

Mobilizing the Private Sector for Large-Scale Property Improvements in Disinvested Neighborhoods

CLEANUP/BUILDUP

It's Saturday morning and the sounds of chainsaws, heavy equipment, music, and laughter fill the air. Volunteers in hard hats clear overgrown lots, haul away illegally dumped debris, paint boarded windows, and plant flowers where weeds once stood. This is CleanUp/BuildUp (CUBU), a collaborative initiative launched in 2017 and led by the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis (ULSTL) and the Regional Business Council (RBC), in partnership with local governments and high-vacancy communities.

CUBU brings together an unusually broad coalition: volunteer construction and demolition firms, utilities, major employers, churches, City agencies, and community members working side by side to tackle visible signs of disinvestment. City of St. Louis departments—including the Forestry Division, Building Division, Streets Department, St. Louis Development Corporation, St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department, and the Fire Department play a critical role by coordinating logistics, addressing safety concerns, and ensuring work is aligned with code enforcement and public safety priorities. Alongside them, companies such as Keeley Construction, Fred Weber, PARIC, Spire, Ameren, Missouri American Water, AT&T, and others donate equipment, skilled workers, and supplies—contributing millions of dollars in in-kind labor and material. Together, CUBU partners have demolished more than 100 vacant buildings, cleared hundreds of vacant and abandoned lots, and addressed chronic illegal dumping across more than 20 large-scale events.

The impact is both practical and symbolic. Beyond demolition and cleanup, CUBU emphasizes beautification as a tool for neighborhood pride and safety. Volunteers have painted board-ups, sheds,

flower pots, and traffic bollards, transforming once-bleak streetscapes. In one of the most visible examples, teams repainted the historic Grand Avenue Water Tower—turning a neglected landmark into a point of neighborhood pride. These improvements help reduce crime by improving property conditions while demonstrating what is possible when underutilized and abandoned properties are treated as assets rather than liabilities.

Since its launch, CUBU has worked in more than 10 neighborhoods in the City of St. Louis as well as surrounding communities including Wellston, Kinloch, and East St. Louis. Each event serves as both a direct intervention and a public statement: concentrated disinvestment is not irreversible. By pairing private-sector capacity, government operational support, and resident leadership, CleanUp/BuildUp shows how coordinated, highly visible action can stabilize neighborhoods, spark reinvestment, and build momentum for longer-term recovery—one block, one lot, and one community at a time.

Learn more at www.stlrbc.org/cleanupbuildup

Top Left: Fred Weber Inc. painting the Grand Ave Water Tower. Photo courtesy of Charles Abdul-Wali Muhammad. Top Right: St. Louis Fire Department providing dust suppression in Hamilton Heights. Photo courtesy of SLDC. Middle: CUBU partners in Wells Goodfellow. Photo courtesy of STL Public Safety Collaborative. Bottom: Volunteers clear abandoned buildings and overgrowth. Photos courtesy of Urban League (L) and Washington University (R).



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