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Wires and Fires

A Journal Sentinel investigation

**Raquel Rutledge,
John Diedrich
and Daphne Chen**

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Biden promises strikes on extremists

Another terrorist attack ‘highly likely’

Robert Burns
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON – President Joe Biden vowed Saturday to keep up airstrikes against the Islamic extremist group whose suicide bombing at the Kabul airport killed scores of Afghans and 13

American service members. Another terror attack, he said, is “highly likely” this weekend as the U.S. winds down its evacuation.

The Pentagon said the remaining contingent of U.S. forces at the airport, now numbering fewer than 4,000, had begun their final withdrawal ahead of

Inside

Taliban block airport to most as airlifts wane. **4A**

Wisconsin Marine injured in Kabul airport bombing, reports say. **15A**

Biden’s deadline for ending the evacuation on Tuesday.

After getting briefed on a U.S. drone mission in eastern Afghanistan that the

Pentagon said killed two members of the Islamic State group’s Afghanistan affiliate early Saturday, Biden said the extremists can expect more.

“This strike was not the last,” Biden said in a statement. “We will continue to hunt down any person involved in that heinous attack and make them pay.”

See **BIDEN**, Page 14A

WIRES AND FIRES A JOURNAL SENTINEL INVESTIGATION

‘I still feel rage’



Tiffany McCarver stands outside the home on North 14th Street where her mother, Patricia Colston, died in a fire.

EBONY COX/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Electrical fires are hitting Black renters hardest in Milwaukee. No one is being held accountable.

Raquel Rutledge, John Diedrich and Daphne Chen
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

Behind the walls of most every home, a powerful energy force snakes through ceilings and down floorboards, traveling close to the speed of light. It zips through wires to outlets and into cords that power cellphones and televisions, air conditioners and furnaces.

Inside

Tips for renters to avoid electrical problems. **18A**

When that happens, it can spit sparks and heat to temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun, vaporizing most anything in its path.

In theory, its destruction does not discriminate. In Milwaukee, it does.

See **FIRES**, Page 16A



Patricia Colston, a mother and grandmother, died in a suspected electrical fire in an apartment in 2019 on North 14th Street near West Capitol Drive. Colston’s friend, Clarence Murrell, who was helping her move in, also died.

COURTESY COLSTON FAMILY

BILLS 19, PACKERS 0



Green Bay Packers quarterback Jordan Love, left, loses the snap in a preseason game against the Buffalo Bills on Saturday in Orchard Park, N.Y. See more coverage in Sports and at jsonline.com. ASSOCIATED PRESS



Craig Gilbert
D.C. Bureau Chief
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WIS.

Population growth now benefits Democrats

Decade after decade in Wisconsin, Republicans saw themselves as the political beneficiary of robust population growth.

And with good reason. Throughout the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s and early 2000s, Republicans did better in places with higher growth than they did in places with lower growth.

But the 2020 census illustrates how that pattern has flipped.

An analysis of census and presidential election data shows that faster population growth is now more strongly correlated with voting Democratic than voting Republican in Wisconsin.

And high-growth counties have seen the biggest Democratic gains in recent years.

The most important example of these patterns by far is Dane County. It has grown at a faster rate and added many more people than any other county in Wisconsin. And it gets bluer with almost every election.

But other places are contributing to the shifting relationship between population growth and voting:

See **SHIFTS**, Page 22A



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Going solar

More Wisconsin homeowners are installing solar energy systems as federal incentives are set to decrease. **1B**

27 must-see Summerfest acts

After Summerfest was canceled for the first time in 2020, this Big Gig lineup is nothing short of astounding. **1E**

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Wires and Fires



Tiffany McCarver stands outside the home on North 14th Street where her mother, Patricia Colston, died in a fire.

‘I still feel rage’

Electrical fires are hitting Black renters hardest in Milwaukee. No one is being held accountable.

**By Raquel Rutledge, John Diedrich
and Daphne Chen, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**

Behind the walls of most every home, a powerful energy force snakes through ceilings and down floorboards, traveling close to the speed of light.

It zips through wires to outlets and into cords that power cellphones and televisions, air conditioners and furnaces.

