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Introducing the Adopt-A-Neighborhood Program

With crime spiraling upward in every major city, shootings and mass shootings are becoming the “new normal” and with graffiti and crime spreading, it is time for a fresh approach. The *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* Program (*AAN*) rebuilds America's great cities by resurrecting their toughest areas, too often a breeding ground of criminal activity, by bringing the American Dream to the poorest communities and most troubled neighborhoods. Governments at all levels have been ineffective at solving these and other problems.

The reason the American dream must be brought back to life is that everyone deserves hope. Hope springs eternal and can bring out the greatest joys in the hardest of times. It can give people the strength to persevere, even when they cannot find it within themselves to keep up that fight. Bringing hope to these neighborhoods also shows young people that a life of crime is a hopeless endeavor. However, the *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* (*AAN*) Program is not a new government hand-out.; it is a private-public partnership that rewards hard work and is built upon Sweat Equity. (Note, “private” come before “public” in “private-public partnership.”)

When a foster child got the great news, “you’ve been adopted!” that child’s life was forever changed, and for the good. Then, thirty or more years ago, signs started appearing

on highways saying, “Adopt-A-Highway,” which was a misuse of that concept of adoption. You cannot put your arms around a highway, but you can put your arms around family members and your family’s home. So, why not a neighborhood also?

What can be done to aid those who struggle is to sponsor the people’s dreams of home ownership, and help whole neighborhoods to stand on their own proverbial feet? For too long, citizens have been told they cannot contribute to such a cause, as it is the realm of government, and that crime and poverty are so complex, one must continue to pump vast quantities of money into projects and never ask if they are working, even if they are not.

Enter the *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* Program, which lets people and corporations contribute to the preservation and/or restoration of troubled neighborhoods they currently visit or would like to visit in the future. The majority of the *AAN* Program rebuilds America's greatest cities by resurrecting its poorest neighborhoods in cities like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and Boston. There are long lists of such neighborhoods, in most states, unfortunately. In Massachusetts, locals avoid driving through Mattapan, South Boston, Dorchester, and many more areas, out of self-protection. The list is growing longer each day because governments not only do not have a solution to this growing crisis but may have unwittingly (or wittingly) helped create the crises these neighborhoods face daily. For example, in many cities, residents no longer know if they will make it home alive on that day or whether they will make it through the night without a bullet coming through their bedroom window.

Most citizens living within the United States have lived their lives in a home. So, what is it that makes a home? Many people have created different phrases to capture its true meaning: “Home is where the heart is”, “A man’s home is his castle.” Yet, despite the

comfort these phrases may bring, it is still true that only 66% of individuals leading households own their homes ¹. These could be apartments, condominiums, or multi-story houses yet, the story remains the same. Home may be where the heart is, but does that mean the heart is even truly theirs? Through this program it finally will be.

A variety of housing crises over the years since this era have led residents to have to pay substantially more in rent every single year as well. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the cost of rent has quadrupled in average within the last 22 years—going from \$400 to a staggering \$1600 a month², and spiking up even further, due to inflation. Because of this, quality of life has decreased significantly, and homelessness, and evictions are on the rise. Yet, many residents have lived in these same neighborhoods for their entire lives, some for multiple generations. This is what connects many neighborhoods together, though. The struggle that many people have had to go through finding jobs to afford their rent is a shared experience many inner-city neighbors may find themselves in together. According to the New York City Budget Commission, nearly half of city renters spent 30% or more of their income personal income on rent in 2018³. This is one reason the ***Adopt-A-Neighborhood*** Program has come to light.

One major issue many neighborhoods face is that of high rates of unemployment (as high as 14.1%) and high rates of crime matched with equally high taxes. According to research done by the Office of Policy Development and Research⁴ these are all disproportionately high in lower income neighborhoods as well. This program seeks to

¹ (Bureau, n.d.)

² (Bureau, n.d.)

³ (*Think Your Rent Is High?*, 2018)

⁴ (*Neighborhoods and violent crime* / hud user, n.d.)

reverse what may have been intentional destruction of the inner cities, using the “original title theft” may just be cities and their agents who seem to have been all too eager to grab buildings, homes, and even commercial space, when the owner was a day late or dollar short on the city’s tax bill, leaving rusting leaking burned out shells of their former selves. These former beloved buildings provided life, and can have life breathed back into them, today, with a little “hand up”, not a “hand out”.

