

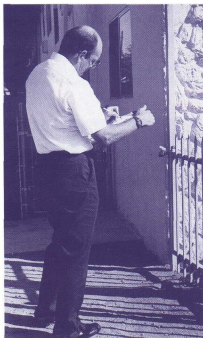
## CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM EXCELLENCE AWARD

*Populations greater than 20,000*



*Douglas K. Clark*

This year's Citizen Involvement Program Excellence Award in the greater-than-20,000 population category goes to the city of Escondido, California, and City Manager Douglas K. Clark for their development of the Rental Housing Improvement Team of Escondido.



*RHITE volunteer inspects non-owner-occupied property in Escondido*

Prompted by concern about property neglect and safety hazards within the city's rental housing stock, the Escondido city council considered instituting mandatory rental housing inspections. A tentative proposal called for the inspections to be conducted annually by the Code Enforcement Division, with an inspection fee allocated to each rental unit. City management, however, wanted to avoid the cost of hiring additional code enforcement officers during tough economic times. The proposal also faced opposition from members of the rental housing industry, who were concerned about the cost, and from tenants who felt their privacy would be invaded.

In March 1993, the Escondido city council directed staff to work collaboratively with the rental housing industry to develop an alternative solution. The city formed a partnership with a core group of citizens representing the Escondido rental housing industry to create a volunteer inspection program. The partnership resulted in the development and implementation of the Rental Housing Improvement Team of Escondido (RHITE), which the city council approved in August 1993.

RHITE, a revolutionary concept in rental housing inspection, encourages the industry to police itself to help upgrade housing within the community. The program was developed to (1) offset code enforcement costs and eliminate the need for a mandatory inspection program, (2) encourage the rental housing industry to take pride in its properties (3) improve the appearance of city neighborhoods and the quality of life in Escondido, and (4) involve citizens in the preservation and improvement of their community.

Under the RHITE program, volunteers—including property managers, real estate salespeople, property owners, and resident managers—are responsible for the inspection of all non-owner-occupied properties. Volunteers, who have been trained by the city's Code Enforcement Division, identify maintenance violations on rental properties within the city. All

inspections are conducted from the public right-of-way; the inspectors do not enter private property. Volunteers are prohibited from conducting inspections until they have participated in at least one "ride-along" training exercise in the field with a trained individual or code enforcement officer.

Once a volunteer determines a violation has occurred, RHITE sends a letter to the owners advising them of the violation and requesting correction before the matter is referred to the Code Enforcement Division. RHITE maintains records on all inspected properties to help identify problem properties within rental housing communities.

The cost to operate this innovative rental housing inspection program is minimal. In 1993, the city of Escondido allocated \$150 in start-up costs and, following the council's decision to continue the program, the city purchased a personal computer to facilitate more efficient data collection. The council also increased its financial support to \$500 to cover rising postage and office supply costs.

Today, RHITE reports indicate a significant improvement in the appearance of city neighborhoods. Of the 234 violations found during the program's first year, only 15 have been referred to the city's Code Enforcement Division. This extraordinary, 91-percent compliance rate spurred the council's continued support for RHITE and a local realtor's donation of office space for program volunteers.

By every measure, the RHITE program has been a resounding success and offers a new model for encouraging active citizen involvement in collaboration with city staff and volunteers. The program's success is attributable to the dedication and commitment of the volunteers who participated in the program. RHITE also offers tangible proof that when a community cares about itself and puts forth the effort, it can make a tremendous difference.