

Transcript

On West Gray, Episode 12, Code Enforcement W/Kelvin Winter & Janita Hatley

Runtime: 24 minutes 36 seconds

Tiffany Vrska 0:00

Hey what's up everybody. Welcome to On West Gray, the monthly podcast about all things local government in the city of Norman. I'm your host, Tiffany Vrska, Chief Communications Officer for the city of Norman, and we appreciate you tuning in. Today we have a pair of guests with us from the city of Norman's code compliance division, Miss Janita Hatley and Mr. Kelvin Winter. Thank you both for being with us today. Thank you, thanks. Now code compliance is housed within the Department of Planning and Community Development. This team is responsible for inspecting and enforcing health and safety codes as well as sign permit application review and processing. Their responsibilities are vast and layered. And many questions or concerns that come in from residents are often sent their way. We're about to learn a little bit more about the ins and outs of what they do right here in the Norman community. But first big shout out to Juanita who was recently honored as code compliance officer of the year. Congratulation.

Janita Hatley 1:15

Thank you. I appreciate that.

Tiffany Vrska 1:16

And how long have you been with us here at Norman?

Janita Hatley 1:18

I've been here for 31 years, I've been a code Officer for 28.

Tiffany Vrska 1:23

Awesome. Well, I think we'll talk a little bit more about how much you must love your job. So let's hop right in here. So whoever wants to take the first question, can you just let us know what the average kind of day to day looks like as a code compliance officer?

Janita Hatley 1:41

Well, there are four of us out in the field. And so we have our areas that are assigned to us. So we patrol those areas regularly, proactively looking for code violations, we also are inspecting complaints that we've received from citizens calling into our office or to the Action Center. We also have a lot of interaction with citizens either on their properties, or by answering their phone calls, voice messages and returning emails. We have a lot of interaction with our citizens after we've been out doing some of this proactive work or code enforcement work. But we also are researching ownership each day we have to research the legal documents and ownership utility records, to know who to send our notices to so there's a lot of data entry a lot of time in the office as well or sitting at the computer in our in our vehicles doing a lot of work like that, too. So.

Tiffany Vrska 2:35

Okay, so I heard you say there are four folks in your division, is that right?

Janita Hatley 2:40

Four inspectors, one supervisor and one admin tech. Yes.

Tiffany Vrska 2:44

Okay. That's a that's a lot of ground to cover for that amount of staff. And so I think we comment often on the show about how we do a lot with a lean staff at Norman. So when folks call in a concern is it tended to immediately or what does the timeline or process look like?

Kelvin Winter 3:03

A lot of that depends on the type of violation that it is. Anything that we Abate, or our contractors can Abate, basically, requires by state statute entity audits, they have, we have to give them a minimum of 10 days to comply once the notice is given.

Tiffany Vrska 3:22

And abate basically means like to resolve.

Kelvin Winter 3:24

Abate means to resolve the problem like tall weeds is mowing. If it's, you know, household furniture, or appliances, or junk trash and debris, then it's cleaning that up. It could be securing unsecured structures, it could be, you know, vegetation, B trees, bushes, whatever that may be obstructing pedestrian traffic