What the *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* Program aims to accomplish is to aid in the restoration of such neighborhoods by giving the power of decision-making to those who call that neighborhood, “Home”. The goal behind the *AAN* is not only to help residents live in safer environments and to build family ties, but also give back to the community by paying them to do the work they are willing to do. This is what is known as “Sweat Equity.” By allotting neighborhoods budgets to spend on infrastructure, housing, and other issues deemed in need of aid, this not only allows the residents their own personal freedoms but also provides less-expensive means in which major transformations, for the good, may be accomplished.

The most significant parts of the *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* Program are called:

The ["Ghetto's to Gold"](#) Program

The ["Graffiti be Gone!"](#) Program

The ["Sparkling Streets"](#) Program

The ["Homeless to Entrepreneur"](#) Program

Ghetto-to-Gold

At the heart of the "*Ghetto's to Gold*" Program is the fact that cities own an enormous number of abandoned properties, often because the families that lived in these homes were a day late or a dollar short on paying their city's tax bill. Now, years or decades later, those homes are no longer inhabitable, and are often used in illicit trades, like prostitution, drug dealing, or worse, human trafficking. So, once *AAN* has a legal standing and built up its own organization, it can organize the reclamation of hundred, thousands, and even hundreds of thousands of home titles from the cities which grabbed those titles, having led to so much depravation. *AAN* will negotiate with cities to reclaim certain titles, with conditions, such as a 10-year waiver on city taxes. Other negotiations may involve an agreement for the city to make specific repairs, like streetlights, which will protect the homeowners from walking through dark zones, known danger zones. So, aside from repair costs, which may be high, the home can be matched to a family without any other cost, which may mean the family gets the title to their own home, but with a very small mortgage to cover the repair costs, repair costs that could not be paid for with their own Sweat Equity, and the Sweat Equity of neighbors.

Is this not the "equity" Americans have been crying out for? A home title, with their family name on it? Is this not the basis of the American Dream? Given these homes will be in otherwise dangerous places, they will earn the title, "Fortresses of Freedom," because each new home to family match will serve to improve the safety and quality of life for the entire neighborhood. This will improve the market value of the investment. So, the *AAN* program will have an interest in services and support to keep those "Fortresses" inhabited with their new owners.

The *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* Program will establish an organization, local offices, systems and rules, and algorithms, which prioritize applicants according to innumerable factors, most of which have yet to be decided upon, including Sweat Equity, work done for other “Fortresses of Freedom. Sweat Equity would consist of all types of construction work, labor work, and more, and would be a major factor in matching homes to families. In addition, *AAN* also intends to train prospects from the neighborhoods in a construction trades, like plumbing, HVAC, and carpentry, for those who need to increase their Sweat Equity score, to move up in the list more quickly, and get the key to their own home. So, when a match is made, the prospective owners can help lower the cost of renovations, and thereby lower their own mortgage amount, and create a living arrangement which should be far lower than paying high monthly rents.

This gives you a taste of the "*Ghetto's to Gold*" Program, so you can understand why people and corporations would be interested in donating money to specific neighborhoods, or a neighborhood near them. In fact, wouldn't a billion-dollar corporation, with headquarters in Boston, be interested in helping some of the poor neighborhoods near their HQ? Might Home Depot be willing to “prime the pump” in each city that starts this project by providing discounts on building supplies for the first few, “Fortresses of Freedom”?

This program's long-term goals also include an increase in home ownership through the *Ghetto-to-Gold* program. Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania and Penn's Perelman School of Medicine have found that by even committing to simple fixes such as new doors and windows on abandoned buildings, crime rate can decrease by as much as 39% as evidenced by

the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2011⁵. With goals such as home ownership in mind, residents can not only help in the betterment of their communities, but they can also create their very own “Fortress of Freedom,” a home they can call their own. The idea of a home should bring feelings of safety and comfort. Through this program, one gains the ability to not only own a house, but to build a fortress, a haven away from the stressors of the outside world.

Through the aid of lawyers and other government officials, this program will also help to provide better safety measures for these areas, from lighting to home security and even connecting with local police departments. A neighborhood with many Fortresses to Freedom is a neighborhood where crime is finally on the run, where children can sleep quietly through the night, where thriving businesses can provide high paying jobs, and where the American Dream should go to keep hope alive.