Out of sight, electricity is hardly noticed — unless it jumps

off course, escaping through a frayed wire, loose connection or overheated outlet. When that happens, it can spit sparks and heat to temperatures hotter than the surface of the sun, vaporizing most anything in its path.

In theory, its destruction does not discriminate.

In Milwaukee, it does.

Patricia Colston didn’t have

much choice of neighborhoods in Milwaukee. Blind in one eye with severe arthritis making it difficult to work, the 53-year-old had trouble paying rent in the past. With multiple evictions on her record, relatives said, she was desperate.

She rented the upper floor of a 1920s bungalow on the city's north side in October 2019. Records show the property on North 14th Street had a history of electrical code violations.

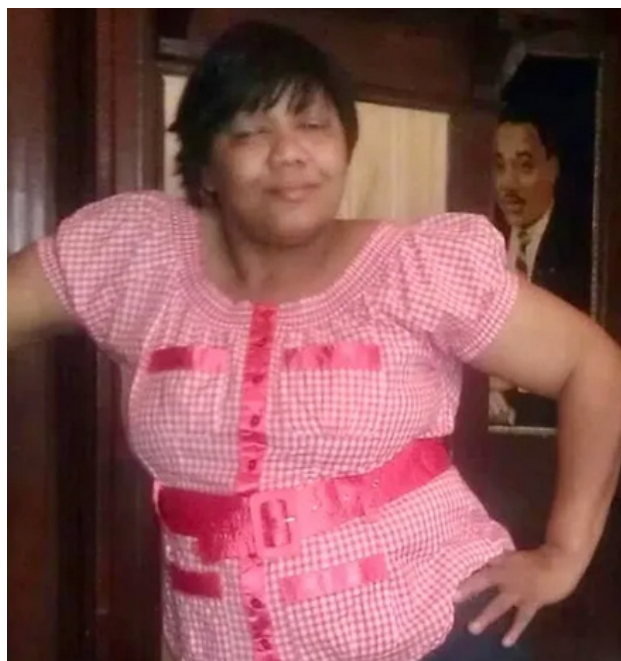
A couple of days after she moved, Colston's friend, 60-year-old Clarence Murrell, was helping her settle in. The pair were likely sleeping as calamity unfolded behind the walls. It was before dawn on a cold Saturday.

By the time the downstairs neighbor smelled it and called 911, it was too late. Thick, sooty smoke had filled the apartment. Firefighters found Colston and Murrell unconscious and were unable to resuscitate them.

Police and fire reports were clear: Fire was smoldering among the electrical wires in the space behind the walls. They suspected that's where it started. Electrical testing was needed to confirm, they wrote.

But that didn't happen. Instead, the fire was treated as a tragic accident.

Six blocks away, in the previous year, investigators found that faulty wires ignited a fire that ripped through another



Patricia Colston, a mother and grandmother, died in a suspected electrical fire in an apartment in 2019 on North 14th Street near West Capitol Drive. Colston's friend, Clarence Murrell, who was helping her move in, also died.

rental unit. The tenants had repeatedly complained to the landlord about sparking outlets, according to police reports.

And just this past April, fire devoured the top floor of another nearby duplex with a litany of unfixed electrical violations — so many that the city had issued a warrant for the landlord's arrest.

Those fires, too, were considered mere accidents, despite the complaints, violations and what electricians say: Most electrical fires are predictable and preventable.

These cases are not anomalies. They represent a little-known and life-threatening disparity in Milwaukee, an investigation by the Milwaukee

Journal Sentinel has found.

Fires suspected to be started by faulty electrical wiring scorch homes in Milwaukee's poorest ZIP code at five times the rate of the rest of the city.

The already distressed 53206 ZIP code — and areas surrounding it — are the epicenter for electrical fire danger in the city.

Police and fire investigators, as well as federal, state and local officials, do little to stop it, the Journal Sentinel found.

The people affected the most: low-income Black renters.

Authorities, by their own admission, routinely do not thoroughly investigate electrical fires, marking their causes as “undetermined” and, in the process, denying families closure and legal recourse and leaving policymakers in the dark about the problem and how to address it.

