

10-4-13 Making the Call

When I receive a call from dispatch indicating a request from the police department for the board of health, it is usually a housing situation and it is usually in dire need of clean-up and changes required to make the place safe.

Sometimes I wonder why neighbors or relatives didn't call to alert me to the situation. I can only assume they didn't want to interfere and they may not have realized that a board of health can help. It is an old idea, this image of the health departments existing for the sole purpose of citing people for violations. Even young people think this. Just the other day, I was checking out restaurant dumpsters, (Try to not be jealous of my exciting job.) when a boy zoomed over on his bike to ask me what I was doing. He left his "gang" of seven or so friends, hanging out behind a building, smoking cigarettes, in order to speak to me. I felt sad about these thirteen year olds smoking but admired his spunk and curiosity. I told the boy I was from the board of health and was looking at dumpsters to see if they were being kept covered and periodically cleaned so as to not create health hazards such as breeding flies or attracting sea gulls and rodents. The boys says, "So, you're gonna shut 'em down?" "No", I told him, "We will find solutions and ways to prevent the problem." I decided to add, "You know, like not smoking is preventing a health problem." He shrugged and rode away.

Boards of health do more than "shut 'em down", or "kick them out". We can also prevent problems. When we can't prevent it, because the problem already exists, we can work with others toward solutions. We need to know about the problem, though. Someone has to make the call. I understand that it is not always easy to do so.

Making the call involves an assessment of the situation; making a judgment call. I once asked at a seminar on the housing code about when we should call other departments such as the Department of Children and Families, formerly known as DSS. The teacher's answer was, "That is your call. Only you can decide when that threshold has been crossed and you think reporting is the correct thing to do."

I'd like you to consider making a call to the board of health when you have concerns about someone's health and safety. When we help one household with hoarding or tenants living in the cellar, for instance, we not only help those people living in those difficult circumstances, but we are also preventing injury and/or death to emergency responders. In their attempt to save lives, fire fighters can lose their own if the hallways are crammed with stuff and the yard is packed with piles and piles of stuff. What if they did not know someone was living in the shed? Their life saving efforts would go toward the house before the shed. A call can save a life.

The solutions to these complicated situations are not necessarily quick or easy. The longer the "situation" existed, the longer it will take to untangle it and to prioritize the actions. Sometimes the first life saving steps are as simple as removing extension cords. It is an actual life style change but it can be done and be done right away. Or the first step might be to tell a

family that people cannot sleep in the cellar, where there is chronic dampness and no natural light.

Last week's solution for one was a problem for another. Finding the funds to get the water turned on for a family with children was not appreciated by the owner because he wanted the tenants out. He should have thought about that when he decided to rent and yet did not meter the water or electricity. Without metering to prove who is using what, the owner must provide those utilities. His call for help would have pointed him in the direction of the proper and legal way to evict tenants. By the time I met him, he had wasted time by not beginning the eviction process, was stuck with non-paying tenants and still responsible for the water bill. The small payment bought everyone some time (one week) to make their plans and get their affairs in order.

There was more to that last situation than a water shut off. There was a long standing co-dependent arrangement where one was paying the electric and the other was benefitting by using their internet connection; that sort of thing. Neither one wanted to make the call, until the water was shut off, that is.

What calls will next week bring? I don't know but maybe it is the call I don't receive that will be the one needing help the most.

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