

## **SUBSTANDARD HOUSING IN GARDEN GROVE**

### **A Growing Problem**

The City of Garden Grove has a large percentage of aging housing. Many properties have not had the investment in repair and rehabilitation that is needed to keep an older property viable, and preventing it from becoming substandard. Like many communities, Garden Grove is facing problems of deteriorating housing stock, which can result in blighted neighborhoods and a downward cycle of disinvestment.

This report will look at the problem of substandard housing in Garden Grove and the local government enforcement agencies responsible for dealing with it. A specialized Building Abatement Unit was created in the hope of improving legal enforcement on problem properties. How is the Building Abatement Unit doing? And where can an owner get help with home repairs if they can no longer afford to keep the property up? In addition to answering these questions, we hope to encourage citizens to take an active role in preventing blight in their communities by demanding enforcement of housing standards and knowing what resources are available to help.

### **Building Abatement Unit**

The goal of the Building Abatement Unit is to establish safe housing through the enforcement of adopted codes and ordinances for building safety and revitalization of mature, built-out neighborhoods and commercial districts in Garden Grove. Revitalization includes clean, safe communities that attract new residents with a variety of new and rehabilitated housing, streamlined development-redevelopment processes and up-to-date infrastructure. Call (714) 741-5172, e-mail @ [Building\\_Services/Building\\_Abatement](mailto:Building_Services/Building_Abatement) or see [Building Abatement Complaint Form](#) to provide information regarding investigation and abatement of construction without permits, garage conversions, and substandard housing conditions.

### **Code Enforcement Unit**

The staff of Code Enforcement Officers work to investigate complaints of property maintenance violations. If a violation is noted, our Officers work with the property owners and tenants to correct any violations and bring the property into compliance with City codes.

See [City's Zoning Codes](#), for descriptions of "Land Use" violations. Please call the Code Enforcement office at (714) 741-5358 and leave your name, address, and phone number. A Code Enforcement Officer will return your call. Or if you prefer, you may contact us via email at [Code Enforcement](#).

## **Extent of the Problem**

What is "substandard housing"? A technical definition could include any residential property that does not meet all 1997 Uniform Housing Codes. However, clearly one minor code violation in an otherwise well-maintained house does not create community blight. The American Housing Survey defines a substandard house as having severe physical problems when it lacks necessary plumbing fixtures, heating, has no electricity or exposed wires, broken staircase or elevator, and various maintenance problems such as water leaks and cracks in walls. Moderate physical problems involve similar issues, but of less magnitude.

One of the great aspects to Garden Grove housing is the large lot sizes available. This also creates an opportunity for adding additions, in some cases illegal (non-permitted) structures. It is very common to find a permitted single-family residence converted to a multi-family dwelling with 6-8 bedrooms and additional bathrooms. Many garages are illegally converted to living space as well as sheds and workshop conversions.

The older the housing stock, the more likely the homes will become dilapidated which, in some cases, will lead to abandonment. In general, the older the housing stock, the higher the vacancy rate. Vacancy rates are affected by market conditions, as well as the condition of the property. Substandard property will be harder to rent or sell than property in good condition. Generally, the older housing is smaller and lacks the amenities of new housing. An owner unwilling or unable to make repairs will eventually give up and leave the property abandoned and vacant.

## **Neighborhood Issues**

Even one noticeably blighted property can affect attitudes and property values in a neighborhood. Substandard housing is not just a problem for the tenants or homeowners who live in it. It is a community problem that, if not addressed, could start a downward spiral. It is a quality of life issue where high density housing (overcrowding) can increase the rate of deterioration and affect an entire neighborhood with reduced parking, noise and crime. Often neighbors are quick to blame "absentee landlords" or "Section 8 tenants" for deteriorating conditions, but often owner-occupied homes can be unmaintained.

As neighborhoods age and the housing stock becomes older, the market moves toward lower income owners and tenants. An apartment complex built in 1970 will no longer be able to attract higher income renters without a major investment in rehabilitation "to make it new again." The small, slab, single-family homes with one-bathroom that were attractive to young families when new, have not aged well, and no longer have appeal even to

first-time buyers. Larger, quality homes of the past can be made marketable to homeowners through investment in rehab. The smaller and less expensive houses are often bought by investors and rented.

The Housing Voucher program, often called Section 8, administered by the Garden Grove Housing Authority provides rental assistance to families based on their income. Many of these tenants have jobs, while other tenants receive only disability benefits and cannot afford to pay rent without assistance. The Housing Voucher program allows the family to find housing on the private rental market and use the voucher to help pay the rent. The family chooses the neighborhood and property that they want to rent. The house or apartment is then inspected by the Garden Grove Housing Authority Inspector to be sure it meets basic standards. The property receives an annual inspection, however, the family or a neighbor can request an inspection at any time if they believe the property is not being maintained.

If neighbors want to take action to address a blighted property, the first step is to find out who owns the property. Contacting the owner and expressing concern about the condition of the property and its effect on property values in the neighborhood is often enough to get action. If contacting the owner is not successful, the next step is to file a complaint with the Building Abatement Unit or the responsible agency. See [Building Abatement Complaint Form](#). Finding the responsible agency can oftentimes be more difficult than finding the owner.

### **Who is Responsible for Enforcement?**

The Building Abatement Unit addresses issues primarily dealing with the structures on the property. The 1997 Uniform Housing Code, as adopted by the City, is used by the Building Abatement Unit in the enforcement of housing standards.

