

ELDERLY TAX FORECLOSURE IN YONKERS, A PPGIS APPROACH

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One in every six residents of Yonkers, NY, is over the age of 65, and many will lose their home as a result of delinquent property taxes. Due to the overwhelming mortgage crisis, tax foreclosures are often overlooked, as they disproportionately affect the elderly population; most of whom live on fixed-incomes. This case study describes our efforts to better understand, educate and engage the elderly community of Yonkers, while promoting free counseling services available to them using GIS and working in partnership with a community-based nonprofit agency. Specifically, using GIS (1)to locate and spatialize the problems to effectively describe and explain the issues to a wide variety of stakeholders (2)to design a pilot outreach program to connect with spatially dispersed elderly residents presently facing tax liens, as well as those likely to experience these problems in the near future, and (3)to gain community and political advocates for seniors facing tax foreclosure.

Introduction

Many elderly citizens in the City of Yonkers are facing foreclosure on their properties due to unpaid tax liens. Westchester Residential Opportunities (WRO) is providing free counseling services to elderly homeowners in Westchester County, NY, with an emphasis on the City of Yonkers. WRO was facing a problem connecting with the community and obtaining a clientele base. Therefore, WRO has contracted Hunter College to help aid in the development and implementation of an outreach program to aid the elderly in obtaining free counseling services, which can reduce or help eliminate their existing property taxes or liens. Through the qualitative and quantitative research methods, a pilot outreach program was developed and tested with results clearly stating an increased awareness of WRO services and an increase in clientele. The pilot program created a strong connection with the Yonkers Office for the Aging, in addition to providing a better understanding of the community, the individuals facing foreclosure and methods of reaching out to senior citizens

The City of Yonkers, like many other cities in the US, has been devastated by foreclosures due to either unpaid mortgages or property taxes. In Yonkers, 13.8% of the population is living below the poverty line, with the per capita income at \$29,191. Approximately 14.7% of those living in Yonkers are 65 years of age or older^{1,2}. The City of Yonkers sells its tax liens to investors who, after three years, can foreclose on the home. Usually the home gets auctioned off for a much lower price than what it is worth, resulting in the homeowners being forced out of their homes with few options on where to go next. In Yonkers, where 1 in 6 residents are over the age of 65, these homeowners are very often senior citizens who are unaware of their situation until it is too late. The goal of this project is to help seniors who are affected by either the unpaid mortgage or property taxes before it gets auctioned off. Making elected officials and community leaders aware of the severity of this situation will help seniors stay in their homes or move into retirement centers. This report will introduce the City of Yonkers and examine how the housing crisis has affected elderly homeowners in Yonkers. Then it will explain the tax lien process, our client and their struggle to reach the elderly. The methodology will describe the study area selection process. The analysis will describe our findings and recommendations for further development and implementation of the pilot program in other areas of Yonkers and Westchester County.

Background

Yonkers

Yonkers is the fourth largest city in New York State and the most populous city in Westchester County. The population of Yonkers is 56% white, 19% black and 35% Hispanic or Latino origin, with approximately 196,000 residents in an 18 square mile area³. 48% of the 80,000 housing units in Yonkers are owner occupied⁴. The median value of owner occupied housing unit is 428,900 is much higher than the NY State average of 303,900.

Similar to rest of the country, Yonkers has been faced with the deterioration of the middle class, neighborhoods that were once prolific, which now exist as shadows of booming economic times. Increases expenses and cost of living in the area, with little positive movement in jobs and income adds to the economic struggle of the city. Senior residents in Yonkers are especially affected by the present economic downturn and sudden drop of housing values, as many live day-to-day on a set-income.

Housing Crisis

Since 2008, property values plummeted and the consequences for seniors are more severe than ever. "Homes have become a more critical source of wealth for retirees who have watched their mutual funds and 401(k) accounts hollow out. Next to accrued Social Security benefits, housing is the single greatest asset for people 60 to 70 years old, making up 22% of their total wealth and outweighing investments and pensions, according to the Center for Retirement Research.⁵"

Most homeowners by the time they reach retirement age have their home already paid off but they are still required to pay property taxes. The housing crisis blocked older Americans who are unable to take care of themselves from moving into retirement homes. After the market crashed, a value of the properties dropped drastically. Many elderly planned on moving into assisted-living centers using the profit from selling their home, could not afford it anymore. After using up their life savings they are often unable to pay their property taxes. The effects of these events are clearly visible in the City of Yonkers.