Will Sherard, the owner of the house where Colston and Murrell were killed, denied any knowledge of what caused the fire.

“There was no electrical fire over there,” Sherard told a Journal Sentinel reporter. “I do not know what happened over there.”

Sherard said he had never seen the police or fire reports that both stated faulty electrical wiring likely started the fire. The Journal Sentinel left a copy of the reports for him at

his office. He has declined to answer additional questions.

The Journal Sentinel's findings expose another systemic assault on the already beleaguered 53206 neighborhood, which has long suffered from neglect and discrimination by governments and corporations. The home where Colston and Murrell perished sits in the heart of a community that, aside from small pockets of stability, faces the city's most severe poverty, crime, unemployment and evictions rates — essentially trapping many families in substandard housing.

Nearly 95% of the population in 53206 is Black, and more than half are renters. Electrical fires disproportionately ravage rental properties: A Journal Sentinel analysis of fires from 2009-19 showed that while an average of 30% of the city's homes were renter-occupied, 62% of suspected electrical fires occurred in rental units. And nearly two-thirds of the fires took place in ZIP codes that are predominantly Black.

Electrical fires often start in concealed spaces, making them stealthy and more deadly than other kinds, such as cooking fires.

While electrical fires account for an estimated 10% of all residential fires, they cause 18% of the fatalities, according to the National Fire Protection Association, an international

nonprofit organization that conducts research on fires.

The association estimates that every year 300 to 500 people nationwide die, and more than 1,200 are injured in residential electrical fires.

But the association’s figures are significantly undercounted because they are dependent upon shoddy data and incomplete reporting from government entities, cloaking the full scope of the problem, the Journal Sentinel’s investigation found.

In fact, the fire that killed Colston and Murrell wasn’t included in government data used to calculate the association’s figures.

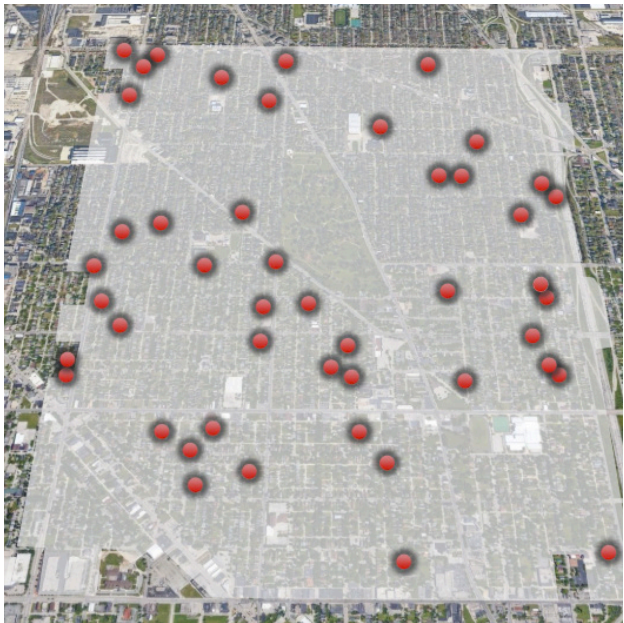
Milwaukee once had several safeguards in place that helped detect dangerous wiring and other problems. But starting in 2011, a group of state lawmakers, some moonlighting as landlords, dismantled the safeguards in a series of sweeping laws promoting the interests of landlords.

Milwaukee’s Department of Neighborhood Services, whose mission includes protecting renters’ safety, has failed to hold unscrupulous landlords accountable as violations mount, allowing them to continue renting unsafe units.

Mayor Tom Barrett declined interview requests, referring questions to Erica Roberts, the city’s commissioner of building



Three properties in 53206 with extensive electrical code violations or complaints prior to suspected electrical fires.



Such fires have occurred far more often in 53206 than the rest of the city in the past decade.

inspections.

When told of the Journal Sentinel’s findings, Roberts said: “This is interesting data, and it’s sad data.”

Roberts said the city does what it can to protect renters. “We do everything in our power

within the ordinances,” she said. “We’re certainly open to suggestions.”

