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In 1997, Rick Stanton, community services supervisor for the city of San Jose, Calif., was hired to administer the anti-graffiti and litter program operated by the parks and recreation department. “After a year or two I didn’t see the graffiti problem getting better,” says Stanton, now retired.

An annual anti-graffiti conference designed to attract regional participants from public works, law enforcement, and schools made little impact, volunteer paint-outs didn’t curb the problem, and an elementary school outreach program was failing. So Stanton decided to survey every tag in the city. Using \$450,000 of general funds, he and his crew identified almost 72,000 tags: \$100,000 for removal materials, \$100,000 for a truck dedicated for graffiti removal, \$150,000 for two full-time positions charged with graffiti removal, and \$100,000 for a contract with a youth group for graffiti abatement.

“We wanted people to do graffiti prevention and abatement on a regular, frequent basis, not just a one-day feel-good thing,” he explains. “You’re not going to change the minds of elementary students when you’re in the

classroom for just 40 minutes. They see their peers all day every day, and their peers might be doing graffiti.”

Stanton attended neighborhood meetings to recruit volunteers and hand out graffiti removal kits of solvent, sponges, mask, goggles, rags, and paint.

“We made it simple for them to sign up and gave them free materials,” he says. “If they could remove graffiti in front of their house and that’s all they did, that’s one less light pole we’d have to deal with. There was no reporting they had to do, no commitment, and they could do it whenever they wanted and wherever they wanted.”

The 124 volunteers Stanton recruited in the program’s first year nearly halved the number of tags citywide, to about 35,000. The program now has 6,500 volunteers, and just a hundred or so incidents of graffiti remain. The city also increased its full-time abatement staff to seven.

Stanton commends the volunteers for keeping costs down. “Supplies are a fraction of the cost of labor. That’s where the savings come in,” he says.

Edmonton also gives residents removal kits, available on a first-come, first-served basis, that include a 25% discount certificate that may be used to buy paint.

But not everyone labels graffiti as vandalism.

“When it’s not gang-related, it can be a form of art,” says Dwayne Kalynchuk, general manager of environmental services for the Capital Region District in Victoria, British Columbia.

A former city engineer in the Edmonton, Alberta, suburb of St. Albert, Kalynchuk helped create a program in the mid-1990s that encourages taggers to paint at a concrete skateboard park. At the time, two-person public works crews were being pulled from other projects to remediate graffiti, taxing department resources. “We couldn’t dedicate part of our workforce to graffiti removal, so we pulled crews from elsewhere, and those projects suffered,” he says.

The city reported a 45% reduction in graffiti just one year later. “You have

to have an outlet that’s an expression of that creativity,” Kalynchuk says.

But for the most part, graffiti remains a crime, and only persistence breaks the cycle.

“You have to be relentless,” says Wiggins, whose efforts have paid off: Since 2000 she claims a 90% reduction

in graffiti countywide. “When government continues to remove it, there’s no sense of ownership. City departments need to work with property owners to take steps to keep it from reoccurring. Governments need to give the general public a sense of ownership for common areas.” **PW**