on the sidewalk, or vehicular traffic in the street. You know, sometimes we get, you know, wind or a lot of rain, and especially the time of year when everything's green, you know, tree limbs start dropping. And so what happens is they'll drop down, and then you'll have your vehicles like sanitation trucks, embark transit, buses, those kinds of things that are getting hit, you know, at the top with tree limbs and stuff. And so then we'll notify the property owners whose trees are causing the problem to, you know, trim it up, trim it back, whatever is necessary, and our contractors would do that if they did not. So that's kind of how that works. And like I said, it depends on the violation. There are things like, you know, if somebody needs to make some repairs to the outside of their house, like soffits, eaves, where there's rotting wood, and maybe they need to paint because the paint is peeling, those kinds of things, you know, they're they're going to be given, you know, at least 30 to 60 days, maybe more depending on what's going on and also depending on the time of year, and, but we'll work closely with the property owners to get things resolved. Our deadlines aren't necessarily, you know, set in stone. Basically, we just want people to communicate with us. So if you get in our, in our letters, when we send our notices out, they'll have the inspectors name, their email address and their direct line phone number for contact to establish that communication. Because normally, whenever we send a notice that we have nothing but their address, we have no idea what their phone number is, we have no idea what their email address is. So it's dependent and incumbent on the person that receives the notice to contact us. But you know, we just want compliance or we're not out there to punish anybody, we just want it taken care of, and we prefer that they do it and not us have to step in with a citation, or send a work order to abatement crew to go out and take care of the problem. So, you know, basically, you know, if you'll commit people will communicate with us. And we provide the means in those notices that we send out. And, and basically, it's, you know, if somebody calls in, say, it's high weeds, and you know, we have to start somewhere. So you know, we're going to tell them, they have a 10 day deadline, we, we even have it in our software, we do an extra day, we do 11 days, just so that they have the full 10 days to get it taken care of, but they'll call us, you know, a couple of days or whatever before the reinspection is doing so hey, my lawn mower, I started mowing my lawn more broke, is that the shop I'm on I need the next weekend, to be able to get it out, get it fixed, get it back and mow, and we'll work with people as long as the timelines are reasonable, regardless of what it is, whether it's painting a house, or mowing the weeds or cleaning up a, you know, junk and debris, or appliances or furniture or whatever, you know, they'll just communicate with this, we'll work with them on it, as long as what they're requesting on on timeline is reasonable,

Tiffany Vrska 6:43

Right, so that the communication aspect is just really important

Kelvin Winter 6:47

It is key, communication is key. Because, you know, a lot of people tend to think, you know, that's the deadline, and I have to do it by then. And there's no movement. Well, we will as long as you communicate with us and tell us what's going on. You know, we'll work with you, as long as it's reasonable. I mean, obviously, if you have tall weed and say, Well, you know, I'm in France on vacation all summer. And, you know, and so I'm not gonna be able to do all that, well, that's not gonna work. But,

you know, it's like, Hey, I've been sick for a few days, I need a few more days to get this accomplished, or whatever. Yeah, we'll work with you on that. Because we would rather you know, the property owner or the occupant or whoever take care of it themselves, rather than us have to do it. And you know, and ultimately, that's just better for everyone. And so communication is key, they'll just communicate, you know, we can get a lot of problem solved with the little heartache.

Tiffany Vrska 7:42

Sure, sure. Well, that seems fair to me. So on average, do you know how many calls you all take maybe week to week or month to month?

Kelvin Winter 7:52

Basically, it's you know, because we weren't proactively, more than 50% of our of the case loads are proactive that the inspectors done, so it's less than 50%. That's complaints that's called in, but roughly about 200 cases a week, about 100 a month and about 10,000 a year. Oh, my is about where we're at on that. And, you know, yeah, there are some that, you know, we're working it proactively with the neighbors don't know that. So they may, you know, they may call us and say, you know, hey, my neighbor at this address, you know, the weeds are two feet tall. And it's like, well, good news, the inspectors already found it. And so we've, we've already got an open case on that. And we're working on it. So so that works out we really enjoy when things when they call them, we can tell them, we're already on it, whether it's they call in or whether it's from the Action Center. Yeah, we're already aware of that. But I mean, you know, there's not there's 193.6 square miles of city limits in Norman, we got four active inspectors and me is one supervisor. And, you know, it's, it takes a lot of time to cover areas. So, you know, we do still appreciate and want people to call in complaints, because we may not have found that one yet. Sure. So so, you know, please do don't stop the complaints just because oh, they might already be working it. Yeah, go ahead. And please let us know, if we are, we'll tell you, Hey, we have an open case on that. Great. And so we're already in that process, or, you know, no, we didn't know about that, and Web Inspector, check on it.