Milwaukee police and fire departments don’t have electrical engineers on staff. If they don’t suspect arson or homicide, they don’t typically investigate electrical fires, they said. The same is true of the state fire marshal.

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, a landlord trade group that lobbied in favor of the landlord-friendly laws passed by state lawmakers, said he wasn’t aware that Black renters in Milwaukee were being disproportionately affected by suspected electrical fires and that little was being done to prevent the problem.

“No landlord wants to wake up and see on the news they’ve had a fire and one of their tenants has died,” Giese said. “Do we need more inspections and new laws that require better electricity in older buildings? That depends on how many people are killed or injured in a year for whom such inspections would help.”

Colston’s nephew, 29-year-old Earl McDougle of Milwaukee, said he is shocked by how little anyone has cared about the deaths of his aunt and her friend.

“I still feel rage,” he said, “and feel like she still ain’t got justice.”



Ricky Carter reviews police records on a fire that occurred in a unit he shared with his girlfriend, Leilani Zollicoffer, and her two young daughters.

Warrant doesn’t stop landlord from renting

Ricky Carter frequently had seen lights flicker in the apartment he shared with his girlfriend near North 15th Street and West North Avenue. But on the night of April 26, something was different.

Carter was getting ready for bed. His girlfriend, Leilani Zollicoffer, was asleep; so were her daughters, ages 5 and 2. The lights in the living room and kitchen flickered, rapidly. Carter said he smelled burning and heard a faint beeping from the smoke detector.

When he looked to find the



An April fire that investigators suspected was caused by faulty electrical wiring destroyed many of Leilani Zollicoffer's belongings. She rented a duplex near West North Avenue and North 15th Street.

source, he saw an odd sight: smoke coming up from the living room floor. He shook his girlfriend awake, and the couple rushed in to get the girls, whose bedroom was filled with smoke.

The family hustled out and called 911. They watched as firefighters hosed down the house. Their belongings were destroyed.

“That fire could have started in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep. Then what?” Zollicoffer, 24, said.

Carter, 30, said he had been worried about the electrical system. “I thought something was going to happen,” he said. “I just didn’t expect it to happen that soon.”

In their report, firefighters wrote, “This fire appears to have been caused by an electrical issue.” But as with the deadly fire that claimed the

lives of Colston and Murrell, the reports reveal that little investigation was done into the specific cause of the blaze. Officials labeled it “undetermined.”

Records show the duplex on North 15th Street had a documented history of electrical violations dating to at least 2012, revealing failures by city regulators, courts and others to hold unresponsive landlords accountable.

The property changed hands several times over the last decade, with a man named Tommy Cole purchasing it in 2016. Cole failed to fix electrical problems or pay fines associated with the violations, resulting in a warrant for his arrest, records show. The warrant against Cole remains active, according to records.

Cole and his attorney did not return calls and emails from

the Journal Sentinel. Cole, who served time in federal prison on a 2006 drug conviction, pleaded guilty to new federal drug charges in 2019. He is awaiting sentencing, records show.

He sold the duplex to Dominique McKinney and Jerome Ward in April 2019. That same month the city again issued electrical violations on the North 15th Street property.

The city immediately began warning McKinney to fix the faulty electrical system, which, reports show, appeared to be the work of a “handyman,” not a licensed electrician. There were double-tapped breakers in the service box — which can overload the system and cause sparks — and other serious safety violations, according to the report.

Shortly after inspection reports were sent to McKinney, city inspector Matthew Jenrich personally delivered the order to fix the violations to her on May 9, 2019. “I also told her that as long as they are working on correcting the violations, we can work with them,” he wrote in a report.

A month later, Jenrich spoke to a renter living in the duplex and was told nothing had been done by McKinney about the electrical violations, according to city records.

The following month, in July 2019, the case and a \$980 fine were referred to municipal

court. McKinney failed to pay the fine, and, as with the previous owner, a warrant was issued for her arrest.

Yet the municipal court’s own practice undercuts its effectiveness when it comes to such warrants. The court generally allows for people with municipal warrants to have at least four contacts with police, for things like speeding, before police carry out the arrest order.