Tax Delinquency Process in Yonkers

Each year, the City of Yonkers auctions off its unpaid tax liens. Almost 700 liens were sold in 2011, with similar numbers in previous years. Properties that are not paid for within 3 years will face foreclosure. The foreclosure list produced by the Westchester county clerk's office is released every year in April. It lists the names, addresses of the individual associated with the property and the amount that the individual owes in that year. It doesn't include information about the amounts in arrears from previous years, or about any liens already attached to the property. Our client, Westchester Residential Opportunities, Inc., is determined to help these individuals on the list to keep their home and restore their financial issues.

Westchester Residential Opportunities

Westchester Residential Opportunities, Inc. (WRO), a certified HUD, non-profit housing counseling agency that has been protecting Westchester County residents for over 40 years. Their mission is to promote equal, affordable and accessible housing opportunities for all residents of the region⁶. Our client is Jane Lindau, Director of Senior Housing at WRO. Jane has contracted our team to help her develop an outreach campaign to obtain more clients: senior citizen homeowners who are at-risk of, or already in, foreclosure due to tax liens on their property as a result of unpaid property taxes.

Many of the elderly according to our client have a lack of understanding of the problem, and the risks associated with property tax liens. Some of them are depressed or even mentally unstable.

The goal of the grant was to provide at least 75 Yonkers seniors counseling and prevent at least 50 homes from going into foreclosure. WRO came to us at the beginning February and at that time they had about 10 clients who they were able to assist. The goal of their grant was to help senior citizens with property tax liens to obtain free counseling and WRO's services. Additionally, they aimed to help at least 25 seniors who were eligible for but were not receiving at least one major benefit such as the Real Property Tax Exemption for Senior Citizens, which will save each household at least \$2,500 per year.

Elderly

It is estimated that over 6.5 million Americans that are 65 or older suffer from depression. Many have been struggling with depression for years, while others have their first episode later in life. The cause of depression is different for everyone; it could be the result of a family trait, the environment, or a biological factor. Some medications can have depression as a side effect, but other factors such as "...the development of a disabling illness, loss of a spouse or a friend, retirement, moving out of the family home or some other stressful event..." could be the cause.

It is often hard to diagnose depression in older adults, as the symptoms they exhibit can be different than the more common ones seen in younger populations. These symptoms can include: confusion, delusions, and memory problems. Depression can result in a person's inability to accomplish their everyday responsibilities like paying their property taxes or understanding the serious consequences of not paying them.

Methodology

Public Participation and GIS

Working closely with the Office for the Aging and Westchester Residential Opportunities, sections were made based upon initial maps, identifying target locations with known elderly homeowners, many of which are associated with receiving some form of aid from the Office for the Aging.

WRO provided us with the spreadsheet of names and addresses of people from the 2011 liens list. This list was geocoded using ArcGIS 10 Address Locator. In order to focus on residential tax liens, our client's main interest; we merged our addresses with the parcel data dataset (2007) from Yonkers GIS. By merging these together it enabled us to categorize each of the addresses by type. Below is the table showing how many of each category that is facing tax foreclosure.

Type of Property	Frequency	Percent
Missing	116	16.6
Commercial	99	14.2
Community Services	14	2.0
Industrial	6	.9

The highest percentage is residential, almost 52%, followed by vacant land and commercial properties. Properties under Community Services, Industrial, and Public Services take up 3% of the addresses combined.

Public Services	1	.1
Residential	360	51.6
Vacant Land	102	14.6
Total	698	100.0

Unfortunately, almost 17% of the addresses were not matched with the parcel data; probably due to the age of the parcel data set (2007). Subdivisions of original parcels that happened after the parcel database was created were not represented in the database since that database represented a snapshot of the Yonkers parcels in 2007.

