

What's Up Transcript (Season 4, Ep. 17)

Grace Hallowell: What's the most unusual item you have ever seen left at a curb?

Tommy Shilling: That's a great question. A whole house. We received a SeeClickFix on an eviction. We are not allowed to touch any of those items or make contact with them for 30 days, until the person who was evicted can retrieve their belongings. When we went out there, it was the whole house that was outside, from the front door to the curb.

Tommy Shilling: I thought after the 30 days — or not 30 days, I'm sorry, 24 hours — we got ahold of the manager and company owner. They got with sanitation, and they got it cleaned up pretty fast. But it was pretty interesting to go out there and be like, "Okay, what do we do with this?" It was a mountain of stuff.

Grace Hallowell: Yeah.

Grace Hallowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hallowell, and today my guest is Tommy Shilling, our code enforcement supervisor. Welcome back, Tommy.

Tommy Shilling: Thank you for having me.

Grace Hallowell: It's your first time here on the new set, so welcome. We are going to be talking about some move-out best practices today. It's hard to believe that this year has already gone by so fast, and we are in move-out season for our college students. To kick things off, for those who may not be familiar with you, tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do for the city.

Tommy Shilling: I'll just give you a background. I'm originally from Waco. I moved to College Station in 2007. I started with the city in 2010, moved over to code enforcement in 2017, and was recently promoted to code supervisor in 2022. I actually have five code officers under me, plus a staff assistant. I make sure that they're operating efficiently, proactively, and reactively checking their areas for common code violations and state laws.

Grace Hallowell: When you think about the size of College Station, having only five code officers is a lot of area for them to cover.

Tommy Shilling: Yes, ma'am. It's a tall task. But with the officers we have and the support from the fire department, we are actually able to accomplish that task pretty well.

Grace Hallowell: You recently moved to being under the fire marshal's office; before, it was under the community services umbrella. How has that transition been for you?

Tommy Shilling: It was a little bit scary at first because I had worked for the same director and assistant director for 15 years, and they recently retired at the beginning of last year.

So, it was kind of, "Where are we going? Where is code enforcement going to go?" Then they decided to go with the fire department under the fire marshal.

Tommy Shilling: It has actually been really good because they do fire prevention and other prevention stuff, and they handle permits as well. We really do coincide very well together. If we are working on a case that involves illegal dumping, since they're certified peace officers, we get them in the mix.

Tommy Shilling: If we're taking any administrative action against homeowners or utility customers, they help facilitate that.

Grace Hallowell: It seems like a very natural move.

Tommy Shilling: Yes, it's been easy, thank goodness.

Grace Hallowell: What is one thing that you wish more people knew about code enforcement?

Tommy Shilling: I would have to say how great a team I have. Our code enforcement officers are assigned to five areas. They check those areas both proactively and reactively. Given the number of students we have and the regular population, they have strong cases, and we try to facilitate those through our standard operating procedures.

Grace Hallowell: Their goal is never to punish anybody; they want to educate and help. Correct?

Tommy Shilling: No, we usually ask for 100% compliance because we don't want to be the bad person. But we have those enthusiasts who just can't fix that behavior, and we do have to cite them or issue a summons.

Grace Hallowell: What is the biggest misconception people have about what you do?

Tommy Shilling: That is a great question. I would have to say the misconception is the actual power that we have. A lot of our citizens, as I said, are great at submitting SeeClickFix requests or calling our office, and they think it's going to get fixed that way.

Tommy Shilling: Well, we have state laws and local ordinances, especially if we have to take administrative action. Say we have to cut somebody's yard or take their junk vehicle; we have SOPs that keep us from getting sued and losing our licenses. Whenever we're working through those systems, it's not going to get fixed in one day. We do have a process, and I think a lot of our citizens don't understand that from time to time.

Grace Hallowell: Again, SeeClickFix makes it easy to report them instantly, but definitely give our employees some time to get them fixed.

Tommy Shilling: Yes. Especially with the rain we've had this past month, we've extended those cases because we don't want people putting ruts in their yards. Just be mindful of that when you put in a request. SeeClickFix is a great tool for the citizens and us.

Tommy Shilling: It assigns the request to the appropriate code officer, and then you can have back-and-forth comments in the section to get an update on the case's status.

Grace Hallowell: What is your favorite thing about your job?

