

# Edmonton Fire Rescue Services – Community Property Safety Team

## COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION CASE STUDY

### The Opportunity

Vacant or abandoned structures present challenges to all communities. The presence of such structures can impact the quality of life for those living nearby, take a financial toll through decreasing property values and the cost of building code enforcement by the local government, and, more importantly, pose a safety risk for first responders called to extinguish fires in such buildings. In 2016, the city created the Problem Property Initiative (PPI) to deal with poorly maintained or “slum” properties, some of which may have been an unsecured vacant property (UVP). Many of the buildings, however, were occupied, so this work, although very important, was not solely focused on UVPs.

By 2020-2021, Edmonton Fire Rescue Services (EFRS) was experiencing an increasing number of fires in UVPs, frequently responding to the same address two, three, or four times for reported fires. Fire Chief Joseph Zatylny saw the trend through response data analysis and direct reports from the field staff, with personnel asking if something could be done about these buildings before someone was injured. The department had also experienced a significant “near-miss” and two civilian fatalities in separate incidents in a UVP.

### The Action

While the city of Edmonton had the PPI program that sought to address affected properties through existing programs within the community and province, Chief Zatylny directed the staff to search for an effective alternative that could feed into the PPI. The outcome was creating the Community Property Safety Team (CPST) pilot program in 2022, which increased the collaboration between the existing programs and was supported by specific legislative action by the Edmonton City Council. More recently, to support the cost of enforcement, the council decided to levy higher property taxes on a particular group of properties declared “derelict.”

### The Outcome

By the end of 2023, the community experienced a 31 percent decrease in structure fires in targeted neighborhoods, and the program is slated to move from a pilot effort to one with permanent status and funding to continue the work.

#### DEPARTMENT INFO

EDMONTON FIRE RESCUE SERVICES

POPULATION SERVED: 1.1 MILLION

TOTAL UNIFORMED PERSONNEL: 1,347

TOTAL CIVILIAN PERSONNEL: TBD

FIRE STATIONS: 30

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE: TBD

ANNUAL BUDGET: 225 MILLION

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### Introduction

The city of Edmonton had a problem: the number of poorly maintained or “slum” properties was increasing. In 2016, the city created the Problem Property Initiative (PPI) to deal with these properties. The PPI comprised separate city departments, such as law enforcement and health, and was tasked with enforcing existing city regulations.



Over time, though, the Edmonton Fire Rescue Services (EFRS), reviewing response data and receiving direct reports from field officers, noted the rate of fires in unsecured vacant properties (UVPs) was increasing. Fire companies responded two, three, or four times to the same buildings for a fire suppression incident. With each fire event, the structures became less safe for suppression personnel to enter as the building became less stable. Additionally, the department had experienced a significant “near-miss” during one such incident and two civilian fatalities in separate incidents.

*"The financial toll these properties take on communities is substantial," Ashley Salvador said. "They put additional pressure on Edmonton Fire Rescue Services, Edmonton police service, bylaw, and Alberta Health Services emergency medical service." -- Edmonton City Councilor Ashley Salvador*

Moreover, residents and elected officials witnessed a vacant structure's impact on a neighborhood and asked what could be done. As reported by CTV News – Edmonton, one resident observed, "We've seen overdoses, we've seen drug activity. My children don't use their backyard; they don't use their tree house because they could see over the fences; it has been a constant battle for eight years."

### The Opportunity

Where to start? In 2021, the department followed the data, focusing on UVPs in residential areas experiencing a high fire rate in these property types. The staff looked for examples from like-sized communities and how they had dealt with and continued to deal with the issue.

#### Key Elements – City of Surrey Distressed Property Program

- **Identify** properties that may be abandoned,
- **Inspect** properties to determine if they are abandoned,
- **Issue** orders to property owners to secure abandoned properties,
- **Secure** properties while recovering costs from non-compliant owners; and
- **Monitor** the properties for any security breaches.

One of these was the city of Surrey Fire Service in British Columbia and its Distressed Property Team program, which Edmonton felt provided a structure that could be adapted to its own community's local needs. The Surrey program initially focused on commercial rather than residential UVP, as those tended to be the more significant source of structural fire incidents. It is broken into five phases that provide an

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escalating set of actions to manage a UVP. The actions break down into “Identify”, “Inspect,” “Issue,” “Secure” and “Monitor” and the staff was able to show a correlation between UVP and risk indicators in the community.