Figure 1: Liens by Category

The map below (Figure 3) shows the liens by categories. The blue circles represent residential liens, which are the majority of the liens. In the eastern part of the city, the higher income areas of Yonkers, liens tend to be more spread out. There is a clustering of different type of liens in the southwest section of Yonkers, which is also the lower income area of the city

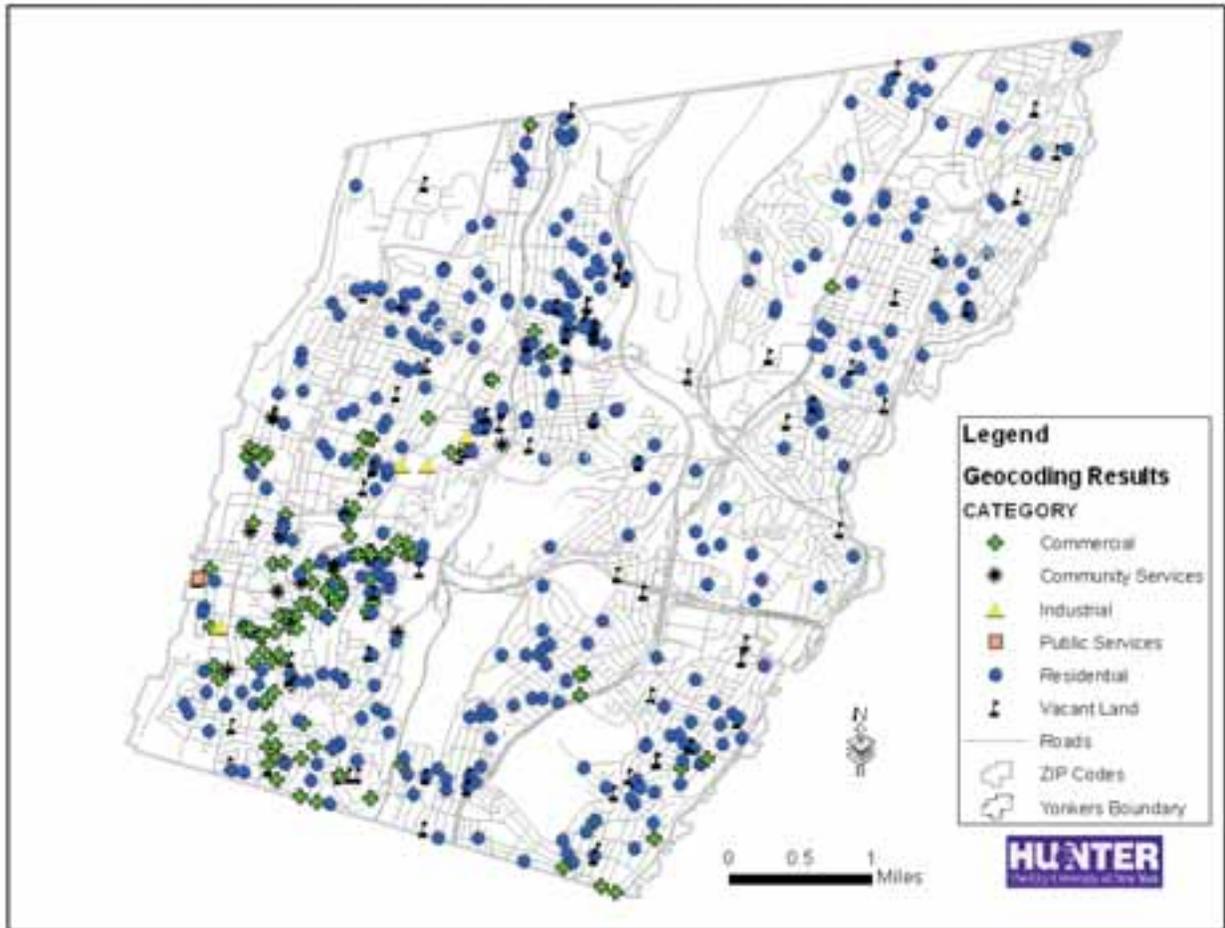


Figure 2. Map of Liens and Property Type

After merging these tax liens with the parcel data we selected our study area, which is located just north of the Peter Chema Seniors-Community Center on the border of 10705 and 10701. Our selection was based on the high density of tax liens in the area.