Tommy Shilling: Number one, I love my team. Number two, I love interacting with citizens. I really am a public servant at heart. I have been with the city for 16 years now, and I love the communication because, in the end, we work for them.

Tommy Shilling: Being out in the community and educating—whether we're having to enforce or write warnings—builds that bond and relationship with our citizens.

Grace Hallowell: Absolutely. How does what you do impact our community?

Tommy Shilling: It enhances the quality of life. One misconception is that we are in "beautification." Code enforcement is not in beautification; we are in immediate health and safety. They coincide a little bit, but things like open storage, accumulation of trash, and junk vehicles put a nuisance on citizens and impact safety. That is where we get involved through local ordinances and state laws.

Grace Hallowell: What is your favorite springtime memory over your time in College Station?

Tommy Shilling: Well, I don't really know if I have a favorite springtime memory.

Grace Hallowell: It's a busy time for y'all.

Tommy Shilling: It is a busy time. One thing I didn't know about until I started with the city is wildflower season. It starts May 1st through June 15th. I love that because I love flowers. You see the houses with flowers, and they're really getting behind them. It's beautiful.

Grace Hallowell: Even the bluebonnets along the highway. Pennsylvania, where I'm from, is very green, but we don't have a whole lot of wildflowers just on the highway. It makes those drives to Houston or Austin a bit more exciting.

Tommy Shilling: If you think about the lots on Highway 6 before the construction, the bluebonnets were everywhere. It's gorgeous and looks good for our city.

Grace Hallowell: How can people contact you if they have questions about what we talked about today?

Tommy Shilling: You can always call code enforcement at (979) 764-6363. You can also put in a request through cstx.gov/codeenforcement. And, of course, SeeClickFix. It is a free app you can download on your phone.

Tommy Shilling: It's a great communication tool. It has every request category, from weeds and grass to accumulation. It uses GIS locations to route the request to the appropriate department. If it's a pothole, it goes to public works. If you need a new trash can lid, it goes straight to sanitation.

Grace Hallowell: Why does move-out season tend to be such a busy time for your team?

Tommy Shilling: We are one of the biggest universities in the country with 76,000 students. With the amount of turnover we have — especially during graduation or between semesters — the amount of bulk trash that comes out of this area would make your head spin.

Grace Hallowell: We had Caroline on recently talking about bulk pickup and the [Curbside app](#). What are some of the most common code violations you see during this time?

Tommy Shilling: Usually, parking issues, accumulation of trash, and bulk pickup. Those are the three main ones.

Grace Hallowell: Why do trash and bulk items become such a problem this time of year?

Tommy Shilling: It's the sheer numbers. Also, many people in multi-family complexes don't realize that apartment complexes do not receive automatic bulk pickup. They have designated areas and have to call them in for sanitation. They have to pay a fee for collection.

Tommy Shilling: People start accumulating mattresses and appliances, but sanitation won't know to go pick it up without a request. My team goes out to management companies to hand out educational fliers. We tell them to get a roll-off container staged so the accumulation won't spill into the street.

Grace Hallowell: What does the city ordinance say about trash and debris left behind at properties?

Tommy Shilling: Accumulation of trash is not allowed because it harbors pests. You have to bag it and put it in your receptacle. For bulk pickup, you cannot put out items more than 48 hours before your collection.

Tommy Shilling: Many people do work over the weekend and put it out, even if their collection is later in the week. We take a proactive approach by leaving fliers and doing "knock and talks." We also coordinate with sanitation to see whether an apartment complex has a work order in place. If not, we reach out to the management company.

Grace Hollowell: How can students and residents avoid contributing to neighborhood clutter during move-out?

Tommy Shilling: Know your city ordinances and your sanitation pickup day. Be proactive. If you're moving out, contact your management company or owner. Let them know you are leaving items at the curb because, ultimately, it comes back to them.

Grace Hollowell: What responsibilities do tenants have when it comes to maintaining a property as they move out?

Tommy Shilling: Depending on the lease, it is usually the tenant's or the utilities customer's sole responsibility. The owner has a contract that protects them, so the tenant will receive the citation or the phone call.

Grace Hollowell: Know your lease. If you have questions, talk to your property manager.

Tommy Shilling: Abide by that lease. That is a contract the city cannot get you out of.