## The Action

In April 2022, the EFRS proposed a pilot program to build on the existing Problem Property Initiative to create the Community Property Safety Team (CPST) as a municipal strategy. It would focus on

*“Our work feeds into a greater strategy for dealing with problematic properties in the city of Edmonton.”*

- Assistant Deputy Chief Justin Lallemand

target neighborhoods that data demonstrated were experiencing a higher rate of fires in UVPs than other neighborhoods. The department’s specialized team is one of five city departments focusing on this issue. For example, one of the teams focuses on property cleanup, which is a part of the overall strategy but is not specifically related to the efforts of the EFRS team. The initial staffing consisted of two fire safety code officers (FSCO) and administrative support.

While the Community Risk Reduction division's code enforcement activities relied on the typical set of fire safety codes, the pilot relied upon the Alberta Municipal Government Act (MGA) to issue enforcement compliance orders to property owners. The Act authorizes cities such as Edmonton to create and enforce bylaws to maintain the community's health, safety, and wellness. This could best be compared to municipal code enforcement in the United States, such as zoning and building codes. To do this, the FSCOs were given bylaw appointments to enforce the MGA. This is one example of collaboration between the different city departments, a key program characteristic.

As the pilot moved forward, the staff quickly learned that a property owner’s definition of “securing a building” could differ substantially from that of the city. As a result, the staff developed clear specifications for each step in the process. This was characterized by details such as the thickness of the plywood used; bracing the panels covering windows and doorways; the length, number, and spacing of the securing screws; and filling the screw heads with silicone to prevent easy access. The staff reviewed standards such as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and practices in larger communities to develop the criteria. It also made changes based on the observed performance of securement methods in the field.

Now, owners who refuse or fail to secure their property following the program's notification will be billed for the costs incurred by the city securing the structure. Assistant Deputy Chief Justin Lallemand said, “Costs for a single-family home could range from \$2,000 to \$5,000. If it’s a two-to three-story walkup, fees could range from \$10,000 to \$20,000.”

### The Outcome

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Since the pilot launched, the team has inspected 593 properties, secured 320, and issued almost 295 enforcement orders. Additionally, 111 properties were demolished after CPST interactions and orders, with 18 already redeveloped. The department also identified control neighborhoods that would be used to compare the targeted neighborhoods' year-to-year fire experience with that of the control neighborhoods. Overall, the targeted neighborhoods experienced a 31 percent reduction in structure fires. The department believes the CPST is a factor, but not the only one in this decrease. Considerations such as community education and convictions of arsonists could be others. Additionally, the frequency of fire incidents reoccurring in the same building decreased.

By The Numbers	
Properties Inspected	593
Building Secured	320
Enforcement Orders	295
Demolished Properties	111
Properties Redeveloped	18

Armed with these statistics, the question became what to do with the secured properties. The answer was the creation of the Demolition Assessment and Response Committee (DARC), which prioritizes the demolition of properties that meet specific criteria. It comprises the directors of safety codes and bylaws, Deputy Chief David Lazenby, Community Safety & Risk, and legal counsel.

In his update to the city council late last year, Fire Chief Joseph Zatylny reported the program's success and recommended it be moved from a pilot to a permanent program with commensurate funding and adding two more FSCOs to extend the program across the city. Further, the City Council has approved a new derelict tax subclass that, starting in 2024, can be applied to residential properties in mature neighborhoods that show severe neglect, are dilapidated, are falling into significant disrepair, or are unlivable. The revenue will be used to reduce the city's enforcement costs.

### Tips for Replication

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- Don't do this by yourself. The problems are complex and require a collaborative solution that will outlast the "founders' of the program.
- Trust your partners.
- Consider creating a centralized office to help manage and coordinate the program.
- Create memorandums of understanding between the different city departments to ensure expectations are understood and remain in place.
- Be data-driven and intelligence-led.
- Track the data and agree on what will be tracked, how it will be tracked, and the measure of success.

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- Understand the regulatory tools and limitations.
- Be willing to share authority – such as code enforcement – to ensure success.

## Additional Resources

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- [“Problem Property Initiative | City of Edmonton”](#)
- “2023 to 2026 Approach to Problem Properties”, [2023-26 Approach to Problem Properties \(edmonton.ca\)](#)
- City of Surrey – Distressed Properties - [Distressed-Properties-Community-Risk-Reduction.pdf \(surrey.ca\)](#)
- “Officials Say Problem Property Program a Success,” [Community Property Safety Team Given Permanent Funding | CTV News](#)
- “Owners of Derelict Properties in Edmonton To Be Charged a Higher Tax Rate” - [Edmonton announces derelict property tax subclass | CTV News](#)

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