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Neighbors work to protect vacant homes

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Longtime Detroit resident Marsha Bruhn was in the hospital for knee surgery last year when a neighbor called to tell her the vacant house next to her home had been broken into yet again.

A homeowner in the proud old North Rosedale Park district, Bruhn described the call as her "I'm mad and not going to take it anymore" moment.

First, she bought the foreclosed house from the bank. Then she poured tens of thousands of dollars into a new kitchen, lighting and other improvements. She sold it recently for a modest profit to a young family who are now her neighbors.

In this way, Bruhn plugged one hole in the fabric of regional life.

Across southeast Michigan, people are fighting back against a foreclosure crisis that has touched about 60,000 residences in Detroit alone, and many more in suburban areas, according to estimates from government, nonprofit and real estate experts.

In Warren, Mayor Jim Fouts drives the city to note examples of blighted buildings, then gets the owners or his city workers to take action. In Dearborn, the city offers free trees to residents to beautify their front lawns.

In Pontiac, the nonprofit Lighthouse Community Development has built or rehabilitated more than 100 houses in recent years to fight blight.

And in the city of Detroit, where the foreclosure crisis has worsened decades of decay, guarding foreclosed and vacant houses against blight and burglars has become the mission of thousands of volunteers.

"A very big issue is how homes look from the street," said Steve Wasko, an Indian Village resident and spokesman for Detroit Public Schools who routinely patrols his neighborhood making minor repairs to vacant homes.

In Detroit neighborhoods such as Boston-Edison and Indian Village, citizen volunteers plant flowers at vacant houses, mow the lawns and take turns parking their cars in the driveways to make the vacant homes appear occupied.

Volunteers hang curtains in vacant windows and install motion detectors in empty houses to catch burglars in the act, with several arrests recorded in Indian Village alone.

Bruhn said her efforts with the house next door were aimed not just at repairing the damage there but at maintaining the value of the street and of her own immaculate Tudor revival house.

"Everybody's doing what they can to try to maintain the appearance of the area," said Bruhn, retired director of the City Planning Commission.

Such volunteer efforts, long a part of life in Detroit, are now being aided by cash and technical

assistance from several nonprofit organizations, including the Kresge Foundation and Community Legal Resources.

Last month, Kresge and CLR gave grants of \$4,000 to \$9,700 to nine community groups in the city to pay for paint, lightbulbs, security cameras and other equipment to fight the effects of foreclosure blight, one house at a time.

Heidi Mucherie, CLR executive director, said the grants were designed to boost the effectiveness of neighborhood efforts already under way.

"We feel this grant is really an important way to reimburse them and incentivize them to do work that they're already doing, but where they really just need a little bit of help in getting it done," she said.

On a biting cold morning last Sunday, three volunteers from Indian Village, Doug Way, 41, D.C. Moore, 65, and Wasko, 46, braved the frigid temperatures to fight blight on one of their regular neighborhood patrols.

They boarded up windows at two vacant homes in Indian Village and conducted a makeshift repair of a garage door hanging askew.

At a vacant home, Wasko and Way used a power saw to trim some plywood to fit over a vacant window while Moore quipped about their "Old World craftsmanship."

Once screwed into place, the plywood would keep out casual entry and make the house look more secure.

"An open window says, 'Crawl through me,' " Moore said. "There's a lot of crime of opportunity that, if we make the opportunity more difficult, you don't get the crime."

Motion detectors placed inside vacant homes have been particularly helpful, Wasko said. When the detector signals that someone is inside a vacant house, a neighbor alerts other residents and police.

"By the time the guy realizes he's been caught, the place is surrounded," Wasko said.

Neighbors who go to such lengths to save vacant properties say it's just part of urban life today.

"I don't regret it at all," Bruhn said of her work on the house next door. "It was a six-month labor of love."

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