Grace Hollowell: Our Neighborhood Services department can help as well.

Tommy Shilling: They're great stewards. We work with them one-on-one and with off-campus student services at A&M. We target areas with high rates of violations to conduct walk-and-talks and hand out information.

Grace Hollowell: Never assume you're doing the right thing. Ask questions and read the ordinances.

Tommy Shilling: Our office is always there for you. If you have questions, call us, and we'll get you an answer.

Tommy Shilling: Landlords and tenants should both know the pickup times to avoid violations. Be proactive, not reactive.

Grace Hollowell: Can you talk about the ordinances related to weeds and grass?

Tommy Shilling: The grass is growing fast with the recent rain. City ordinances state that grass cannot exceed 12 inches in height. This is for health and safety because rats and snakes hide in tall grass. We leave door tags for the utilities customer or contact the management company to get it mowed.

Grace Hollowell: Parking can get chaotic. What are some key rules?

Tommy Shilling: Know your surroundings and pay attention to signage. Do not park near stop signs, fire hydrants, or intersections. Make sure you are parked in the correct direction of traffic; if you are parked the wrong way and pull into oncoming traffic, you are liable.

Grace Hallowell: And don't park in the yard.

Tommy Shilling: Do not. You're driving over sprinklers, and if we have a dry summer, that grass can turn to dust and cause a fire.

Grace Hallowell: Are there restrictions on trailers or moving trucks blocking the street?

Tommy Shilling: No vehicle can block a sidewalk or an intersection. If you are actively loading or unloading, we understand. However, trailers cannot be parked on the street permanently. Fire trucks, EMS, and sanitation trucks need to get down those narrow streets.

Grace Hallowell: You mentioned not parking in front of fire hydrants. If there is a fire, they will go right through your car to get to it, and you will be responsible for the repairs.

Grace Hallowell: What is the easiest way to avoid a citation?

Tommy Shilling: Know your local ordinances and state laws. Don't park in prohibited areas or block hydrants. If you have a question, call us.

Grace Hallowell: If somebody receives a notice or a warning, what should they do?

Tommy Shilling: If it's a warning, learn from it. We want 100% compliance, not to issue citation after citation. If it is a citation, contact the municipal court system. The information is on the back of the ticket.

Grace Hallowell: What is the difference between a warning tag and an official citation?

Tommy Shilling: A citation carries a fine. A warning has all zeros.

Tommy Shilling: To report illegal dumping, use SeeClickFix. Our five officers can't be everywhere at once. If you see it, SeeClickFix it.

Grace Hallowell: What role do neighbors play in keeping the community clean?

Tommy Shilling: Neighbors notice things. You can remain anonymous when submitting a request, and it will get to the right officer.

Grace Hallowell: Be a good neighbor. If you see them struggling, offer to help. Or just let them know they can't park a certain way, so they don't get in trouble.

Tommy Shilling: Exactly. Have a conversation before going straight to us. Enforcement action can put neighbors against each other. Just talk to each other.

Grace Hallowell: And SeeClickFix is not a social media app or a place to air dirty laundry.

Tommy Shilling: Right. It's a reporting website. If you use it for that, we'll flag it and take it down.

Grace Hallowell: Top three tips for a smooth move-out?

Tommy Shilling: Know your ordinances, download the [Curbside app](#), and be proactive.

Grace Hallowell: Time for our lightning round! Coffee or energy drinks?

Tommy Shilling: I don't drink either, but I'd take an energy drink over coffee. I don't like coffee.

Grace Hallowell: Early bird or last-minute packer?

Tommy Shilling: Early bird. I overpack.

Grace Hallowell: Most unusual item you've seen at a curb?

Tommy Shilling: A whole house! As I mentioned earlier, it was everything from an eviction—from the front door to the curb. It was a mountain of stuff.

Grace Hallowell: Your most overlooked move-out tip?

Tommy Shilling: Being proactive. People are here for an education, but they live in the city and use city resources. Understanding local ordinances proactively is key.

Grace Hallowell: Your top piece of advice in one sentence?

Tommy Shilling: Just be clean and follow the rules.

Grace Hallowell: Thank you so much, Tommy. One more time, where can people find more info?

Tommy Shilling: The SeeClickFix app, call (979) 764-6363, or email codeenforcement@cstx.gov.

Grace Hallowell: And that's what's up!