Promotes neighborhood revitalization by collaboratively developing practical and sustainable resolutions to blighted properties and to the systems that lead to widespread neglect, vacancy and abandonment of real estate. The Organization focuses on policy advocacy and implementing/documenting replicable comprehensive neighborhood improvement projects.

Imagine an idyllic neighborhood. Rows of well-maintained houses filled with friendly neighbors lining the litter-free streets. Streetlights bathe the sidewalks when evening falls, filling the area with a sense of peace and security. Of course, the ideal setting is never quite so picturesque in the real world. Things tend to get messy. A raccoon knocks over several rows of trashcans. Paint peels. Sidewalks crack. Weeds grow. Abandoned homes fall into disrepair. The time and effort required to fix each problem will vary widely, and frequently, what seems simple is far from it.

Consider the process for reclaiming and rejuvenating an abandoned building. An individual or group of individuals call in a complaint: the pink house on the corner is falling apart and no one has lived there for years. Months go by and it seems like nothing has happened.

The official complaints continue, and people begin to grow frustrated. Meanwhile, the Department of Housing and Code Enforcement dispatches an inspector who determines what (if any) violations apply to the structure. Then the department must identify and locate the building’s owner, inform them of the violations, and begin the process of bringing the building up to code. With violations that range from uncut grass to failure to maintain siding, and with homeowners who might be deceased or living in another state, it is easy to see how complicated and frustrating the process can become. That pink house might stay vacant and dilapidated for a couple years more, especially when you factor in good, old-fashioned bureaucratic inefficiency.

Frater worked as an industrial engineer before turning his keen eye for processes and standardization to city code enforcement. After working with the City of Memphis for the past 2 years, he has already seen excellent results. Steve Barlow of Neighborhood Preservation, Inc. notes, “Frater’s focus on the details and his ability to bring everything together into a compelling case for improving processes has wowed me more than once... I consider Mark Frater’s work to be some of the most important and transformative work for code enforcement in Memphis that I have been a part of in 20 years of working here.”

Frater and the LeanFirm do not operate through a strictly top-down approach. They prefer to work with the employees in facilitated focus groups and workshops. This process, called “Kaizen”, roughly translates to good change. Fundamentally, it means learning by doing, and necessitates the involvement of the people doing the work. Frater notes that the employees are the ones in the weeds who know the processes forward and backward. Most often, the individuals doing the work are the ones who can problem solve and identify solutions. Frater and his team work alongside staff to identify process waste as well as gaps that need to be filled. Kaizen is a visual process that involves documenting the step-by-step procedure for a process on butcher paper. From there, the team works together to determine and eliminate unnecessary steps that add no value to the process.

That’s where Mark Frater and LeanFirm come in

Frater’s work takes on a two-pronged approach. First, he and his team delve deeply into the details of the process itself, working with organizations to identify unnecessary steps. These are most likely to occur due to miscommunication. For example, two people might unknowingly spend time working on the pink house simultaneously. In addition, proper procedure might dictate that one person pass off the case to a new person, losing most of the knowledge and facility the first person had gained through research and experience with the abandoned pink house. LeanFirm identifies these moments of miscommunication or lost knowledge and implements a structure which is standardized and easily digestible so that if a hand off must occur, knowledge about the case is maintained. Problems also arise when the process is not clearly mapped from beginning to end. The case of the pink house might dead end when an inspector is stuck with no identifiable next step.

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Mark is a proven team builder with a successful track record in helping organizations institute lean principles. With 15 years of experience in operations, quality improvement and project management, he has a demonstrated ability to create and implement a foundation for change. He has experience in leading kaizen events at all levels. He has significant expertise in working with public housing authorities, cities, counties and municipal courts.