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On the front lines

Caring about 'how things look' can stem urban decay

By **Steve Patterson** / Staff Writer

Enough.

That single word has become a community rallying cry for some citizens fed up with "bad news" in their communities.

They've declared "enough is enough" in the name of preserving the health and safety of their hometowns.

There was a push against prejudice in Porter County that stemmed from a rash of hate-driven incidents.

In Munster, fliers were distributed and a neighborhood watch program started in response to a series of sexual assaults.

In Gary and Hammond, residents of select neighborhoods pushed to eliminate or stifle the growth of adult businesses.

Gary joined a list of cities filing lawsuits against gun manufacturers, citing the violence they've brought to their cities.

National experts say signs of a healthy community are those with visible, vocal members.

Local law enforcement agencies are doing more to promote that activist spirit.

U.S. Attorney Joseph Van Bokkelen has pushed the "Keeping Our Communities Safe" initiative since taking office two years ago.

"We have many separate initiatives under one umbrella here - each trying to keep our communities safe," said Jim Mesterharm, Van Bokkelen's specialist who helps develop community-based programs.

"It all goes back to grass-roots efforts of citizens who become more involved in their community, educating them on crime-prevention efforts and contacting their local police when they see suspicious activity."

Van Bokkelen is aware of the irony of the federal government administering local programs, and that's why he said he tries to

allow local folks to run those local programs. Among the programs are Weed & Seed, Project Safe Neighborhoods, the Northwest Indiana Violent Crimes Task Force, the anti-terrorism task force, homicide information sharing and law enforcement training programs.

"This isn't rocket science," Mesterharm said.

"When you talk about major incidents, it's not going to be the FBI or U.S. attorney who's going to see it first, it's going to be citizens and first responders like local police, firefighters, EMTs. ... We want to do more to better prepare those people."

Focus on little things

It can be something as little as the abandoned car parked in front of that house down the block for the last year.

Or the dog that never seems to stop barking.

Or the grass that is now knee-high next door to your house.

At least two Indiana cities are cracking down on what some would call minor infractions.

But to those living in Carmel and Terre Haute, such problems are the type they want to nip in the bud, not wanting them to spiral into larger problems.

Representatives from each city recently spoke at the Indiana Municipal Lawyers' Association's workshop on local code enforcement issues.

The message was that the little things are the very things that a community can focus on in order to make a difference in overall crime in their cities.

"As people learn about what we're trying to do, they see more of the code violations," said Adrienne Keeling, the first full-time code enforcement officer in Carmel, hired in 2001.

"The high grass, the weeds, abandoned properties - our zoning ordinances are pretty strict on those things."

Among the ways Keeling and the city have spread the message about zero tolerance for such headaches are through public access programs, as well as through local advertising.

"I wouldn't say we weren't strict before, but we're now devoted to it," she said. "It's been very well-received by the community, except for those found to be in violation. They don't like it too much."

Terre Haute began focusing on its zoning, code and trash ordinances. Every cited violation requires an appearance in court and with that come court fines, on top of anything that might come due to ordinance violation fines.

"It is clear," city officials wrote, "that a municipality may, without

infringing upon Constitutional prohibitions, regulate the use of private property and require private citizens to adhere to regulations enacted to protect the public's health, safety and welfare."

Sowing seeds of change

Sometimes there are unique approaches to generating an activist spirit from a community.

Van Bokkelen said in Richmond, Va., a program was started to provide jewelry to anyone turning in an illegal gun.

A local focus on anti-terrorism efforts resulted in a tip from Highland, Mesterharm said, where agents came up with fake identification equipment and other illicit activities.

Locally, Gary's Weed & Seed program has been successful enough that Van Bokkelen is now pushing for federal funding for similar programs in Hammond, South Bend and Gary's Glen Park area.

That program provides federal funds to develop community-based policing efforts and promotes partnerships between residents, community groups and police in high-crime areas. The five-year program provides a model for those groups to continue working even after the federal grant has expired, with the hope that the community then has the knowledge and resources needed to make a difference.

"When you plant a garden, the first thing you must do is get the weeds out," Van Bokkelen said. "Then, once you have fertile soil, you plant the seeds and it brings forth a garden."

Project Safe Neighborhoods, Van Bokkelen said, is focusing primarily on firearms reduction in Lake County, South Bend, Fort Wayne and Lafayette.

"Whether it's drug crimes or bank robberies, firearm violence is way too high," he said. "Our goal is to reduce the amount of gun violence."

As programs make an impact, Mesterharm said, more residents are seeing the success and trying to model it in their neighborhoods - that infectious result is one their office is hoping continues throughout Northwest Indiana.

"We're seeing more and more community groups being created, coming out and we're trying to stay ahead of the curve with that," he said. "We hope the momentum continues."



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