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RATS. . . GARBAGE

These are the two major complaints of a South Memphis community organization which blames some city sanitation workers as contributors because they damage containers and leave garbage scattered around the containers.

DOGS ON THE LOOSE

Members of the South Binghampton Community Organization complain that stray dog spread garbage in the yards and bite children. They want the city to better enforce it ordinance against stray animals.

Staff Photos

Community Groups, Aimed at Improved Services, Grow From ACORN

By RICHARD POWELSON
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There are a number of community organizations springing up throughout Memphis which apparently don't put much credence in the adage *You can't fight City Hall.*

The new groups are being organized with the assistance of a newcomer to the local scene, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

The objective is for each group to get as many improved services from the city as it can for its neighborhoods.

"I think there is a potential for 30 to 50 community organizations here," said John M. Beam, ACORN's 26-year-old head community organizer in Memphis. "We expect the ACORN office here to be a permanent one."

ACORN — organized in Little Rock in 1970 by Wade Rathke of Massachusetts, son of an oil company bookkeeper — now has offices in six states where staff members are helping persons with low to moderate incomes to organize community groups and to help citizens meet with city officials who are responsible for handling some of the problems in the neighborhoods.

In the last two months, the Memphis ACORN staff of three persons has knocked on 3,000 to 4,000 doors in North, South and Midtown Memphis, Beam said.

The canvassing was aimed at pinpointing major problems and finding the victims.

"The biggest complaints in Frayser are overgrown lots and general upkeep (on the city's property)," Beam said. "There seems to be a general feeling among the residents that they have been forgotten by the city administration.

"In South Memphis the garbage pick-ups and rats are mentioned often.

"Near Broad and Poplar residents are concerned about the speeders. It seems to have become a racetrack," he said.

During recent weeks ACORN staff members have helped form a community organization in West Frayser. The residents held elections and chose as their chairman a neighbor named Everett Henson, who last year donned football cleats and tromped across Public Works Director Frank Palumbo's front yard for days at a time to protest the city's sidewalk ordinance.

Henson's group bundled up four-foot-high grass on city property at Frayser Boulevard and Dawn Drive and took it to Maynard Stiles, city sanitation director, to show him how long it had been since the city had cut the grass. The group was told that a work order already had been issued for the job and it would be cut soon.

A South Memphis group, called the Mallory Heights Community Organization, is being formed to amplify complaints about garbage pick-up and rat infestation.

"We strongly recommend they clean up garbage, stop damaging cans and lids, collect garbage regularly and collect the leaves and brush," said Mrs. Katherine Reid, newly elected secretary of the group. "The neighbors just can't afford to replace garbage cans every three to four months."

James Schippers, a priority area coordinator in the city's Office of Community Development, is supporting the efforts of the citizen's groups.

"I agree with the basic tenet that the city and neighborhood residents should work together. I hope that it causes people to take more pride in their own property. This can be a very big factor in keeping an area from downgrading and becoming a slum."

The work of ACORN staff members in strengthening the community organizations is not free of charge. If residents want to become full-time ACORN members they must pay $16 a year. This fee entitles members to newsletters and pays ACORN staff salaries and overhead at their office at 11 S. Cleveland and the salary of an attorney who divides his time between ACORN offices in six states.

"This is a voluntary membership fee," Beam said. "ACORN runs on a real shoestring budget. We're planning to find merchants who will give discounts to ACORN members and perhaps we'll start a food co-op here, buy the food wholesale, and sell it at a reasonable cost to members."

In other states where ACORN staffs have been working for several years, Beam says there have been favorable results.

"In Central Arkansas we were responsible for winning refunds for residents from electric and gas companies. In the Dallas-Ft. Worth area we were successful in holding back an increase in (natural) gas rates.

"In Missouri, we got a petition together to get an initiative on the ballot to eliminate the tax on food and drugs. They will vote on it in November.

"Most community organizations fail to grapple with the need for internal funding. Few collect membership dues and when the source of funds dries up the group falls apart.

"I've seen very few community organizations survive after one year. Those that do survive they die after the second year," Beam said. "ACORN has kept growing year after year. The leadership has never been typecast as a one-issue organization."

The Memphis Better Business Bureau, which conducted a preliminary check of ACORN's operations in other cities, found "nothing derogatory at this time" about the group, a BBB spokesman said.

Meanwhile, ACORN staff members are continuing their door-to-door interviews with residents, aiding in organizing groups and pointing the way to the appropriate city officials' doors.