Strategic code enforcement is an innovative approach to code enforcement that can help local governments reverse the negative impact of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties. Creating equitable, efficient, and effective code enforcement programs that go beyond property inspections and notices, instead weaving together regulation, policy, cost recovery, and “carrots and sticks,” can proactively improve communities through responsible property ownership. For most communities, a truly strategic approach to code enforcement marks a shift from status quo operations. This unit helps practitioners understand the elements of strategic code enforcement and the steps to take to strengthen a code enforcement program.

The modules in this unit can be mixed-and-matched with modules in other units to create a place-based training just right for your community. Contact Courtney Knox at cknnox@communityprogress.net to discuss a place-based training structure that would work best for you.

Module 1:

Strategic Code Enforcement 101
Recommended Length: 45 -90 minutes

A successful strategic code enforcement program moves beyond inspections and notices. It thoughtfully weaves together regulation, policy, cost recovery, and “carrots and sticks” into a comprehensive strategy to benefit community residents. It can help to eliminate backlogs of complaints through the sophisticated monitoring of warning signs and use of early interventions. Other elements include clear and effective enforcement mechanisms; working with other city departments and nonprofits to create programs for vulnerable owner-occupants or seniors who simply do not have the resources to bring the property up to code; providing “good landlord” incentives; connecting to other city programs, like nuisance abatement and demolition; and more. In this module, practitioners will be invited to look beyond the traditional and toward the potentially transformative role of code enforcement. They will explore a systemic, proactive approach that, when put into action, can make code enforcement more effective and, ultimately, much more efficient. Using real-world examples from around the country, this module will equip participants with an overview of the pros and cons of various code enforcement strategies and how to implement a more strategic approach.
Module 2:

Using Neighborhood Conditions to Inform Equitable Code Enforcement Strategies

Recommended Length: 90 minutes

Code enforcement gives local governments the ability to use their regulatory powers to improve quality of life for residents. A core challenge, however, is how to do so given limited resources. One way to address this challenge is through a neighborhood-sensitive approach to code enforcement, which is equitable, more resource-efficient and, ultimately, more effective at stabilizing and strengthening neighborhoods, because it tailors interventions based on actual neighborhood conditions. Such an approach is sensitive to the needs of vulnerable residents and homeowners. Understanding neighborhood dynamics, including vacancy rates, crime statistics, unemployment rates, or housing market conditions, better positions local government to implement code enforcement based on the unique conditions in each neighborhood. This module will explore how to develop a neighborhood-sensitive approach to code enforcement. It will include instruction on how to gather and aggregate the necessary datasets to reveal the factors contributing to a neighborhood’s wellbeing, with examples from other cities about how this data translates into tailored code enforcement strategies.

Module 3:

Code Enforcement Strategies to Motivate Responsible Rental Property Ownership*

Recommended Length: 90 minutes

Rental housing is a critical part of every community’s housing stock, yet it usually accounts for a disproportionate share of code enforcement challenges. While most communities have some irresponsible landlords who “milk” their properties for a few years of rental income and then walk away, communities also have many responsible landlords who intend to hold and maintain their properties. A strategic code enforcement program should not only crack down on irresponsible landlords, but instead develop a mix of strategies that reward responsible landlords and discourage bad ones. This module will provide practitioners with instruction on how to identify responsible and irresponsible landlords and apply code enforcement tools accordingly. It will address not just the “sticks” to compel compliance, but also “carrots,” to resolve challenges faced by well-intentioned landlords, who lack training or skills, have limited resources, or are impacted by adverse economic conditions in the neighborhoods where they own properties.

*This module incorporates elements from Modules 1-5 in the Rental Regulation unit.
Module 4:

Local Ordinances: The Building Blocks of Code Enforcement

Recommended Length: 90 minutes

A code enforcement department is only as good as the regulatory tools it has on the books, and the systems that are in place to use those tools. Many ordinances have been on the books for years and do not reflect up-to-date state law. Others may or may not be appropriate for current neighborhood conditions. In other cases, the ordinances on the books are well-crafted, but aren’t wielded as strategically as they could be. It isn’t always clear how to analyze the existing regulatory framework or where to look for best practices to implement. This module is an opportunity to take a step back and explore what makes a code enforcement ordinance equitable, efficient, and effective. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of the components of effective and ineffective local code enforcement ordinances and explore examples from other cities of ordinances that work well and those that haven’t. At the end of this module, participants will be better-equipped to undertake an analysis of their own local ordinances, with a clearer sense of what best practices to consider in shaping (or re-shaping) their regulatory framework.

Module 5:

The Role of Community Partners in Supporting Code Enforcement Outcomes

Recommended Length: 45-90 minutes

There are only so many code enforcement officers in a community, and there are a whole lot of properties to keep an eye on. Since you can’t do it all from City Hall, residents and neighborhood groups can be powerful allies as the eyes and ears on the ground. They bring a tremendous amount of knowledge about what is happening on a given block, and a strategic code enforcement program will recognize and leverage that resource to improve community outcomes. Citizen participation and reporting is key to collecting property data, identifying unregistered rental housing units, and serving as an early warning system to support struggling homeowners before their properties fall into disrepair or foreclosure. This module covers methods to build stronger partnerships and more formalized communication channels with community residents and organizations. Such collaboration can assist with collecting on-the-ground information, raising awareness on how to be a good homeowner, tenant, or landlord, and reporting out on the program’s progress. It also explores how to build trust between code enforcement departments and residents. Participants will complete this module with clear examples of ways to build community partnerships that support and enhance existing rental housing registration and code enforcement efforts.