

# Getting Rid of Neighborhood Blight

Host: Paul Napier  
In-studio Guests: Leslie Evans, Empowerment Congress North Area Development Council  
Williana Johnson, Codewatch, Mayor's Volunteer Corps  
Insert Guest: Rubin Perez, Department of Building & Safety

Paul: It seems that every neighborhood has one. A house that's falling apart or even abandoned, or how about that pack rat who lives down the street? What could these people be thinking? Is there anything that we can do about it? Our next guests may just have the right answers, and we want to welcome, Leslie Evans, from the Empowerment Congress North Area Development Council, and Williana Johnson, Program Manager for the Mayor's Volunteer Corps. Williana, what does the term "codewatch" mean? It sounds like it's something very hush-hush.

Williana: We have volunteers throughout the community who monitor visual blight in their community. There are actually 14 codes that they look at, such as parking on the front lawn, not maintaining your property, graffiti, etc. These are things that can be taken care of very easily, so we have volunteers who we train to monitor those items.

Paul: I presume that it's a natural problem for some of our viewers. If they are in a neighborhood experiencing one of these blights, but they are fearful of getting involved because of the repercussions, is there a way of overcoming that?

Williana: We don't provide information about our volunteer to the public. The only people who actually have information about you, a volunteer, are the city departments, like Building and Safety, or the Bureau of Street Services. Volunteers would come to our office where we would train them. Leslie, for example, is one of our volunteers. He provides us with the address of, for example, someone parking on the front lawn.

Paul: Parking on the front lawn is a no-no?

Williana: Yes. Just because you own the property, doesn't mean that you can actually do anything and everything you want on that particular property.

Paul: Leslie, you as a volunteer get this information. What area are you from?

Leslie: Our Neighborhood Council is basically the area from the 10 freeway down to Martin Luther King Blvd., and from Figueroa basically to Arlington.

Paul: What are some of the buildings or neighborhoods that are involved?

Leslie: USC is in our area and a big part of the historic West Adams District. A big part of it is a poor Latino and African American. Frankly, that's most of where we work with our Neighborhood Council's Public Safety Committee. We open the door to whoever has a complaint. We work with all the Block Clubs, and people can bring just about anything there.

There are certain things that we don't touch. If you have a noisy neighbor or you have somebody that drinks too much, we don't touch it.

Paul: What's the reason for that? Is that a police matter?

Leslie: It's because you can't verify that the truth of the matter, and we don't want to be put in that position. We don't want to accuse somebody of something even though what we put in our reports has no legal standing until the City investigates. We want to be pretty sure that the conditions are there, but we get everything. We get drug dealers, gangs selling drugs on a street corner, we go and look. Then we contact the Senior Lead Officer, the Neighborhood Prosecutor, the City Council member who's involved in that area, and we try to concentrate City resources on cleaning it up. It might be a derelict building. It might be the pack rat you mentioned, we have one of those.

Paul: In the case of the pack rat, it's an ongoing thing, and perhaps by photographs and witnesses. It's something you can sustain in trying to say to the pack rat, hey this is the problem and they can't really deny it, even though they may attempt to deny it. Obviously, there is something there. You go one way or another and you inform the violator and then how much time do they have to react before you have to the next level?

Leslie: A pack rat is one of the most difficult problems to deal with because the person's got some sort of mental issue, which is why they fill up their property with old junk. We have one of those, and we raised it in our committee because we had several complaints from neighbors and we have a City Attorney who's a member of our committee. The Neighborhood Council sits down with the Neighborhood Prosecutor and we say this property has this problem here and they'll say, "we've known about this for years and we've had them in court years ago and we gave up because he's an old guy and he doesn't want to get rid of his stuff."

Paul: Why don't we take a look at some examples of properties that are in need of repair and a project that's brought safety back into a neighborhood? Let's take a look.

<<video clip>>

Rubin: Citizens were concerned about this vacant and vandalized building. There's graffiti on one side of the building. There is an ordinance in the City that requires that owners maintain the property so that vandals can't get it or break into these properties. We have what we call a Vacant Building Ordinance that requires that the owners submit a plan on what they intend to do with these properties. They can't just leave it vacant. It has to be properly secured and fenced. Here we have a case where we have a single family dwelling that's in dire need of maintenance and repair. We've been working with the owner and the City Attorney's Office to remove a large accumulation of miscellaneous storage. Storage became a problem when there's blocked exits or access to required parking space and also, in some cases, it can create a fire hazard.