Tiffany Vrska 9:19

And there's multiple ways to, you know, call those in or communicate with you all, you mentioned the Action Center. So you can call or fill out the web form or send an email or call your office directly. All of that information is online at Norman ok.gov. I'm not sure how you keep up with so many calls and cases, but it sounds like some real heroes work to me. So thank you for what you do.

Kelvin Winter 9:44

We also have an online portal for complaints directly can be submitted to well, in addition to all those other avenues you mentioned.

Tiffany Vrska 9:51

Awesome. All right. Good deal. So we just congratulate EJ and Anita on the top most award in the state but we should brag on this entire team for Just a moment, I know that we have a legacy of the best and brightest in terms of code enforcement with several of our staff taking home prestigious awards and honors for the jobs that they do. So what would you say is key to succeeding in these roles?

Janita Hatley 10:16

I would say, trying to remain positive. And, and to remain calm, oftentimes, we're dealing with upset citizens. So just remaining calm, but we have a great team here, we all can vent to one another if we need to, if we've had a rough day. But But I think, you know, making the positive impact in the community is rewarding for us, you know, driving down streets and areas and seeing how seeing them cleaned up after we've come through and, and done some of our enforcement, it's, it's nice to see the impact that we've made on the neighborhoods and our you know, our goal is to try to keep things healthy, say, for the, for the citizens of Norman. And so that's, that's probably what I would say. Okay. And

Tiffany Vrska 11:07

I did have a question too. I come from a community that did not have a lot of HOAs, or homeowners association. So what's the dynamic there with code compliance of the city of Norman and then HOAs? I mean, do you encourage people to like kind of report through HOAs? If if their neighborhood is, has one of those? Or can they call you directly are what's that look like for you?

Kelvin Winter 11:32

Well, it's, it can go either way. Sometimes what happens is you'll have residents in a community that has an active Homeowners Association, and they'll contact the their HOA about it. And a lot of times the HOA is will sit you know, given notice or put a note on the door, something about the issue that's in violation violation of their covenants or restrictions. If they don't do anything about it, if it's something that also happens to violate city ordinance, then oftentimes, the HOAs will call us and say, you know, the weeds have been out of control. We told them about it, they haven't done anything. So we're going to turn it into you guys for enforcement action on that. You know, Hoa covenants and restrictions can be a lot more stringent than what city ordinance is. So if it's something that's not a violation of city ordinance, but it is a violation of covenants and restrictions, that's totally up to the HOA to enforce that. And the cities that are able to do anything like that. There may be they may have, you know, an HOA may have a covenant restriction against any accessory structures. So you can have a storage shed in your backyard. And so, you know, the city of Norman does, you know, they allow that. But the covenants or restrictions of a particular HOA may not allow it. And so that's completely up to the HOA to enforce those issues that are not a violation of city ordinance. Got it. That's kind of how that works.

Tiffany Vrska 13:03

Okay, good to know. So what would you say your favorite part about the job is?

Kelvin Winter 13:10

I enjoy working with the interaction with all the citizens that's that's very rewarding. But we we work with a lot of other city departments. Practically all of them, it seems, but we work very closely with the police and the fire department. We line maintenance sanitation, we work with them quite a bit. But we do a lot of inspections, annual inspections with fire and fire inspectors. So we go out to the sororities and fraternities and hotels and bed and breakfasts. And we do all these inspections together so that we can issue an annual permit from the city of Norman. But then we also do on our own, we also do the short term rental inspections. That's a fairly new program that we have here at the city. So the Airbnb ease and the VRBO is things like that. We issue an annual permit to those and inspect those annually as well. So

Tiffany Vrska 14:06

all right, and I totally understand and agree with kind of working across the Lord with all the city departments. We're lucky and blessed to be able to do that Bryce and I hear and communications and learn about the jobs of everybody just with the podcast, and so understand where you're coming from there. So, so we hear a lot about like tall grass and weeds. It was mentioned a couple of times already junk vehicles, that sort of thing. And what's something that maybe is less routine that your team can often may come across or deal with?