Graffiti-Be-Gone!

This will be an additional program that would accompany the ***Ghetto-to-Gold*** Program. The "***Graffiti be Gone!***" Program solves the growing crisis of graffiti painting gangs, plying their trade, damaging public and private buildings, signs, and roadways, with no regard for the damage they are causing. Once again, government does not seem willing or able to solve this problem. So, the time has come for the people and the Private Sector to form the solution and do it by providing an incentive for success.

⁵ (Remediating, n.d.)

At the heart of "*Graffiti be Gone!*" is the simplest solution, overlooked by everyone. Yes, graffiti, no matter how small, is a crime, even if it could be called, "a minor crime." Graffiti, no matter how small, causes damage, damage to the people's property, period. The point that has not yet been discussed is that graffiti is, by definition, a fingerprint. It is a tool, invented for a criminal, who is trying to skirt the law and conduct further illegal acts, such as selling drugs.

At a high level, we need to gather a massive number of pictures of graffiti, process them with facial recognition like software, then map each image to both the creator and the cost of removal. This is where some simple technology, like facial recognition software needs to be used. The difference being that 2-dimensional images, like graffiti, are far easier to process than the 3-dimensional images of facial recognition. Then, when we aggregate the images of graffiti and display those images in a map, we can find the area of operation for each gang and measure the area of operation for each gang using graffiti in that broader region. Cities, towns, counties, states will then be able see an estimate of the damage inflicted by each gang. On the street, gangs are known by the graffiti they leave, and a tiny amount of detective work will match the dollars owed to the individuals who owe these municipalities the money. Then, the civil court can see to it that those potentially large bills are paid, per orders of the court.

This is where "*Graffiti be Gone!*" overlaps with the "*Homeless to Entrepreneur*" Program. Homeless people have a street-level connection to the neighborhoods in which they travel. With as little as a smart phone, they could easily help catalog graffiti anywhere it is found in the areas in which they choose to work. Each photo would be time-stamped, and location stamped. And the photographer would get some cash reward, or log Sweat Equity Points toward their own "Fortress of Freedom" or get some other benefit for the effort.

The next step is to assess the cost to repair each graffiti, and this step would be of interest to the same people who photographed the graffiti and earn that person more money or points. That is especially true, once all the graffiti in the town's been digitally cataloged. It would likely require a personal visit, another photo, to enable the app to pull up that instance, and offer pre-defined options on making the cost estimate. This cost data would be how the "**Graffiti be Gone!**" system can aggregate the total harm individual gangs have inflicted on that community.

So, as the photographed chase down the opportunity of being the first log a graffiti, they are becoming founding members of the "**Homeless to Entrepreneur**" Program and earning money without the need for any education or certification. But it gets better...

The third step is when cities, counties, and towns decide to remove the graffiti, or the **Adopt-A-Neighborhood** Program gets permission, actual funds can be paid to those who can safely paint over or remove that graffiti. This could potentially cost a generous sum of money and produce solid work for certain graffiti removals, which could be the next step up for those who started with **AAN** with little skills by simply photographing the graffiti. Hence, "**Homeless to Entrepreneur**".

In conclusion, people who may be homeless currently, but have a smartphone, could potentially earn some cash, as they clean up their neighborhood, or earn Sweat Equity points, towards their own home. Once they have trouble finding new graffiti for too long, they can move to a different spot, one where the donations into the **Adopt-A-Neighborhood** Program for graffiti removal exceeds the number of feet on the street (The app will display where they can go to maximize earnings). Should they choose to become a painter; they can earn more money and truly consider themselves entrepreneurs!

This will work in a three-step process (summarized here), with each step earning Sweat Equity Points or some other value, including cash money:

- 1) **Identify and photograph the graffiti**, (using the app), with the goal of documenting each form of graffiti in a particular neighborhood.
- 2) **Estimate the cost of removal** for each graffiti using a simple-to-use estimation tool, provided in the app.
- 3) **Paint over the graffiti** and provide evidence of removal (via the app) to win Sweat Equity Points, cash money, or some other benefit.

NOTE: Some people may wish to work on one of those steps only, for example, photographing the graffiti (Step #1 above) only.