Leslie: Our Neighborhood Council had a lot of complaints about speeding here along Budlong, 26<sup>th</sup> St., and Jefferson Blvd. It wasn't something that we were able to pick up on because we had a lot of problems, but one day a whole family came to my door at dinner time to tell me that a car had just made a fast left turn, jumped the curb, knocked down their fence and went right up against their house. That whole fence was knocked down and the car drove right up to their porch, and they were just lucky that nobody was killed. They said that that was the second time

in year that had happened where they desperately wanted some help from the Neighborhood Council to get stop signs put in to try to prevent this from happening again. So we called The Department of Transportation and we actually got a three-way stop sign in here. For the first time it's safe here. So, it's something that really needed to be done. Our lives were at risk here and we feel it was an important accomplishment. Our very first Neighborhood Council meeting, after we put the sign up, the family came to the meeting and brought us a thank you card. That was the first time that ever happened.

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Paul: Leslie, you really put a stop to the problem.

Leslie: It's everything. It's things on City property, things on private property.

Paul: I want to make sure that I understand here. There's going to be a line of distinction some place between trying to elicit a response favorably from the person who's causing the blight, and when it's necessary to get heavy, perhaps involving the police. Where do you draw the line?

Williana: What we do is send a notice to the person who's in violation. The idea is to educate both the owner and the tenant about the problem. If it's the tenant who's in violation, then by sending the owner the letter, the owner will push the tenant because they don't want to receive a fine.

Paul: What if they don't comply?

Williana: We refer them to the enforcing agency, which is Building and Safety, Bureau of Street Services, or Housing.

Paul: While most people interpret Building and Safety as dealing with structures, even parking the car on the lawn would come under Building and Safety. Is that right?

Williana: Building and Safety deals with public, private, residential properties.

Paul: Leslie, how long have you been doing this?

Leslie: Since July of last year, and in that period we had 76 different locations that we're tracking on a monthly report, which goes directly to the Neighborhood Prosecutor and she verifies that there's a reasonable problem in each one of those locations. From there they go to Building and Safety, Health Department, or whatever agency it needs to go to. I also deal directly with the four Senior Lead Officers and we have a lot of relation with the police officer, and we also deal with the staff of our two City Council districts, Bernard Parks and Ed Reyes'. They are very cooperative. They get a copy of the report, after it's approved by the Neighborhood Council. We don't try to deal directly with owners. We have no obligation to do that. We get a complaint and try to verify that it's real. We try to get the City inspectors and have them verify that it's real. They're the ones with the enforcement power.

Paul: Welcome back to the Neighborhood Café, so Leslie Evans, just before the break we were talking about blights in the neighborhood and your volunteerism. How does the Police Department's Senior Lead Officer or the City Attorney's Neighborhood Prosecutor assist you? Tell us about that.

Leslie: They're actually crucial to making this whole thing work. Without contacts through them, this whole thing really wouldn't happen. The Neighborhood Prosecutor must find some place to connect with the community, and this is definitely some place to do it. You know they can't go to every block, and there's not much point to sitting at a Neighborhood Council meeting where there's another 10 things on the agenda. Our Neighborhood Prosecutor comes to every Public Safety Committee Meeting. We go over a list of 20-25 locations each time and see what's happened. She gets information from us, she gives us back information like, "this one has gone to Building and Safety, this one there's a hearing schedule, this one is a zoning issue, the police are doing something about this one." There's an exchange of information between the community and the City agency.

If it's strictly a police issue, then not only is the Neighborhood Prosecutor's involved, but the Senior Lead Officer is as well. I canvas the four Senior Leads at least four times a month. What's the chief problem that people are complaining about in this area that's localized enough for us to work on it over time and then often they'll come. We had a hearing at City Hall once where Ed Reyes came, the Senior Lead Officer, and I came to re-open an empty parking lot that the City owned next to a children's park that they had locked up for years that had become a dumping site, and homeless encampment. It had become a problem for the neighborhood. I got the Senior Lead Officer to testify and I testified, the Ed Reyes' person talked, and we finally got it cleared up, so it's really important to have that live contact with people who have some actual ability to get something done. That's the partnership here.

