity among older residents, who may have felt uneasy about getting out of their homes and walking, or working in their yards, prior to the cleanup effort. Research has shown that greater daily exercise promotes physical health and a sense of well-being.

Involving residents more directly in solving the neighborhood's problems builds a sense of security for older adults in the area. The perception that local people, both public officials and neighbors, are paying attention to the needs of "the block" reassures those who are more isolated, who may be physically impaired, or who may not have routine contact with others throughout their day. Heightened neighborhood awareness also wards off criminal activity, while building civic pride at the same time.

The project also yielded unanticipated benefits. Residents appreciate the interest shown by public officials, and this goodwill may well translate into productive partnerships with city leadership on future community-wide endeavors. And because the work required greater collaboration and communication among different city departments, says Sabaugh, "the project was also successful in promoting harmony and cohesiveness among the various city departments, line staff, and leadership."



PROMISING PRACTICES—LESSONS LEARNED

- Recognize that problems in the physical environment create social problems.
- Promote cohesiveness among city departments through collective projects and action.
- Plan ahead for questions and establish an accessible information source for residents' use.
- Promote community volunteerism by establishing formal roles working alongside city staff.
- Respond to community feedback by challenging and engaging citizens in developing solutions to problems.

REFERENCES

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This case study is part of [Aging Well in Communities: A Toolkit for Planning, Engagement & Action](#). This toolkit includes a community planning overview; guides for resident surveys, public forums, and focus groups; case studies; and a list of aging-related resources. For the complete toolkit, visit <http://www.civicpartnerships.org/aging-well>.

CONTACT

James Fouts
Mayor
City of Warren
One City Square
Warren, MI 48093
(586) 574-4520
mayor@cityofwarren.org

Richard Sabaugh
Director of Public Service
City of Warren
One City Square
Warren, MI 48093
(586) 574-4522
rsabaugh@cityofwarren.org

City of Warren
(586) 574-4520
www.cityofwarren.org



Center for Civic Partnerships
1851 Heritage Lane, Suite 250
Sacramento, CA 95815
Tel: (916) 646-8680
Fax: (916) 646-8660
Web site: www.civicpartnerships.org
Email: ccp@civicpartnerships.org