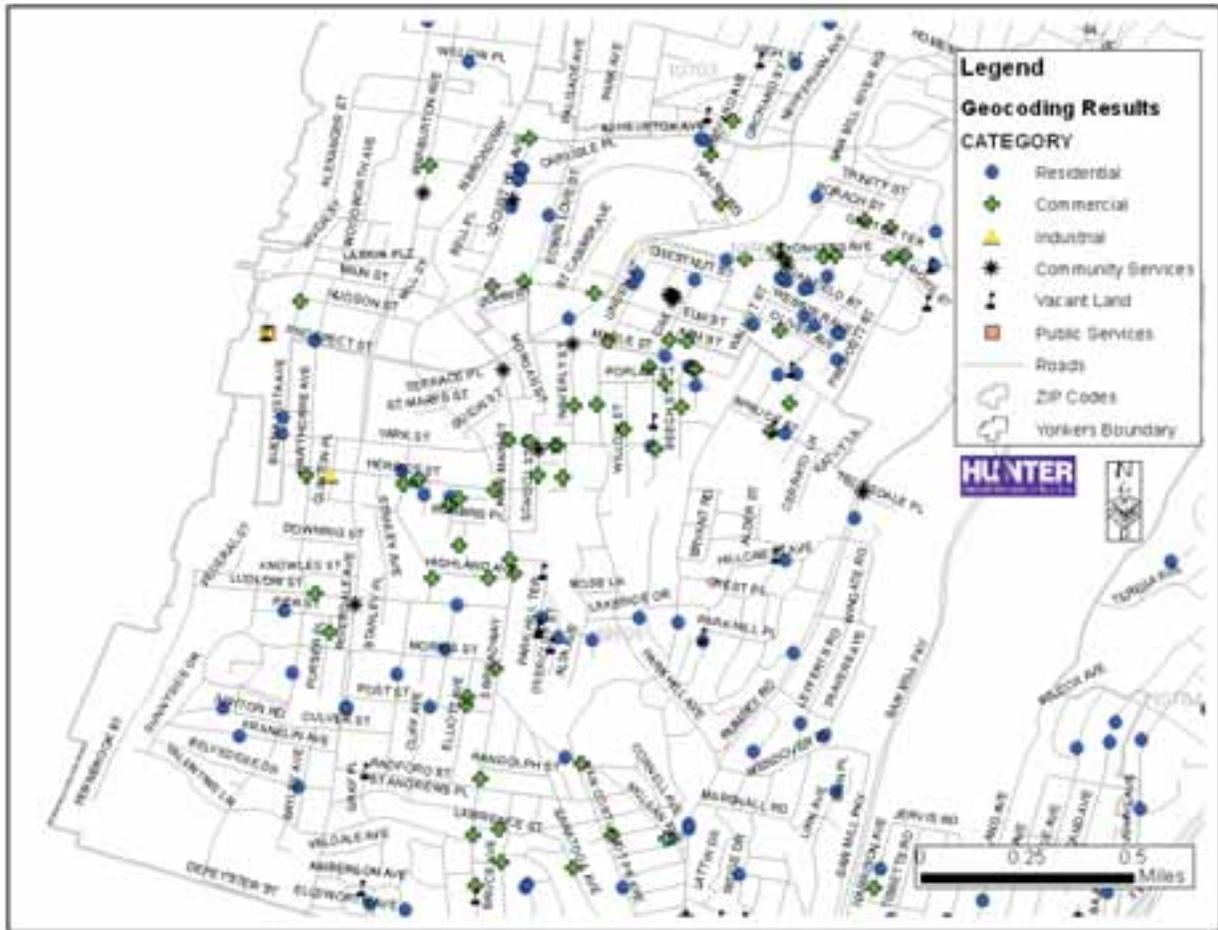


Figure 3: Study Area

The next step in the project was to identify where the seniors are since our client's primary goal is to help senior citizens. Based on the 2010 Census data we were able to identify high clusters of seniors, this is indicated in Figure 5. Then we overlaid them with the liens data, which will help our client to focus their attention in these areas as they continue the outreach efforts in the future. Areas with high density of elderly residents are more likely to be at risk of facing foreclosure in the future.

