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## A by-the-numbers path to midtown safety

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Midtown residents are putting one finding from a housing study initiated by University of Nebraska at Omaha to the test.

After one year of study, researchers and volunteers discovered what they call a major safety concern in some neighborhoods - the lack of visible address numbers on homes.

The problem is magnified in emergency situations, said Joe Fuxa, a Fire Department battalion chief.

"When the neighborhood is not well-lit and addresses are not visible, it makes it harder to find the house," Fuxa said. "If addresses were visible we would be able to respond quicker."

UNO researchers say they didn't realize how pervasive the problem was until they received results from the Omaha Neighborhood Scan.

The scan project is a joint effort to study and prevent housing decay. UNO's College of Public Affairs and Community Service, the city, the Neighborhood Center for Greater Omaha and several neighborhoods are part of the program.

UNO has been collecting data from various neighborhoods, including Gifford Park, Joslyn Castle, Clairmont Heights, Ford Birthsite and Miller Park-Minne Lusa.

The study focuses on code violations, infrastructure and environmental problems and park maintenance needs.

In 2005, project volunteers conducted door-to-door inspections of approximately 3,000 houses. Using pocket PCs and digital cameras, volunteers recorded data on homes in the area.

After compiling the results, neighborhood leaders sent letters to homeowners detailing any violations and the neighborhood conditions overall. Volunteers then rescanned homes to see whether violations were corrected.

The UNO-led study of housing conditions showed, for example, that two out of every 10 houses in the Joslyn Castle neighborhood did not have an address posted on the front.

Joslyn Castle Scan Coordinator Margie Magnuson said her neighborhood sent letters to neighbors notifying them of the problem and received a few responses.

"It was initially discouraging that we didn't get more responses," Magnuson said.

When the group rescanned the homes, she said they found that more than 30 percent had corrected the problem.

Magnuson and other neighborhood groups want to raise awareness about the problem, so they are launching an ad campaign called "Address It Now."

They plan to post billboards in target areas or air commercials.

"This is a whole new approach to looking at housing," Magnuson said. "Hopefully, this will be a better approach to addressing housing and safety issues in the neighborhood."

Magnuson said the address initiative is just the beginning.

The Gifford Park and Joslyn Castle neighborhoods also will focus on other safety concerns such as the lack of handrails and

unsafe sidewalks.

"The (neighborhoods) are using different strategies to address different issues in their area," said Russell Smith, director of UNO's School of Public Administration.

Smith said the beauty of the scan project is that it can be tailored to fit the needs and address problems of different neighborhoods.

Smith said volunteers will continue scanning homes this year. He hopes to extend the project over the next five to 10 years and make it a citywide effort.

"I think this will have a positive impact and the impact will be significant," said Omaha Planning Director Steve Jensen.

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