

Desiree Williams, Jala Washington, Nick Williams, Krissy Thomas

### **Records show over 4,000 homes vacant in Muncie**

Large buildings surrounded by orderly yards and antique statues are an everyday sight for Ball State students. The rest of Muncie does not look quite the same.

The 2014 Census reported that 4,375 housing units are vacant in Muncie. That is 13.7 percent of the total housing units in the area.

The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing describes abandoned property as buildings in grave disarray which can “evoke fear and precipitate decline in a community.”

Elizabeth Duke, former member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, spoke with RealtyTrac in 2013 to discuss how vacancies affect property rates in the U.S. RealtyTrac is a real estate information company that provides housing data and analytics.

“The potential fallout of high rates of vacancy — blight, crime, lowered home values, and decreased property tax revenue — is the same for every neighborhood and community,” Duke said.

A number of neighborhoods surrounding Ball State experience these conditions. The McKinley-Gilbert neighborhood suffers the most with nearly one in three homes left vacant.

Paul Strout is a property manager for American Holdings LLC., so he has seen how vacancies impact the community and property values.

“I think it’s deteriorating quite a bit in the last five years,” Strout said.

The Delaware County Clerk's office valuation records show one home in the McKinley-Gilbert neighborhood, 1716 S. Hoyt Ave., was valued at \$41,100 in 2011 and is now valued at \$19,600, a \$21,500 decrease in just four years.

Another document from the County Clerk's office shows an abandoned home along 11th Street, 812 W. 11th, valued at \$18,700 in 2011 is now worth \$15,000.

Vacant properties not only affect the property value, but they also affect the community as a whole. Strout said he believes this issue causes potential new residents to stray away from Muncie.

"I think most people that move in this area don't reside in the city limits of Muncie," Strout said. He also said people will move to surrounding areas, but they will stay out of the actual city.

To improve the community and attract new residents, Strout said he thinks it's best to tear down vacant homes.

"Try to knock down as many of them as you can so it doesn't look as blighted," Strout said. "That's probably the best thing they can do right now."

Destruction isn't always the first option. Instead, the Greater Muncie Habitat for Humanity works to restore the city.

According to the Habitat for Humanity website, they strive to create a world where everyone has a decent place to live.

Their website also says Habitat has helped 6.8 million people improve their living conditions since it was founded in 1976. “Our mission is to put God’s love into action by bringing people together to build homes, communities and hope.”

There are more than 70 national organizations and more than 1,400 local affiliates. The Muncie affiliate was founded in 1986.

Jena Ashby, program director of the Muncie office, recognizes that abandoned homes cause issues in the community, especially for newcomers.

Muncie can attract people because they can buy homes for affordable prices, but “it’s difficult to make an investment in a property like that because it’s probably not going to increase in value,” Ashby said.

Not only that, but Ashby also said Muncie doesn’t look visually appealing to newcomers, especially when entering downtown through Hoyt Street. “It’s not the most aesthetically pleasing route to come into town,” Ashby said.

The Habitat office is located on Hoyt Street, so Ashby knows the area well.

“I think Muncie has a lot of great things about it that that’s going to cloud your vision of what those are,” Ashby said.

Ashby suggests that perceptions and ideas about a community can largely influence people as they decide whether or not to move to that area, and that abandoned homes can factor into those perceptions.

“[Vacant buildings] invite crime, be that arson or just a place for undesirable activities to take place,” Ashby said. “It brings down someone’s perception of the neighborhood that they live in.”

Ashby said Habitat strives to improve these perceptions and create a safer community. She described one step toward that goal — the Neighborhood Revitalization Plan.

According to Ashby, this plan focuses on a specific geographic area, one bounded by Madison, Memorial, Perkins, and 8th Street. In that area, close to one third of the homes are vacant, Ashby said.

Habitat paired with Vectren Corporation, distributor of electricity and natural gas, to decide which area was in need. Habitat chose this specific area because it showed up on Vectren’s heat map.

Heat maps highlight areas with the highest number of disconnects and late payments. Ashby said Vectren uses these maps to identify which neighborhood is stressed or in significant need.

Habitat also looked at the capacity within the community. Ashby described this as “the capacity within that neighborhood to raise up leaders in the neighborhood who could really drive change that’s happening.”

There are four sub committees within the program including housing, beautification, business development and services, Ashby said. She also said they bring together professionals and residents “to dream about, envision and bring to reality how the neighborhood can be different.”

Another section within Greater Muncie Habitat for Humanity is called ReStore. According to Habitat's website, this division "accepts donations of new or nearly new building supplies, furniture and tools from individuals, contractors and businesses."

The website also states the proceeds from selling these supplies go back to Habitat to help them build more homes.

"Muncie is a great place where people want to come together and make our city better," Ashby said. "I think there are a lot of people who haven't given up hope that we can see a new day for our city."

Habitat is always looking for more donations, volunteers and business partners. If you are in need or want to help, you can start by visiting [munciehabitat.org](http://munciehabitat.org).