

WATCHDOG REPORTS

'Making Milwaukee a better place.' Community activists, officials tackle scourge of faulty wiring endangering city renters

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As suspected electrical fires continue to ravage rental homes in Milwaukee's most impoverished neighborhoods, elected leaders and community activists are advancing solutions such as restoring inspections, requiring landlords to carry insurance and educating the public on the dangers of faulty electrical systems.

Up first is the educational outreach program, spearheaded by the city's Department of Neighborhood Services, designed to inform tenants and homeowners about electrical hazards that may exist at their properties and what to do about the dangers.

Beginning in January, the free sessions will be held first on the city's north side, where the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel discovered the risks of electrical fires are among the highest, and then expand citywide throughout 2022, according to Tanz Rome, a department spokesperson.

The department "believes that timely, customized, locally delivered education will provide critical knowledge that will empower residents and help keep them safe," Rome wrote in an email to the Journal Sentinel.

The action comes amid an ongoing investigation by the Journal Sentinel, "Wires and Fires" which launched in August, which revealed how electrical fires hit Milwaukee's Black renters the hardest and how fire and police officials, as well as state and local regulators, fail to address the issue. A Journal Sentinel sponsored study of 50 single and two-family rental properties in the 53206 ZIP code suggested as many as 80% of the homes have electrical code violations.

Members of the Common Council applauded the educational outreach campaign around electrical safety but said more oversight is needed as well. They are investigating measures for a legislative package, some of which will hinge on a pending legal review from the City Attorney's Office.

A review by the Wisconsin Legislative Council, a nonpartisan legislative service agency of the state Legislature, suggests there is nothing in state law that prohibits routine inspections by a city in areas where there is evidence of a high number of code violations. It also indicates there is nothing stopping the city from mandating that owners of rental properties carry liability insurance.

Milwaukee Ald. Khalif Rainey said he'll push for legislation in January to require that landlords carry liability insurance on rental properties. He said he also wants the city to reinstate a routine inspection program of residential rental properties — one that includes a careful examination of wiring and other electrical components.

"Electrical is the biggest thing," Rainey told the Journal Sentinel. "It can kill people."

In 2016, the city dismantled its limited rental inspection program following the enactment of state legislation that banned such programs. The city had been considering expanding the inspection program, which a number of officials have said was effectively detecting risky conditions in rentals.

The state law was later revised to allow routine inspections in rental districts where there is evidence of high rates of code violations, but it still capped the fees that the city could charge property owners for inspections.

Those restrictions on how to pay for the inspections, which were pushed by lawmakers — some of whom were themselves landlords — make it financially impossible to run a routine inspection program, according to City of Milwaukee officials.

Two architects of the efforts, both landlords at the time, would not comment on their actions. A spokesperson for state Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, said he was unavailable for an interview. Frank Lasee, a longtime member of the state legislature who resigned from the Senate in 2017, said he doesn't recall much about the bills he sponsored and that he doesn't own rental property in Wisconsin any longer.

"It's so distant from anything I do now or give any thought to whatsoever," he said.

Rainey along with Ald. Michael Murphy and others are looking for other ways to fund routine inspections. They said the council will consider using federal pandemic relief funds to get an inspection program relaunched.

Stable and affordable housing is among the city's top priorities for the \$394 million in direct funds from the federal rescue plan allocation.

Murphy, chair of the council's Finance Committee, said the Legislature has made it difficult for cities across Wisconsin to do proactive inspections. Milwaukee must get creative quickly because the Journal Sentinel investigation reveals an urgent problem, he said.

"I think we have an obligation as the city in terms of working to protect the public and if the landlords don't do it because of a financial cost and are willing to sacrifice or put people's lives in harm's way, of course, the government should step in," he said. "That is what we are here for."

The key to the legality of a new routine inspection program of rental properties is that there is a demonstration of a problem. On Dec. 10, Murphy sought an opinion from City Attorney Tearman Spencer on whether that requirement has been met by the Journal Sentinel's investigation. Murphy said to him the threat is clear.

"Your stories demonstrate very well that this is a serious problem," he said. "In the past, we didn't have that evidence."

Spencer's office did not return calls from the Journal Sentinel seeking information on the request this week.

