

Volunteers clean up a dirty Reading

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By [Holly Herman](#)

READING, PA

Volunteers came out early on a summer morning to cut down 8-foot weeds, collect trash, pick up discarded drug paraphernalia and remove old tires from a blighted alley off Tulpehocken Street.

The volunteers with City Light Ministries, a homeless shelter in Reading, teamed with visiting summer interns to clean the alley and an adjoining vacant lot in the 400 block of Tulpehocken.

"It's a mess," said Steve Harrity, coordinator of Mayor Vaughn D. Spencer's Clean City Initiative. "There are trash pockets everywhere in the city."

This cleanup was one of more than 200 done by volunteers in Reading in the wake of cutbacks in maintenance employees since June 2010, when city went into the state's Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, known as Act 47.

Spencer said that when he took office in January 2012 he continued the volunteer cleanups, which started on a smaller scale under former Mayor Tom McMahon in 2011.

"I continued the initiative so we can present Reading in the best possible way," Spencer said. "Providing a clean and safe environment is a top priority for the city of Reading."

The city began keeping records of the volunteer cleanups in 2013. Since then, 204 cleanups have been conducted by 5,737 volunteers, saving Reading \$460,445, according to a report provided by the city.

Some volunteers have performed multiple cleanups, and Spencer said the savings are based on a cost analysis of volunteer efforts provided by Independent Sectors, a Washington-based agency that oversees nonprofits.

Harrity said the goal is to nearly double the number of cleanups from 63 in 2014 to 120 this year, with the hope of saving the city more than \$225,000.

The mayor said the city Public Works Department, which handles city maintenance, has been reduced in manpower by nearly 50 percent in the last decade and now has just 47 employees.

The mayor said that as renewed pride in the city continues to grow, he hopes to expand the volunteer initiative this year.

"Because of the irresponsibility of property owners, we are forced to do all of these cleanups," Spencer said. "We are cleaning up illegal dump sites."

City staff cuts hurt

Ralph Johnson, Reading's director of public works, said the city in the last several years has reduced the parks maintenance staff from 15 to six employees.

"It takes us longer to get the work accomplished," Johnson said. "Using the volunteer process is a good way to get the work done. It's greatly appreciated."

Johnson noted that too much trash is being thrown in the gutters.

"We ask people to please put trash in the trash cans throughout the city," he said.

Louise Brown, president of Wood-to-Wonderful, a nonprofit at 1044 N. Eighth St., said the organization has placed 800 trash cans across the city in a program called CAN-IT, an acronym for Clean a Neighborhood in Town. Brown said the agency is working to obtain funding to purchase additional litter receptacles to place along Penn Street.

"If everyone would use the CAN-IT receptacles, there would be no need for all of these cleanups," she said.

Adam Mukerji, executive director of the Reading Redevelopment Authority, which purchases vacant properties for development, said the cleanup initiative is excellent.

"They are doing outstanding work," he said. "Our larger properties become the product of illegal dumping. Anyone doing renovations dumps on our properties. The volunteers do a great job."

Volunteers glad to help

Harrity said the city networks with nonprofit agencies and colleges to obtain volunteers to clean up sites throughout the city. He also thanked the nonprofit agency, Reading Beautification Inc., for providing supplies for the cleanups.

On a recent morning, more than a dozen volunteers cleaned a vacant property in the 900 block of Penn Street under a big sign that read, "I Love Reading."

Two part-time public works employees, Israel Santiago and Corey Garcia, helped supervise the group. Garcia said he was so thankful to the volunteers for cleaning up the lot near his home.

"We hope to see the vacant lot turned into a playground," he said.

At the Tulphehocken Street cleanup, Pastor Joseph Sclafani said clients at City Light Ministries, a homeless shelter on 246 N. Ninth St., like to do what they can to help the city improve.

Steve Theilacker, 43, said he participates in all of the City Light cleanups.

"Volunteering makes me feel good," he said, while pulling trash from the weeds. "It's great for the community."

Also aiding the effort were visiting students from the QuadW Foundation, a Dallas-based missional internship program that is active in Berks County this summer.

Bernard Opoka, 21, an intern who will be a sophomore at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, Chester County, worked on clearing weeds from the lot.

Another volunteer, Taz Barker, 35, of City Light Ministries, said it's all about giving back.

"We work hard and sweat," he said. "When we are done, we get together and have some laughs."

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