Building codes are the primary responsibility of the Building Services Division of which the Building Abatement Unit is a part. Its jurisdiction is limited to the City. The Garden Grove Fire Department will be involved if fire safety hazards exist at commercial establishments. The Code Enforcement Unit enforces the City Municipal Codes dealing with land use issues.

When a complaint is filed with the Building Abatement Unit, the case is assigned to an inspector who investigates the complaint, prepares a "Notice of Corrections" and directs repairs to be made in a timely manner. Garden Grove handles over 300 complaints per year with three (3) inspectors to take care of them. Owners have varying amounts of time (30-60 days, with some extensions), depending on the severity of the problems, to remedy. If these directives are ignored, the issue is sent through the civil process and violators face possible fines. The owners may appeal the action according to the provisions of the Uniform Housing Code.

Many complaints to Building Abatement are received from Code Enforcement, the Fire Department, and the Police Department, but individuals can lodge a complaint. Complaints are handled by certified Building Inspectors and result in field orders for corrections. If the property is unsafe and in immediate danger of causing bodily harm, then a "Notice and Order" is sent to the property owner for a more immediate response.

A complaint that results in an unsafe building order is handled by letters to the owners and/or meetings with the owners. In some cases, the City may take the owner to court. This is a cumbersome and expensive process and is not resorted to unless all other options have failed.

Dealing with building complaints is often a slow and difficult process. It may take as long as a year to adequately enforce orders from the Unit on substandard housing. This can be very frustrating for neighbors left with deteriorating neighborhoods and declining property values.

### **Neighborhood Improvement (Proactive)**

In addition to a complaint process, the City has proactive programs available through the Neighborhood Improvement Division. Rehabilitation Grants for seniors and mobilehome residents, which are offered to qualifying property owners to address substandard conditions, code violations and safety and accessibility. Grant program details and applications are available online or can be reached by calling the Neighborhood Improvement Division. Depending on funding, rehabilitation loans are periodically made available to income-qualified homeowners. There is currently a waiting list for residents who are interested in receiving a rehabilitation loan.

### **Adopted Codes**

Codes and Ordinances as adopted are based on the 1997 Uniform Housing Code, State Housing Statutes, the California Building Code 2007 edition, and the associated model codes which cover serious substandard or "unsafe" conditions. These substandard codes also cover other conditions that are unsightly but not necessarily unsafe (such as missing/torn screens, broken or missing windows, peeling siding or paint).

### **Abandoned Property**

Buildings that sit vacant can be a serious problem in our community. A significant number of properties have fallen into foreclosure within the City and the Building Abatement Unit finds many cases where owners cannot be found, have moved or died. Bank or real estate companies usually handle the abandoned properties but are unwilling to invest any additional money into the properties for maintenance. The property can be in bad condition and stripped of any appliances and fixtures, which could result in substandard if not unsafe conditions for future owners.

The inspector performs a record check to verify County and City permits on the property. He then goes out on one of perhaps many inspections, takes pictures, documents the findings and begins the process of preparing an initial letter of corrections for the owner of record. Matters of health are turned over to the County Environmental Health Agency; e.g., swimming pools, stagnant water, filthy conditions, etc. If senior or childcare issues are observed, the Department of Social Services or Adult Protective Services are called in.

When the City is aware of any Substandard conditions on an abandoned property a "Notice of Substandard Building" is recorded as a "Lien" with the County Recorder's office. This can create a catch-22 situation. When a title search is conducted a lender is not willing to make a loan available for the property until the lien has been removed. The lien is not removed until the corrections have been completed by the owner of record, which in most cases is a bank.

The City is reluctant to board up houses, which could cause additional safety concerns. A boarded-up house with an unkempt yard can have a very negative effect on property values in the community. It is difficult to fast track vacant and abandoned property, due to the lack of staff, the lawyers' priorities, and the possibility of bank liens complicating the legal process.

If an abandoned building is in bad shape and poses a serious safety hazard, it can be condemned and razed by the jurisdiction.

### **Where Can You Get Help with Repairs?**

Enforcement is only successful if there are financial resources to make the needed repairs. The following resources are available to Garden Grove property owners:

**Neighborhood Improvement Dept.** - Through the grant and loan programs owners can borrow money to repair or remodel their homes. There are income qualifications. For information call 714-741-5330.

**Fair Housing Council of Orange County** - For renters not receiving timely repairs made to rental properties. For information call 714-569-0823.

**Community Action Partnership** - This nonprofit agency receives funding from a variety of sources that allows it to provide free repairs for income-qualified homeowners in certain jurisdictions. For information call 714-897-6670.

**Reverse Mortgages For Seniors** - FHA (Federal Housing Administration) has a loan that is available to homeowners 62 years and older. The

homeowner can borrow based on their equity in the house, but no repayment is made as long as the borrower continues to live in the house. This allows seniors who own their home, but who have little income, to get the money to make repairs. For information call the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

**Council on Aging** – This nonprofit corporation is dedicated to promoting adult empowerment, abuse prevention and advocacy for the rights and dignity of those experiencing health and aging challenges. For information call 714-479-0107.

**Direct Assistance Program** – This program is sponsored by The Gas Company, and provides no cost energy saving home improvements for qualified, low-income renters and homeowners. For information call 800-331-7593.