Kelvin Winter 14:40

Well, there's zoning violations, you know, an improper use so in a residential area, somebody's say operating a barber shop out of the garage. Well, you know, that's a home occupation that's actually specifically prohibited by ordinates zoning ordinance. And so you know, there's those kinds of things Uh,

Tiffany Vrska 15:01

you know, learning kind of give us a little bit of background on zoning. I mean, it kind of just dictates what you can do in certain areas.

Kelvin Winter 15:08

Yes, that basically that what the zoning does is, you know, depending on what is like residential, it'll have it'll list, okay, here's the uses that's allowed in residential. And then it'll go on to say, here's the list

of special use lists you can do if you go to the planning commission obtain a special use in this zoning district. So, you know, there's a lot of things that goes like some things that require a special use. Like before we changed our municipal ordinances to allow, say, a medical marijuana dispensaries, you know, they would, they would have to get a special use first to be able to do that. Well, now, that's been the, the zoning ordinance has been modified to, and that's just an example. But it's been modified to allow that in specific zoning areas. So there's a lot of things this, there's like maybe a church or a school, depending on what the zoning is, they may have to get a special use to be able to exist there. And so, you know, to apply for special use, you have to go to the planning commission, that after it gets past the planning commission, it would go to council for a council vote to to allow something for a special use in a specific zoning district. So that's kind of how that works.

Janita Hatley 16:25

We also utilize the International Property Maintenance code here, we have adopted that. So that allows us to address issues with structures, residential or commercial. So oftentimes, we're going into residential properties. You know, the tenant maybe is having an issue with the landlord, not repairing things. And so often we're contacted to go in and make an inspection. And then we work with the property owner or the manager, and try to address those issues and get those those problems resolved, for the tenants that are living there. But that can be that can be tricky. Sometimes. You know, we're we're also asking property owners to maintain their structures. So broken windows, were asking them to replace those and things like that. Hoarding issues can be sensitive and can be tricky. But you know, those, those are issues that we we try to tackle, gently, I would say, you know,

Tiffany Vrska 17:25

and, I mean, we've talked a lot about the what in the win, but why is this important? You know, why is zoning important? Why is code compliance important?

Janita Hatley 17:36

Well, I feel like it's to make, as I said before, a positive impact on the community to help, you know, the health, safety and welfare of our citizens is important to us. And that's really why we're why we're here why we do this job. A lot of I've heard a lot of other code officers in the state mention that code enforcement or code compliance in their community is an economic development tool, you know, we're businesses are less likely to come want to come to a community that has a lot of violations, a lot of damage, dilapidated, vacant, abandoned structures, or tall grass and trash. So you know, that that's, that's our reasoning, I would say. Sure. I've,

Tiffany Vrska 18:17

I've actually read a couple of studies on that. That makes complete sense. So ultimately, what would you all like folks to know about code compliance here in Norman?

Kelvin Winter 18:28

You know, a lot of this we covered previously. And one thing he mentioned at the very beginning of this podcast was sign permit review. And so we do about 450 of those years Well, and that's anywhere from, you know, billboards along the interstate, or the tall ground signs, pylon type signs that the businesses have that are close to the interstate, and then just a wall sign, you know, above the entry on the wall of a business. And then temporary size, temporary signs also require a permit if, you know, basically, if it's, it's visible from the street or side of public street or sidewalk. And its intent is to draw people in. Even if it's temporary, it requires a permit. And a lot of people don't realize that they need a permit for a temporary sign when they put out like a feather flag or a yard sign or something like that to draw attention to their business. And the other thing is that none of it can be in the right away. And a lot of businesses will go out and put it right out, you know, in the grass right next to the curb. Well, it's in the right away, it's illegal, it can be there, it has to be essentially behind the sidewalk is usually pretty safe. As far as not being in the right away. Generally, most of the time, a lot of a lot of property lines, not all but a lot go to the inside edge of the sidewalk or close to it. So basically, the rule of thumb is you know, when you have a sign number one, you're gonna need a permit to put out a temporary sign. And number two, it can't be in the right away. So make sure it's behind the sidewalk. And generally that'll cover that So, we do a lot, we move a lot of signs in the rights away.