Murphy also would like to see the Legislature allow cities to require that a property be brought up to code at the time of sale.

"That would be a tremendous opportunity to fix these properties, especially when you have speculative landlords just trying to make a quick buck," he said. "The state Legislature has been harsh on local governments on that but it is something I am not going to give up on."

Murphy said he will be asking if housing agencies can put more stringent requirements on landlords to receive rent assistance. A Journal Sentinel analysis found that landlords who failed to fix electrical violations nevertheless continued to collect taxpayer-funded rent assistance.

"Why don't we demand more when landlords are receiving this assistance?" Murphy said.

Finally, Murphy said he would be talking to the fire chief to see how the Milwaukee Fire Department could better investigate fires to get to the origin, even when no crime has been committed. Murphy suggested Milwaukee should look to other cities to see what can be learned from those doing it better.

Part of the problem with electrical fires stems from the fact that government investigators seldom confirm that the cause was, in fact, electrical. The Journal Sentinel's investigation found that more than 75% of suspected electrical fires in Milwaukee's single- and two-family homes had the cause listed as undetermined or accidental.

Such failure to nail down a precise cause allows those responsible to escape accountability and leaves families with no legal recourse and lawmakers in the dark about the extent of the problem.

That's where Rainey and others, including state Sen. LaTonya Johnson, D-Milwaukee, say insurance liability could help. Insurance companies have electrical engineers and fire investigators who specialize in determining the cause of a fire. They have a vested interest.

Johnson's office sought the opinion of the state Legislative Council on whether Milwaukee could enact an ordinance mandating liability insurance on rental properties, much like the state mandates liability insurance on automobiles.

The answer: Yes, the city could do that.

"It makes absolutely no sense," Johnson said. "There should be legislation that says if you are going to receive rent on these properties, you have to be sure they are in good and safe working condition."

Requiring liability insurance could be one way to encourage property owners to maintain their rental homes, she said.

'It's about making Milwaukee a better place'

Jim Gaillard loves Milwaukee but doesn't like what he's been seeing in recent years.

As a native of the city — and an electrician — Gaillard has worked extensively in Milwaukee's most neglected neighborhoods. He said he thinks he can address electrical issues in more than three dozen homes for about \$80,000 — an average of about \$2,000 apiece.

Gaillard, vice president of Ezekiel/Project Hope, a nonprofit whose mission is to train unemployed and formerly incarcerated people and repair the city's blighted homes, said he would reduce his rates significantly to get the problems fixed and that he could use the opportunity for workers in his jobs program to gain experience.

"It's about making Milwaukee a better place," Gaillard said. "I don't like the place Milwaukee is right now. ... Milwaukee is known for predatory landlords. It's been going on for so long and people have gotten away with it."

Gaillard has seen faulty electrical systems in Milwaukee's rental properties firsthand over the years. He worked for a short time for Will Sherard, well-known by city regulators for his poor upkeep of rental properties. Gaillard said Sherard often refused to pay for electrical repair work, even when the conditions appeared unsafe.

"He'd say, 'This isn't the White House,'" Gaillard said.

Sherard did not return phone calls from the Journal Sentinel for this story.

Gaillard said Sherard's lack of care for his rental properties causes more harm than people realize, harm that extends to the whole community. The quality of housing projects out to people's feelings of self-worth.

"We've got to make people feel like they're worth something, that they are somebody," Gaillard said. "If you don't feel like you have a future, you don't care about my future either. We've got to change that."

To address electrical safety issues, Gaillard proposes his team begin with the Amani neighborhood — bordered by North 20th and 27th streets between West Keefe Avenue and Center Street — and systematically go through and identify and prioritize the electrical hazards and begin the repair work. With five trainees and one trainer dedicated to the work for 16 weeks, they could improve about 40 properties for about \$82,000, Gaillard said.

Rainey said the Common Council will consider Gaillard's proposal next month along with the other potential solutions.

Gaillard said the initiative would be a good start and could be treated as a pilot program.

"Part of me says the landlords don't deserve this (help) but then I think the people that live there don't deserve to live like that."

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Read the investigation

To read the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's "Wires and Fires" investigation, go to jsonline.com/wiresandfires.