



WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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Contact:

Rob Henken, President, Wisconsin Policy Forum
(414) 708-4392 or rhenken@wispolicyforum.org

Affordable Housing in Milwaukee: Taking Stock of Non-Governmental Players and Activities

Survey, interviews give insight into what nonprofits, private developers are doing, what is needed

Nonprofit and private sector organizations working on housing affordability in Milwaukee focus much of their spending on home repair services, and view affordable housing development as most in need of greater financial support, according to a new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, affordable housing was one of Milwaukee's greatest challenges – and stark racial disparities make these issues particularly challenging for the city's Black and Hispanic populations.

Building on previous research on public-sector affordable housing efforts in Milwaukee, this report from the independent, nonpartisan Forum examines the scope and scale of non-governmental affordable housing activities in the city.

It finds that new efforts may be needed to coordinate affordable housing development and rehabilitation efforts and to track housing services and outcomes across organizations and sectors.

The report also finds that while boosting Milwaukee's faltering homeownership rate should be a priority, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates a short-term focus on housing stabilization and eviction prevention. The impact of the pandemic has been severe for many of Milwaukee's low-income households, who typically rent and whose members are disproportionately employed in hard-hit service occupations.

"Preventing evictions through increased rent assistance, tenant-landlord mediation services, and (when necessary) legal representation are urgent needs for the immediate future," the report finds.

These findings stem in part from a survey of 61 nonprofit organizations and private developers. The survey sought perspective on how they provide housing services and activities, including affordable housing development, home repair, homebuyer services, supportive housing management, rent assistance, and housing advocacy.

Also informing the study were interviews with leaders from 15 of these organizations to glean their views on the city's most pressing housing needs, the challenges nonprofits and developers face in their housing work, and potential solutions.

Additional findings are that:

- Greater priority should be given to affordable housing developments that include units targeted to very low-income households and that are located near suburban employment centers.
- There is a need for more flexible pools of funding and a need to increase access to financing for emerging affordable housing developers and developers of color, who may struggle to compete for limited federal and state tax credits.
- New or expanded funding sources are needed for services in supportive housing developments. Supportive housing is designed to help renters with disabilities, mental health and substance abuse issues, and formerly homeless individuals remain stably housed in their communities of choice.

Dozens of local, state, and federal policy changes were suggested by the housing leaders interviewed for this report.

While some would require changes that are beyond local control and/or would be politically challenging to advance, they include: expanding housing vouchers, limiting rental prices and/or property taxes, changing state policies for awarding tax credits, changing local zoning and land use plans, or increasing homeownership opportunities.

Lastly – while this report focused specifically on housing programs and services – another key finding was that there are limits to what these organizations can do to address housing affordability in Milwaukee. For many households in the region, conditions will not improve substantially until incomes increase.

“With very low household incomes a primary factor underlying all of the city’s housing affordability problems, the solutions will likely have to extend beyond housing itself to economic and workforce development policies and strategies,” the report finds.

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