Tiffany Vrska 20:04

Yeah. And, you know, you talked about some of the temporary signage and stuff like that. I don't know if it varies as far as the type of signage that you have, but what is the, you know, all see signage for an election or a sale or something like that, and then that time has passed, so folks need to go back and pick up that signage, right. So what's the timeline like on that?

Kelvin Winter 20:29

Well, it's, it's a little bit different political signs are a little bit different. Because it's, it's political. So it's a little bit different than, you know, somebody's advertising a yard sale, because they're doing a garage sale at their house, you know, technically, when you have a garage sale in place, you can legally put a sign is on your property where the sale is occurring, and it can be anywhere else, a lot of times, people will go out, and they'll put signs with an arrow or something, you know, at the intersection closest to their house, or whatever. And those are all illegal. And a lot of times, you know, depends on what's going on. But you know, we may end up removing those. But if they put those out, the big thing is, make sure you go back and take them back up. If we haven't gotten to them yet to grab them and throw them away, just pick them back up, especially if you plan on using them again, in the future, clean up your own mess. And, you know, otherwise, we'll end up picking it up eventually and throwing it away. So

Tiffany Vrska 21:21

yeah, that's good to know, I'm sure that, you know, sharing knowledge is probably just a really big part of what you do day to day, because as you said, Folks just may not know,

Janita Hatley 21:31

I even though we are proactive in in our enforcement, I would I always like to tell citizens that we there's only four of us to cover this, this area out in the field. And so we're not in every neighborhood or on every street, every, you know, every week all the time. So we do rely on citizens to help, you know, submit these complaints or call in and just inquire, are you already working this property? Because it's helpful for us. And since we can't be everywhere all the time. But we do. As Kelvin said, you know, the majority of our work truly is proactive, certainly in my area it is but we do rely on the citizens to help. So that's very helpful when they call and it either through the Action Center or to our office directly and submit complaints.

Tiffany Vrska 22:27

Yes, the citizens are your eyes and ears. They can't be everywhere. Right. Right. Awesome.

Kelvin Winter 22:32

Well, and you know, it's a community effort, you know, I mean, we're the ones is being used for enforcement to try help get these problems solved. I mean, basically, we're problem solvers. But we need the community to help us with that, for sure. And, you know, when we send out notices for violations, 95% of the people comply voluntarily, you know, with the notice of violation. So you've only got that 5% that we either have to abate or file charges on or something like that. So, you know, the compliance rates good. People are pretty good about complying for the most part. And, you know, and it just makes for a safer, healthier, a better standard of living, quality of life is better, and it keeps property values up. So the people want to sell their house, you know, they don't want some horrid thing right next to them, because it could affect their property values. And so, you know, if it's violations we know, that's why we try to work all these to keep people's property values up, keep the quality of life up for people. And just help out and make Norman a nice place to visit and to live.

Tiffany Vrska 23:39

As a Norman homeowner, I thoroughly appreciate what you all do. So thank you so much. Thanks for being with us. So questions or commentary about On West Gray can be sent into PublicAffairs@NormanOK.gov. Shout out to our producer and editor Mr. Bryce Holland of the city of Norman communications office. Don't forget to celebrate lakes appreciation and Parks and Recreation month in July. Log on to NormanOK.gov to learn more about all of the fun lined up. Janita, Calvin, thank

you so much. Until next time, stay engaged, stay informed and always remember to cast your ballot. I'm Tiffany Vrska. Thank you for tuning in to On West Gray.

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