

# Vacant House on the Block: What Can Neighbors Do?

All too often, Minneapolis residents find a vacant house on their block. These simple tips will help you ensure the neighborhood is safe until someone new moves in.



## Adopt a Vacant House

Vacant properties can pose safety challenges for everyone — neighbors, property owners, police officers, and firefighters. The City of Minneapolis is taking comprehensive measures to make all of our neighborhoods safer, including those affected by foreclosed or vacant properties.

City leaders are encouraging neighbors and block clubs to work together by “adopting” a vacant property on the block. **It’s important for neighbors to report any suspicious or illegal activity by calling 911.**

- If you see someone inside or around a vacant property, **call 911**. Do not confront someone who is trespassing or living temporarily in a vacant property.
- **Call 311** to report a property that is open to trespass (including one that has not been boarded), or if you observe anything on the property that could be a health or safety issue.
- Check on a vacant property occasionally to ensure doors and windows are closed and that the building is not open to trespass.
- You may maintain the public space—sidewalks and alleys—around vacant properties. As long as you stay on public space, it’s okay to shovel snow, rake leaves, and pick up or remove flyers and litter.
- Some people, with an owner’s permission, put a pot of flowers on the porch or a wreath on the door to make the house looked lived in.
- Remember that it’s not okay to dig, climb on or enter a building or make improvements to vacant property without written consent from the owner.
- If your block has a property with an ongoing problem, call your crime prevention specialist at your police precinct. They can work with you to resolve a variety of “problem property” issues.

## Contact the Owner With Your Concerns

Houses become vacant for many reasons — foreclosures, death in the family, abandonment, or just changes in tenants. Sometimes the owner just ignores problems or doesn’t hear from anyone that there is a problem.

You can **get the name and address of the property owner** from the County Property Taxation Office, 612-348-3011. This information is also available on the City of Minneapolis web site at [www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/propertyinfo](http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/propertyinfo). After you’ve found the property by address, select “Structure Information” to view the owner’s address and phone number (if available). If it is a rental property, you can click on “Rental History” and find the owner or the property manager and contact information.

**First, contact the property owner in writing, informing him/her of your concerns.** Compose a letter clearly stating the address and location of the building in question. Next, list your concerns. Be as specific as possible about your complaints and what your expectations are. Have everyone in your block club sign the letter. As a rule, the more signatures the better. Mail one copy of the completed letter to the property owner, one copy to your council member, retain one copy for your block club files, and send a copy to your CCP/SAFE crime prevention specialist.

If your letter doesn’t bring appropriate response, however, you should **invite the owner to a block club meeting**, where you can discuss your concerns.

**If there is the appearance of past criminal activity**, contact the Police Department and send them a copy of your letter. If you need help in assessing the situation, or are



unsure of which division of the Police Department to call, contact your CCP/SAFE crime prevention specialist.

## A Few Other Tips and Tricks

**If you suspect a house has gone into foreclosure**, you can try to find details. Go to the Hennepin County website <http://www4.co.hennepin.mn.us/webforeclosure/search.asp> Type in the address of the property in question. The page that comes up will tell you when the sheriff's sale occurred, who held the mortgage, and when the redemption period expires.

Spend a little time with a search engine such as **Google** or **Bing** to get contact information for the holder of the mortgage.

If you see signs that someone has entered the house and stolen copper pipe or other valuable items, **call 311** and request that an inspector stop at this house and board it if necessary. **If you smell gas, call 911** and get far away from the house.

Many **neighborhood associations** track vacant properties in the neighborhood. Contacting the association can sometimes yield valuable information and advice from other blocks. See <http://www.minneapolismn.gov/about/maps/neighborhoods.asp> for neighborhood maps.

## When Does the City Step In?

**Trash and rubbish/mowing/shoveling:** Housing inspectors follow up on 311 complaints and write orders as appropriate. If the work isn't completed, the City hires contractors to do the work. In the case of vacant buildings, most are put on a regular schedule for shoveling and mowing.

**Major maintenance:** The City doesn't do major maintenance work on buildings it does not own.

**Vacant Building Registration (VBR):** If a building is vacant and open to trespass but not boarded, call



## 911 and 311

You need to remember only two numbers to give information to the city — 911 and 311.

**Call 911** in an emergency, when you need the police or fire department to respond.

**Call 311** when you want to reach a city department for something that is not life threatening. Examples:

- Unshoveled sidewalk or unmowed yard
- Unauthorized people going into a house
- Rodents or pests
- Trash, rubbish, litter
- Graffiti

311. The Problem Properties Unit of Regulatory Services can begin the process to have it boarded if it is not already started. The owner of a building must be notified and given 6 days to secure the building. After that, the city will reinspect and may arrange to board the house, adding 7 to 10 days. Police can immediately board a building in emergencies.

The VBR program is the City's primary tool to track, monitor, and manage nuisance vacant properties. Owners pay a yearly fee, \$6746 in 2011, to pay costs related to the program. Not all vacant buildings qualify; properties that have one or more of these conditions may be required to register:

- Condemned — requiring a code compliance inspection. See [condemned properties](#)
- Unoccupied and unsecured for five days or more
- Unoccupied and secured by means other than those normally used in the design of the building for 30 days or more
- Unoccupied with multiple housing maintenance, fire or building code violations existing for 30 days or more
- Unoccupied more than 365 days with an order having been issued to correct a nuisance condition pursuant to section 227.90.
- A vacant building or structure that is unable to receive a certificate of occupancy due to work stoppage or expired permits

See <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/inspections/ch249list.asp> for more information about the VBR program, including a list of properties on the list.

**Spanish- Atención.** Si desea recibir asistencia gratuita para traducir esta información, llame 612-673-2700

**Somali- Ogow.** Haddii aad dooneyso in lagaa kaalmeeyo tarjamadda macluumaadkani oo lacag la' aan wac 612-673-3500

**Hmong-Ceeb toom.** Yog koj xav tau kev pab txhais cov xov no rau koj dawb, hu 612-673-2800

**Sign Language Interpreter** -- 612-673-3220 TTY: 612-673-2157.

If you want help translating this information in any other language, call 612-673-3737