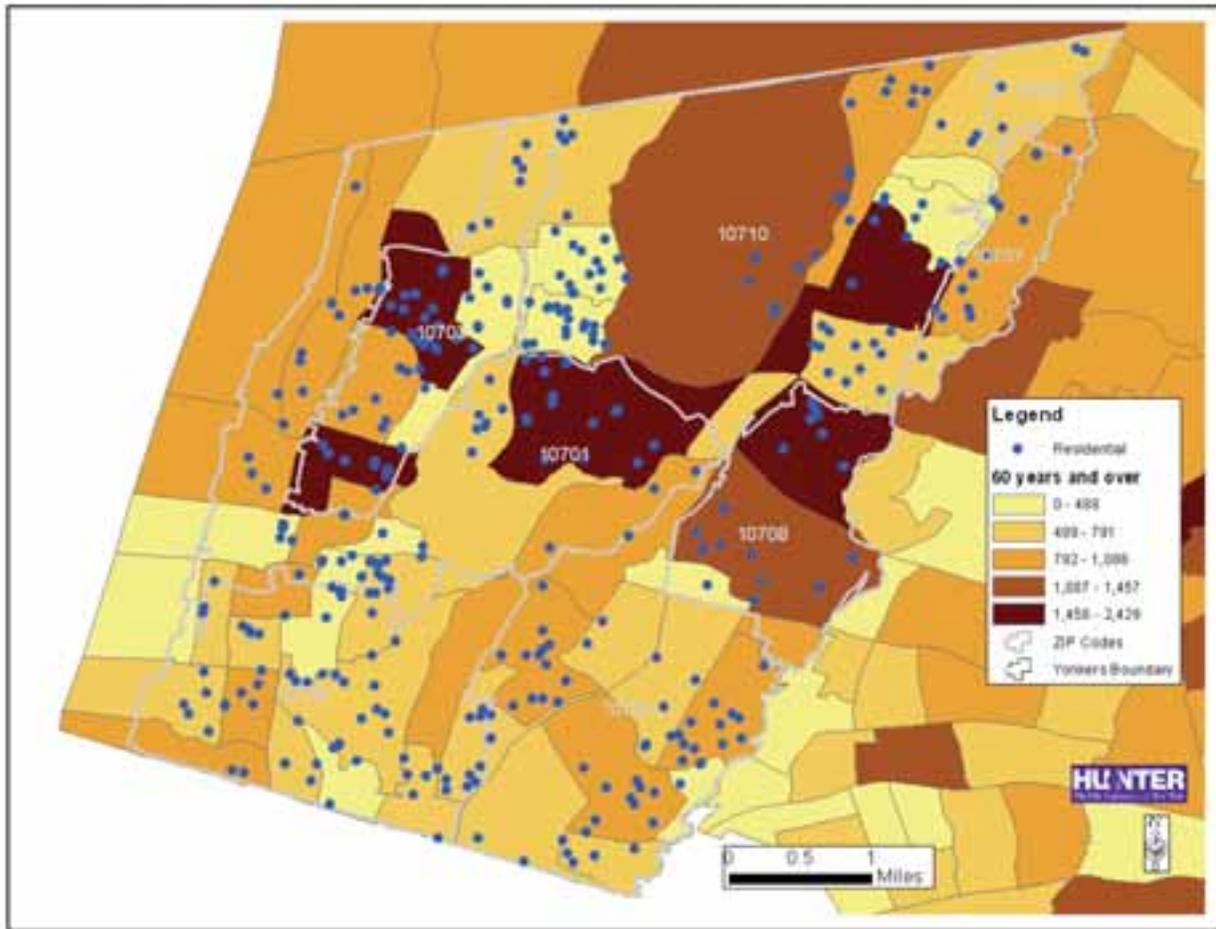


Figure 5. Map of Yonkers 60+ populations and liens

Survey

In order to develop a successful outreach plan we determined that surveying the clients of WRO Senior Services was the best approach in gaining and understanding of the clientele. The survey, which can be seen in the Appendix 12, have been given to WRO for distribution. Presently, we have not yet received any results of this survey. These surveys were to be distributed by WRO to clients that they have already helped, prior to Hunter’s involvement Clients obtained after the pilot outreach program was developed will also be given the same survey, but printed on different color paper to distinguish new from old clients. The goal of these surveys is to see which tactics are successful and which are ineffective; this will allow us to modify the outreach campaign appropriately.

Expert Interviews

Interviews were conducted with WRO Director, Jane Lindau and Robi Schlaff, a lawyer working pro bono with WRO. These interviews gave the team a broader perspective of the goal of the project and better understanding of what data existed and what WRO is looking for. These interviews also provided us with a detailed inside into some of the cases that our client worked on. Seemed like each person they helped had a unique twist to their financial situation beyond what we can ever think of.

An interview was also conducted with Barry Nesson, a lawyer from Yonkers, who was able to depict a clearer picture of the lien and auctioning process. This interview was conducted at the request of WRO and provided insight into the legal process. Mr. Nesson works for one of the investors who already purchased multiple liens this year and in the past. He had shared contact information with our client on some cases and also the severity of the problem; how close the individual is to losing their home. Mr. Nesson provided essential information that could have taken days to figure out giving the time it takes to peel off the layers of legal jargon on each case.