The approach was adopted in an effort to stop the practice of jailing low-income people who might not be able to pay fines and traffic tickets. Landlords and others who can pay fines benefit.

Records show the city continued to warn McKinney to fix the electrical problems, notifying her by letter or in person at least seven more times after the warrant was issued. Records do not show that McKinney fixed the problems.

The city has the power to declare, on an emergency basis, a house to be unfit to inhabit when the home constitutes a “substantial threat” to the health or safety of tenants. The city can “placard” the property, which means posting signs barring people from living there. In this case, the city declined to do so.

“At no time in our involvement with this property ... did we believe that the observed electrical violations constituted

a placard,” Steph O’Connor, a city spokeswoman, wrote in an email. “We do not take the placarding of a property lightly and we are constantly weighing the risks of violations against the risk of displacement and potential homelessness when placarding occupied properties.”

Roberts, the city’s building inspection commissioner, said she reviewed the case carefully and, despite the eventual fire, believes the city handled it properly.

“I felt comfortable that we did the best we could,” she said.

The warrant for McKinney was issued in 2020 and was active at the time Zollicoffer rented the upper flat from her in November.

Zollicoffer said she was concerned about the electrical system in the house soon after she moved in: Some outlets didn’t work. An overhead light was inoperable. When they plugged a lamp into one outlet, the lightbulb popped and then stopped working, she said.

Zollicoffer complained to McKinney about the electrical problems as well as the heat not working. She said she called McKinney repeatedly and sent several text messages, which she provided to the Journal Sentinel. Nothing was fixed, Zollicoffer said.

McKinney did not respond to messages left at her home by a Journal Sentinel reporter.

Reached by phone later, McKinney was asked about the electrical violations at the rental unit and the fire. McKinney said she couldn’t talk but would be available to comment later. She has since failed to return repeated phone messages.

The other owner, Ward, is facing drug charges in Milwaukee and Waukesha counties. He and his attorney did not return repeated phone calls from the Journal Sentinel.

Zollicoffer said she couldn’t believe that McKinney was allowed to rent out the unit given her flouting of the city’s authority, to the point that a warrant was issued for her arrest.

“I feel like she should be in jail,” Zollicoffer said. “We were homeless and house-hopping, and now we are back to square one.”

The day after the April blaze, Zollicoffer recalled she was texting with McKinney about the fire and the many problems with the rental unit that were not fixed, including the lack of heat.

McKinney’s response: “You warm?”

‘It’s beyond our scope’

When fire investigators don’t believe a fire was started intentionally or a crime was involved, they often don’t dig deeper.

“That isn’t really what we do,” said Andrew Timm,

Online Interactive Graphic

Online interactive version of the graphic can be viewed at www.jsonline.com/wiresandfires



Electrical fires typically start in a handful of ways and most are preventable, experts say.



Sparks coming from a light switch are a sign of an incorrectly installed switch or damaged wiring.



A flickering light is a sign of trouble and should be examined by a qualified electrician.



An outlet plate that is discolored brown or black indicates problems and should be addressed immediately.



When wires are not properly and tightly installed, current can jump across those gaps, causing sparks and potentially a fire.



Loose outlets are also a regular contributor to electrical fires. The blades from a plug should slide into the outlet easily and fit snugly.



Overloading an outlet with power strips can cause the outlet to overheat. A lack of outlets or non-functioning outlets often lead to dangerous overuse of extension cords.



Worn or damaged insulation is a problem. Wire insulation can get chewed by rodents or frayed over the years by heat or moisture.

assistant chief with the Milwaukee Fire Department. “It’s beyond our scope.”

In fact, fire investigators with the state Department of Justice and the Milwaukee police and fire departments acknowledge that unless a crime is likely involved, they do not investigate most suspected electrical fires, labeling them “accidents” and listing their causes as “undetermined.”

More than 75% of suspected electrical fires in Milwaukee’s single- and two-family homes had the cause listed as undetermined or accidental, according

to a Journal Sentinel analysis of fires from 2014-19.