Paul: Williana, obviously we can't start from scratch and say we don't like what's happening here and initiate the process. I'm assuming there's a little bit of training is advisable.

Williana: Yes. What you would do is go to a one day training, 4-6 hours, after the volunteer has been interviewed, and we have a Building and Safety, Bureau of Street Services and, the Housing Inspector do the training. They tell the volunteer, what to look for. For instance, if we have a property where the grass is dry and cut all the way down, then that's not something that you should be involved in because people are actually maintaining it.

Paul: If they let the grass grow?

Williana: If they let the grass grow waist high, that's a problem that you should refer to our office, so we could send them a notice. After the training has occurred, sometimes the volunteer would hook-up with another volunteer and they would go out on their volunteer duties. The volunteer duties can be one hour, three hours, it depends. For example, if Leslie's on his way home and sees a particular property, he provides us with the address.

Paul: Obviously, there's the need for efficiency here. Has the Neighborhood Council made a difference in measuring how much success there's been?

Leslie: I think it's been a fantastic success. We have cleared 42 locations in the periods of July of last year until right now. That's compared to any Block Clubs or all the Block Clubs could have done in that time. What the Neighborhood Council did was three times without this tie through the Neighborhood Council and the City Attorney and City agencies. They listen to the Neighborhood Councils in a way they can't to all the myriad of Block Clubs.

Paul: What are Block Clubs?

Leslie: Block Clubs are your little local neighborhood associations. I'm actually the president of one of the Block Clubs. We've got approximately 40 members in the area immediately around my neighborhood, which is about 6 to 8 blocks. The Neighborhood Council serves about 64,000 people and the City treats them very differently. They treat them as having a much higher priority. It's already been filtered from many of these very little Block Clubs. The City has devoted a lot more resources to try to solve the problems that come from the Neighborhood Councils than one that come from 20 or 30 people.

Paul: You're trying to overcome the myriad of problems that come from your jurisdiction, we're talking about blight, whether it's a car parked on a lawn or a house that's falling down, like the one we saw on the tape there. What would you say is your percentage of success once you initiate the process?

Williana: Our success rate is approximately 70% because of the fact when the person who's in violation receives a letter, it's a very official letter. Therefore, they would call our office and will say, "I received a letter from your office." Basically, they're worried that they might be fined.

Paul: Is that letter printed on City letterhead?

Williana: It has our Codewatch Logo on it.

Paul: There's something official about it, right? Williana says 70%, how would you equate that with your success, Leslie?

Leslie: There's no way that we're going to get that clearance rate because we have such a broader type of issue. We've got a gang entrenched on a street corner selling drugs, which went on for several years and it was cleared up. Some of these cases are the really hard core cases, like that derelict house that we saw. That house was sitting there for 14 years according to one neighbor, and 20 years according to another without anyone doing anything about it, so the owner was very reluctant. After 6 or 8 months we finally achieved a meeting between the owner and the Police Department and the City Attorney to lay out a plan to fix that place. We got progress on it. These are the hard core issues.

Paul: What would you estimate the measure would be?

Leslie: About 55% of clearance. There are some things that we know we can't. A noisy night club or dangerous toys that are being sold on ice cream trucks. These things are really beyond what our community can do, except to really call attention to them.

Paul: You mentioned that it was several years that the blighted house was sitting there and there was no attempt to clean it up, would you estimate that if it wasn't for your Neighborhood Council, the house would still be sitting there.

Leslie: Absolutely! Nothing was happening after 15 or 20 years. I think to get the owner in and a plan developed even after 6 months is a great achievement there. Wasn't going to happen if we didn't do it.

Paul: You were talking about the block groups before, which had a certain degree of effectiveness, but not certainly to the degree that Neighborhood Councils do. Neighborhood Councils' philosophy is relatively new in Los Angeles and it appears to be working. We would

like our viewers to know that whatever appears to be the blight problem in their community that there is the prospect that by utilizing the Neighborhood Council that those problems are going to get some attention if not correction. Can we conclude that as really a tribute to the force of the Neighborhood Council?

