

INVESTIGATIONS

Dangerous wiring in neglected homes can spark fires. This Milwaukee program seeks to fix that.



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The electrical systems in Evelyn P. Terry's north side Milwaukee house were downright scary and presented a risk of fire.

First, a light switch didn't work. Terry said she hired someone recommended by the city to fix it, but then the problem got worse. After the repairman left, the light worked briefly and then went out again, along with it several others.

Then another switch went out, in the basement. When she had someone fix that, her furnace started cutting out. She also had extension cords crisscrossing her house.

An electrician came in and determined the system in her 100-year-old house on North 18th Street needed to be overhauled, costing several thousand dollars.



On a fixed income, Terry, 77, had few options. And then she met Jim Gaillard, a master electrician and vice president of Ezekiel HOPE, a nonprofit that helps to train unemployed people in Milwaukee in the trades and improves housing conditions.

Ezekiel is leading a program to fix dangerous electrical issues for homeowners in Milwaukee for no charge.

Now the electrical in Terry's home is being revamped. In the process several men are being trained by Gaillard and his team to become electricians.

To date, repairs have been made to two dozen houses with a grant from the Zilber Family Foundation. A new \$100,000 grant from the Greater Milwaukee

Foundation, announced Monday, will pay for electrical work in another 20 homes.

"I believe this is a gift from God," Terry said. "There is something wonderful happening with this program."

Old, dangerous wiring in city's poorest areas

Milwaukee has some of the oldest housing stock in the country and with it dangerous electrical conditions that can easily spark a fire.

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A [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation published in 2021](#) revealed that suspected electrical fires fall hardest on Black renters in the city's most distressed areas.

Gaillard credited the Journal Sentinel articles with raising awareness of what he has known for decades: [Milwaukee residents are facing risk](#) every day living in houses with decaying electrical systems that may have been made more dangerous by unqualified handymen working on the wiring.

"Electrical fires are super, super dangerous, and we want to help stop that," Gaillard said at a news conference Monday at a Milwaukee Fire Department station at North 30th Street and West Teutonia Avenue. "We also want to make sure that we got people from the community working in the community. That's really big with me."



So far, Gaillard has about 20 people working in the houses, training to be electricians. What they are finding is concerning: Electrical boxes that are smoking. Loose, dangling wires. Light switches taped off because flipping them would throw out something else.

The teams are finding shoddy work done in the past, Gaillard said.

"It is like they are putting a Band-Aid on a broken leg," he said.

Milwaukee Fire Chief Aaron Lipski said Monday's news conference was at Station 30 because it is at the center of the 53206 zip code, where the homes have a litany of troubling conditions, including dangerous electrical systems.

A Journal Sentinel-sponsored study of 50 single and two-family rental properties in 53206 suggested as many as 80% of the homes have electrical code violations.

Lipski said what Gaillard and his team at Ezekiel are doing "is as heroic as the things that my firefighters do, and it will save lives."

Gaillard said the focus of the program has been on owner-occupied homes. But he said that he is deeply concerned about renters living in dangerous conditions and wants to find a way to help them too.



Trauma from a fire felt decades later

Theresa Scott, from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation, is looking for more funding to keep the repairs going.

Scott herself escaped an electrical fire 25 years ago when she, her husband and three children lived in the 400 block of West Ring Street.

The fire began the night after a friend helped them change from a gas to an electrical stove.

In the middle of the night, an outlet on the first floor started sparking and soon there were flames. Scott's 16-year-old son, whose bedroom was on the first floor, woke up, grabbed his little brother and woke his parents. Everyone got out safely.

About once a year, Scott said, she awakens in the night and smells what she thinks is smoke. She shakes her husband awake and asks him to go check it out.

"Twenty-five years later, I am still affected by that trauma," she said.