Kathy Moran, Director of the Office for the Aging, was also interviewed. This interview was most beneficial, as it gave the team a clear view of the elderly community, problems they may face, methods that may work, methods that will surely fail, and the mentality and thinking of elderly living in Yonkers. Different neighborhoods, recreational centers and religious institutions were also noted in this interview.

Outreach Campaign

WRO PSA Commercial

Prior to contracting Hunter College to aid in developing an outreach program, WRO has developed a Public Service Announcement (PSA) commercial. This commercial was aired on local television on March 26, 2012. A portion of the funding from the grant was used for the development, production and airplay of the PSA commercial, which cost \$8,800. Limited finances were available in the development of the Hunter Outreach Program.

Advertising Campaign

Based upon analysis of the target population fliers were designed and distributed throughout “ideal” locations in the City of Yonkers. Ideal locations were selected based upon a GIS analysis conducted on the residents of Yonkers and high clustering of liens. The goal was to distribute the material to these neighborhoods where they can be picked up and used or forwarded to other potential clientele. The initial flier distribution was 250 fliers dispersed throughout 10701 and a 5-mile radius of the Office for the Aging Center. Types of locations included: religious institutions, medical offices, pharmacies, restaurants, youth and elderly community centers.

The first release of fliers included two different fliers, each based upon a different form of help WRO provides. Each type of flier was printed on 8.5x11 paper and 8.5x11 paper with telephone number tear-outs. These fliers incorporated large typeface and dark contrasts to pop-out. Our idea was that with this style they would attract attention, as well as be easily readable from afar.

A new, revised flier was created based upon observations and findings of the field trip. The modified fliers had a much cleaner visual appearance and focused on the “Office of the Aging” as a collaborator in this project. Additionally these fliers are 8.5x11 in size and doubled-sided with English and Spanish context.

WRO has been asked to make the fliers visible on their organization's website and sent out to their networks via email, with hopes of increasing awareness. We are collaborating with the Office for the Aging in distributing these new fliers to residents using their “Home Delivered Meals” service. This kind of approach will bring the fliers directly into the elderly citizens’ home. All of the fliers described above can be seen in Appendix 4-11.

Field Work

Trip - March 30th 2012.

Our group met with Kathy Moran and her staff, Kirsten Kodl, at the Yonkers Office for the Aging, which is located at the Peter Chema Senior Community Center. During our meeting we discussed what methods would be most effective in reaching out to the senior citizens in Yonkers. Ms. Moran's genuine care to help seniors and her intimate knowledge of the target population goes way beyond her title as Director of the Office for the Aging. Ms. Moran and Ms. Kodl directed us to people who can aid us in our outreach effort and they also provided us with their contact information. Additionally they supplied us with the list of pharmacies, supermarkets that deliver and religious organization in the area. They also reached out to the mayor's office regarding a press release that could put this issue of foreclosure and seniors in the spotlight. We distributed flyers in the area during our field trip to religious institutions, community centers, medical centers, pharmacies and restaurants near the War Veterans Club, that army veterans are known to frequent.

During our fieldtrip we made the following observations. The residents in Yonkers were very kind and accommodating to our purpose. The terrain is very hilly, and it is difficult to navigate to a large area without automobile usages. A clear impression was left on our team that the fliers must be translated into the Spanish language, as we observed a very high percentage of Latino population in Yonkers. Additionally, we learned that different venues held events especially for senior citizens, often these events ended by 3:00PM. *This is important to note, as we missed the opportunity to meet the seniors by 5 minutes. A map indicating the route and distribution of fliers can be seen in Appendix 15.

Phone List

The list of individuals with property tax liens is very large and includes property addresses and owner names; however no contact information is available. WRO wanted to be able to go down the list and contact the individuals by telephone, to see if they would be eligible for their services. We recommended using and purchasing a temporary account on Spokeo. This website application allows the client to obtain information on the individuals on the tax liens list, including but not limited to: telephone number(s), age, income, relatives that might be registered at the same address, relatives' names and ages, aerial image of the property, Zillow property estimate, and other public information in one place. According to spokeo.com the cost of this service is approximately \$3.95 per month. This would help WRO identify if the individual is within the appropriate age and income bracket that they are searching for. This method has provided mixed results

Findings

Flier distribution has been successful in bringing more phone calls and potential clients to WRO. Although they were only distributed in a small geographic area so far, with more needed to be given out in the rest of Yonkers. The PSA has produced no new calls or clients for WRO, it is believed that the target market is not being exposed or relating to this commercial/media form. Perhaps it is due to the numerous scams that are going around Yonkers and the country, they have been advised to avoid. Postings in the church bulletins and local paper also didn't yield any new clients.

