

THE DAILY REPORTER

Report: Milwaukee housing programs need more organization, private money

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A recent report finds the city of Milwaukee's array of housing programs are less efficient and receive less private money than programs in similar cities around the Midwest.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum on Wednesday released a report examining Milwaukee's 21 housing programs, which are dispersed among three city agencies. Such "fragmented" housing-development efforts could benefit from stronger organization and clearer leadership, according to the report.

Meanwhile in places like Minneapolis, Detroit, Madison and many other Midwestern cities, housing programs are often found in a single department with a single director, according to the report.

Milwaukee could also work harder to attract private capital for its housing programs, according to the report. Detroit, for instance, draws tens of millions of dollars from a variety of private sources.

"With greater knowledge of the city's array of programs and services and how it prioritizes its efforts, the stage should now be set for collaborative discussion among leaders of all levels of government and private sector stakeholders about the strategies required to bolster the city's efforts and fill the gaps that exist," according to the report.



The former Phillis Wheatley Elementary School, 2442 N. 20th St., is being converted into affordable apartments with help from the city. A new report says Milwaukee's affordable-housing programs need more efficiency and private-sector money. (Photo courtesy of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

The Policy Forum found Milwaukee largely places emphasis on programs that help homeowners repair their properties — a "logical" investment given the city's old housing stock and population characteristics and the fact that other governments don't offer similar programs.

Between 2014 and 2018, the city spent \$26.4 million on home-repair programs, or 45% of the total amount it spent on housing programs in that period. Milwaukee, meanwhile, put \$19 million during that period toward increasing the numbers of affordable-housing units in the city.

Milwaukee has also prioritized affordable housing through the use of Community Development Block Grants and, since 2015, has used tax increment financing, or TIF districts, to support affordable housing investments. The city's programs generally make up for a lack of housing offerings from other governmental entities, such as Milwaukee County.

The report also calls attention to a policy from Mayor Tom Barrett, the 10,000 Homes Initiative, deeming it a "valuable" tracking system that could be bolstered. That initiative brings together various city agencies, and the

Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, to gauge the program's effects on the city's housing stock.

The report cautions that its conclusions draw on research conducted last fall and winter and don't reflect the economic conditions brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. Those conditions are likely to accelerate the need for affordable housing in Milwaukee.

Compounding the region's troubles are a lack of affordable housing in Milwaukee's suburbs.

"Lack of affordable housing in suburban areas is a problem the region has recognized for years but has failed to act upon," according to the report. "Inaction has only added to the city's challenges and the region's racial disparities."

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