This will not only allow for cooperation between the local homeless population and local authorities but will also provide a source of income for said individuals. These steps would be sponsored through donations, at first, made to the neighborhood through the *AAN* Program. Then, it could become self-funding, as the civil actions would sometimes results in monetary damages being paid to the cities, counties, and states. Residents can also use this aspect of the program to gain Sweat Equity Points, instead of cash money, to go towards their own Fortress to Freedom, via the *Ghetto-to-Gold* Program.

What is at the heart of the “Graffiti be Gone!” Program? There has never been a crime where criminals *intentionally* leave their fingerprints at the crime scene!

Painting graffiti is indeed a civil crime, but a minor one, compared to dealing drugs. But rather than the People taking the economic impact “on the chin” for the near infinite cost of graffiti removal, using the free market to calculate the cost, then bill the villains, will finally curb what is running out of control accumulating the costs or removal can amount to sizeable civil damages.

How does it work?

Using technology similar to facial recognition technology, one may capture an image of a graffitied scene which will then be sent to the authorities. Upon further investigation and through the use of fingerprints, charges will be pressed on the individual who is in at fault. With this program, it not only provides a safe and secret method of reporting, but also allows *Graffiti-Be-Gone* entrepreneurs to save points and earn monetary awards or create opportunities for themselves in the future by building their Sweat Equity.

The goal of this program is to decrease minor crimes, such as drug trafficking, which deplete the livelihoods of many neighborhoods and provide a legal and honorable source of potential income for residents that will bring positive results for generations to come.

Sparkling Streets

This program will add another way for residents to gain Sweat Equity points within their neighborhoods. Inspired by the cleanliness of other countries through their own cleaner streets initiatives, this will encourage residents to apply their skills in maintenance to their own backyards. While this may seem like a minor change for a community, such a change as cleanliness can completely alter feelings of value in a neighborhood, as well as public opinion.

Steps include:

- 1) Taking pictures before and after work
- 2) Applying Sweat Equity value to it (done through cooperation between donor and residents)
- 3) Gaining Sweat Equity points towards a new home!

This program is another sponsored addition that may be added by donors who wish to sponsor.

Donorship

There is no limit to what can be donated and to where, a home means something different to each person. There are many neighborhoods which are in need and the goal behind the *Adopt-A-Neighborhood* Program is to help provide a way for both residents and businesses to give back to the homes and families they love.

Who Can Donate?

- Anyone can donate to any neighborhood they wish to help!
 - Independent Donors
 - Individuals, concerned parents, safety seeking employees, and more
 - Lawyers, doctors, and other professionals
 - Small business owners, protecting their customers and employees
 - Small Businesses to Multi-Nationals
 - Local Businesses
 - Corporations and those with a headquarters downtown
 - Law firms
 - Non-profits

What can be donated?

- Monetary Donations
 - Cash Donations in the forms of checks can be made, these may be paid in lump sum, weekly, monthly, or annually, for any period of time, with the choice of the specific neighborhood to receive each donation.
 - Gift Cards to be used for the purchases of goods will also be accepted (ex. Home Depot Gift Card)
- Services
 - Pro-bono Lawyers will be sought out, primarily, since the legal structure of *AAN* needs to be formed before the first “Sweat Equity Point” can be earned or cashed in for that first “Fortress of Freedom.”
 - Service providers, from carpenters, plumbers and electricians to security system and HVAC installers, and much more
 - Local construction companies willing to donate time, or offer a discount, to help restore a particular Fortress of Freedom
 - Organizations such as church groups or local schools willing to donate their time to volunteer and help with the construction of houses or other buildings in the neighborhood.
- Real Estate
 - Owners of unused properties can donate to *AAN*, so that residential families can use their Sweat Equity and the resources of *AAN*, to re-build and move in.
- Goods

- The donation of construction equipment, from shovels to front-end loaders, building supplies, and appliances of all types

Benefits

The benefits of donating to the *AAN* Program are far-reaching as well. For resident donors, these may be clearer: newfound safety as well as being able to witness their community thrive. However, even large corporations can benefit from safer environments for their employees as well as creating stronger economic security in neighborhoods near their headquarters. These businesses may benefit from the financial aspect of these donations as well. Contributions made by larger corporations may be longer-lasting and create a greater impact, leading to better lifestyles for their local consumers and an increase in local product consumption. And enabling employees to live closer to work is an added benefit.

We can do this together!

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