

Renter-First Policy

Vision

All residents who rent their homes will live in safe, dignified, stable, and healthy housing.

Purpose

The Renter-First Policy guides City procedures, services, and programming related to housing inspections and code enforcement, including renter engagement and legal actions. The Policy prioritizes the dignity, stability, health, and safety of renters in regulatory and enforcement decision-making. This policy directs particular attention to rental property owners who consistently neglect or mismanage their properties.

Background

In the early 1900's, as Minneapolis was maturing as a city, discrimination against Black, Jewish, and Indigenous populations, as well as other nonwhite populations, was overt and effective in creating geographic patterns of racial segregation. Discriminatory policies denied people of color the benefits of home ownership, including the ability to build wealth and assets.

As discrimination became more subtle, policies that maintained the embedded segregation of the city continued in various forms, contributing to racial disparities in income, education, employment, health, and access to affordable, quality housing.

Regulation of rental housing has been a core function of the City of Minneapolis since 1956 when the City established some of the first housing maintenance ordinances in the country. These ordinances were developed to protect public health, safety, and welfare through ensuring quality housing stock.

Today, while renters range in income, age, race, and family status, Black, Indigenous and other nonwhite households are more likely than white households to be renters. Renter households are also more likely to be cost-burdened by monthly housing payments than are homeowners, limiting their ability to pay for other necessities like health care, child care, groceries, and transportation. This cost burden can lead to housing instability.

People who rent their homes are particularly vulnerable to market forces like low vacancy rates which make it difficult for renters to secure and maintain housing. This causes competition between renters and ultimately contributes to an environment conducive to predatory rental practices.

While there are external private market factors, and State and Federal legal constraints which limit the City's authority, ensuring that renters live in safe, habitable housing is the foundation of the City's regulation of rental housing. Policy direction guides enforcement approaches and this policy affirms the City's commitment to advancing renter protections and developing new tools to support affordability and stability in rental housing, instead of practices that may inadvertently harm renters. While a renter-first approach does not negate the City's responsibility to ensure building conditions meet code requirements, it asserts that the City will utilize enforcement and regulatory tools and methods that center the needs of the renter.

Desired Outcomes

By implementing this policy, the City will build upon current work to achieve the following:

- Rental Housing, which is the majority of housing in Minneapolis, will be treated as a community asset for our residents and neighborhoods.
- The conditions within the building structure will be highly valued as they directly impact the health and safety of residents.
- Harm to renters resulting from the City's efforts to hold property owners accountable will be prevented or minimized.
- Renters will be treated in a dignified manner, through City policies, procedures, and customer service interactions.
- The City will hold noncompliant and recalcitrant property owners accountable, work to attract responsive, responsible owners, and actively support high quality owners in providing even better service to renters.
- City staff will be supported in efforts to build collaborative relationships with and on behalf of renters.
- The City will be successful in better coordination between departments and with external stakeholder groups.

Supporting Policy Framework

The Renter-First Policy is consistent with—and builds on—goals and guidance that Minneapolis has solidified in the Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan and the City's Unified Housing Policy to address rental housing affordability, stability, and racial housing disparities. This policy adds to a growing body of work to address the unique challenges renters face in the City, including a number of renter protections within the City housing code, Chapter 244, such as protection against retaliation, notice of entry, notification of environmental contamination testing, and the recent advance notice of sale, post-sale renter protections, and revised conduct on licensed premises ordinances.

The City budget allows for additional impact, including expanding renters' access to representation and services to better understand and protect their rights.

Implementation

Application of this policy primarily resides with the Regulatory Services Department, where staff are already leading changes to better prioritize renter health, safety, and stability. Other City departments also have a critical, ongoing role in implementing a renter-first approach, including the City Attorney's Office, Community Planning and Economic Development, Health, Police, Finance and Property Services, Public Works, Civil Rights, and Neighborhood and Community Relations. Additionally, the City will continue to partner with non-profit and stakeholder organizations to support implementation of this policy.

Implementation of the Renter-First Policy will include both early intervention and safety net strategies:

- Revise or develop policies and protocols, including making recommendations for City policy change and creation of new tools or programs, to ensure a renter-first framework is embedded in City operations.
- Strengthen evaluation of environmental hazards such as mold, lead, radon, and infestations through use of technological assistance.
- Strengthen enforcement protocols to make sure all available tools, such as citations, criminal prosecution, and Tenant Remedy Actions (which may include court-appointed administrators), are considered and appropriately applied so that repair issues are addressed quickly with minimal negative impacts on the renter.
- Strategically use resources to direct inspection efforts towards properties in disrepair or with a high volume of renter complaints, and properties whose owners are repeatedly cited for having a property in disrepair.
- Ensure that City-initiated vacations of rental properties only occur as a last resort.
- Create financial opportunities for property owners to maintain housing conditions and affordable housing without increasing the cost to renters.
- Improve renters' and property owners' ability to access information about rental properties by supporting community outreach, creating culturally appropriate materials that improve understanding and compliance, and making relevant data available and easily obtained.
- Ensure City staff are equipped to successfully implement the Policy (e.g. tools, training, staffing levels, and understanding of the Renter-First Policy).

Evaluation

To measure the success of this internal policy, it will be important for relevant departments to use their existing data as well as incorporate tracking of new tools and metrics into their reporting process. Reporting out on the use of tools and metrics should indicate that a comprehensive, renter-first approach is being applied. For example: number of citations issued, use of alternate enforcement tools (e.g. conditions on rental licenses, Tenant Remedy Actions/Emergency Tenant Remedy Actions), the efficiency with which necessary repairs are completed, whether renter occupancy was maintained, the number of households impacted by the 4d program, and the number of renters impacted by City utility shutoffs.