We believe that the best way to reach seniors who are at danger of losing their home is through the community centers. These centers play an important role in the seniors everyday life and it is a comfort zone for them. Daily, seniors attend programs here like Bingo and are provided with free lunch on a regular basis.

We have yet to receive back any of the surveys that were sent out. However, in the future WRO can continue to use it as a tool to tweak their outreach effort.

Recommendations

Volunteers

WRO has a commitment from The Volunteer Center of United Way to provide them with volunteers. These volunteers should be trained in speaking with the elderly and understand the requirements for WRO services, i.e.: age requirement, homeownership and income bracket. These volunteers would hopefully be elderly themselves, and be able to spread word of the free counseling services available to them. Additionally they should distribute fliers and work with WRO at events and outreach. Having elderly volunteers who live in Yonkers is essential in this outreach effort since they will be more likely to be trusted than anyone else. They have the advantage of knowing the community, knowing the people in the community and their age something that neither our group nor WRO has.

Events

Currently WRO is holding events throughout Westchester County at senior events at community centers and libraries. We recommend they expand their events to Housing Association Meetings where they can connect to senior homeowners. We have already contacted one of them and they are interested in having WRO speak at one of their upcoming events. Speaking in various events should continue on the monthly bases in order to keep WRO known throughout different communities.

Developing Networks within Westchester County

We have recommended that WRO try to work closely with the following organizations in promoting their services: (1) Office for the Aging (2) Local Political Offices and Representatives (3) Media Outlets. Working with the following organization will strengthen WRO's present in the community. They will be more trusted because they have the support of the Office for the Aging, local politicians and the local media.

Office for the Aging

A great relationship has been developed with Hunter and the Yonkers Office for the Aging. Both are working together closely to help benefit the elderly community. Office for the Aging has allowed Hunter College to use them as a direct resource and use their office in all advertisements. This is crucial, as the Office for the Aging is a strong player in Yonkers, and a powerhouse in terms of community trust and respect. We hope to continue to build upon and cultivate this relationship.

Political Offices and Representatives

WRO and the Office for the Aging are both involved in obtaining political involvement in this project; Office for the Aging has requested the Mayor release a Press Release in regards to the free counseling services available through the collaboration of WRO and the Office for the Aging. This is currently in progress and will hopefully result in a long-term partnership between each organization.

Media Outlets

WRO has already publicly released a PSA that is presently on-air. Future involvement with the media includes 2 articles that we will write and try to have published in the local newspaper. Fliers

should continue to be distributed throughout Yonkers and Westchester County. They should be updated as necessary for the communities in which they are being distributed. Presently English and Spanish fliers exist; there may be a need to include additional languages. WRO should seek out to have more involvement in published newspapers and magazines in both the local and more national community. Trying to get advertising in pro-bono from the local media would be beneficial, especially if there is a push from the political community. In the future, a documentary grant may be worth attempting, as this will broadcast the issue to a global audience. Radio may also be a good option, with an emphasis on Oldies and Latino stations.

Conclusions

Through the use of GIS technologies and public participation, a pilot program was developed to help locate and provide counseling services to elderly residents in the City of Yonkers facing, or at risk of losing their homes due to tax delinquency. While the pilot outreach program was successful, additional efforts must be made to ensure continual support and stability in the community. The relationship developed with the Office for the Aging has been invaluable, and proved crucial in providing insight and understanding, and gaining a sense trust within the community. This relationship should continue to be nourished.

Acknowledgements

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¹ City of Yonkers, "Demographics." Last modified May 24, 2007. Accessed April 20, 2012. <http://www.yonkersny.gov/Index.aspx?page=217>.

² United States Census Bureau 2012

³ United States Census Bureau 2012

⁴ City of Yonkers, "Demographics." Last modified May 24, 2007. Accessed April 20, 2012

⁵ Healy 2008

⁶ Westchester Residential Opportunities, INC. 2012

⁷ Duckworth October 2009