Leslie: Of course. We get it because what we do is extremely specific. We have a list of this location what the problem is and we have a photograph, which is partly to protect the owner in agreement so that they know that we're not going to report things that can't be verified. We don't want the owners unhappy. Once we have a digital photograph we send that out with the report, so that when we take it to some City agency they can say "Oh, yeah, the problem is really there." I go around once a month with a digital camera and if anything has improved, then I take a new photograph, so the photograph is always up-to-date. It protects the owner and keeps the City informed of what the status of each one of these is and get some action.

Paul: You were talking about drugs before and gangs accumulating.

Leslie: I don't photograph gangs and drugs. That's too risky.

Paul: Is that lack of evidence or is it the strength of the neighborhood because everybody knows it's happening.

Leslie: There are two different gang type situations. One is behind closed doors, they're dealing drugs. In that case, I'm probably going to leave it alone, unless the police have already sensed that something is going on there or I have something trustworthy or resourceful. Gangs on the street corner, everybody knows that they're there. I can see them, everyone else can see them, but I'm not going to go out with a camera and stand there and photograph an armed drug dealer. That's suicidal. I'm not going to do that, but what I will do is our committee will put that location on the list and what the list does is that the Neighborhood Prosecutor will tell us this. The list will help the City prioritize its resources. Yes, often the police already know about it, but what the Neighborhood Council says is that these are priority locations for our councils and resident stakeholders. They care about maybe more than other problems that they're looking at, so please try to do something about it. We're concerned, so please try to do something about it. That's the partnership.

Paul: Williana, even though it might appear to some that with the Neighborhood Council philosophy, we've added another level of bureaucracy, if you will, apparently it is working. Whatever the problem is in you neighborhood, particularly when it comes to blight because it's a bringing together of neighbors beyond the block groups, if I might, and it seems to be working, rather than going to the City Council person's office.

Williana: Yes. Especially with our program. The volunteers feel that they have a hand in it. "This is my neighborhood. I'm going to protect it and I'm going to take care of it." If there's a particular problem then we know what to do. We can go to the Neighborhood Council, we don't necessarily always have to go to the Mayor's Office or the Council member's office. The Neighborhood Council, I think, is a very good thing. We work hand-in-hand together.

Paul: As with all undertakings, there's seldom complete success, so what is it that you're looking for in ways of improvement or enhancement. Is there anything that would come to mind or is there anything that you feel is not working or do you have a handle on the problem?

Leslie: I think things are working extremely well. I think that the way we document things, the way that people start to come to us with problems. At almost every one of our meetings, we have neighbors that we've never seen before. They will come and say that we've got this type of a problem. We've got a business that's opened up on Jefferson, for example, that is pouring solvents into the street and it's stinking up the whole block. Other places are applying for a liquor permit and this could be a blight to the neighborhood. Can you help us oppose that? Things like that, so that's really good. What we need always are volunteers, if for example, someone would seriously take-up the homeless issue, find resources to take up the issue. We always need more volunteers and that's true of all these groups.

Paul: Williana, I'm sure you would say "Amen" to that.

Williana: Amen to that. With Codewatch, not only are we looking for volunteers, but the Mayor's Volunteer Corps is also looking for volunteers. Since we approximately have 80 City departments, all these department's are always looking for volunteers that would assist them in their office, so if anyone is interested they can always call our office.

Paul: We're going to have in a moment the number that they can call, but we can encourage our viewers not only to get involved in the Neighborhood Councils, but how to get a hold of the volunteer programs that they may want to subscribe and help clean-up the blight in their neighborhood. We've come to that part of the show, which is positively and guaranteed to happen because young Nancy is going to come in and present the check and this is not a voluntary undertaking.

We're just about of time and I would like to thank our guests, Leslie Evans from the Empowerment Congress North Area Development Council and Williana Johnson our Program Manager for the Mayor's Volunteer Corps and as we were discussing before, if you have any questions or topics that you would like to see covered in future shows, email your comments to the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment at [www.lacityneighborhoods.com](http://www.lacityneighborhoods.com) or you can call toll-free 866-LAHELPS and for more information on any City service just call 3-1-1. That's 3-1-1, your one call to City Hall. For everyone here at the Neighborhood Café, I'm Paul Napier.