“If we find an electrical issue — if it’s degraded wiring or loose connections or conductors — we may stop short,” said Brian Liethen, a special agent with the state Arson Bureau. “Because if it’s not a crime, we can allow others to come up with the exact cause.”

Nationwide, regulators have long known that failure to nail down the precise cause of a fire allows those responsible to escape accountability and perpetuates the problem. A 2014 report by the National

Association of State Fire Marshals found that the lack of thorough investigations and determination of the causes of fires were nationwide concerns. The report noted: “What gets measured, gets fixed.”

Electrical fires usually start in a handful of ways. Damaged wiring insulation, resulting in exposed and touching wires, can cause electricity to jump or “arc,” generating heat or sparks. Broken light switches, loose outlets and service panels installed by unqualified contractors are also common causes of electrical fires.

Landlords often blame tenants for dangerous extension cord use, but city regulators say the responsibility falls on landlords to make sure there are enough outlets and that they are working, reducing the need for extension cords.

While police and fire officials don’t usually drill down into the causes of electrical fires, insurance companies, which have a vested interest, often do.

But when landlords pay cash for buildings rather than take out loans — as is common in distressed areas of Milwaukee — they’re not required to have insurance.

Insurance companies are not subject to public open records laws, and so it’s difficult to know how many rental properties are not insured.

In a random sample of 25

rental properties in the 53206 ZIP code, however, the Journal Sentinel found 75% had no mortgage loans on file with the Milwaukee County Register of Deeds — meaning they likely didn’t have a mortgage and thus were not required to have insurance.

In the case where Colston and Murrell died, landlord Sheppard told police he had no insurance, according to the police report.

No insurance, no further investigation. And no accountability.

“Wow,” said city Ald. Khalif Rainey, whose district includes a portion of 53206 and surrounding ZIP codes, when the Journal Sentinel told him the findings of its investigation. “You mean to tell me they’re renting uninsured homes to renters?”

Rainey said he wasn’t aware electrical fires were such a problem. That’s not surprising considering data collection about electrical fires at the local, regional and national level is scant and based on voluntary participation. The U.S. Fire Administration does not require the nation’s 30,000 fire departments to report fires, even when they result in death.

And often when the fires are reported — about three-quarters of the fire departments do submit at least partial data

— key details are frequently missing, including information about the cause and whether there were any fatalities.

Of the Wisconsin residential structure fires reported into the National Fire Incident Reporting System from 2014-19, 60% listed nothing in the box for “factors contributing to ignition,” the Journal Sentinel analysis showed.

Based on the limited entries that did include factors that started the fires, the national database indicates there are an average of 30 suspected electrical fires across the city of Milwaukee every year, five of which occur in the 53206 ZIP code.

The database also showed that between 2009 and 2019 there were at least 3,077 suspected electrical fires in Wisconsin homes — an average of about 280 every year and a 40% increase during the 11-year period.

To find what government data failed to record, the Journal Sentinel pieced together information on residential electrical fires in Wisconsin through open records requests with local fire departments, medical examiners offices, city departments of neighborhood services and state fire marshals as well as the national database maintained by the U.S. Fire Administration.

The national database lists 229 fire-related deaths

statewide from 2009-19, with eight deaths in Milwaukee.

In reality, Milwaukee had at least 68 fire-related deaths, the Journal Sentinel found.

Safeguards stripped away

As other cities and states enact protections for tenants, Milwaukee and Wisconsin are headed in the other direction. What few safeguards the city and state did have were rolled back in a series of landlord-friendly bills passed by the state Legislature and Milwaukee Common Council in the past decade.

The front line in protection for renters is the Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services. Yet the department doesn’t routinely inspect single- and two-family rental units, leaving tenants on their own to determine if they are safe.

The city also softened its permitting requirements for some electrical work, such as replacing outlets and switches. In a council meeting in 2013, Tom Mishefske, operations director for the neighborhood services department, said some electrical work didn’t need the city’s oversight and that the change was a “minor lightening of the requirements.” He equated changing an electrical switch or outlet to replacing a faucet on a kitchen sink.

In a recent interview with the Journal Sentinel, Mishefske

said the change in the permitting requirement was the result of pressure from some members of the Common Council and property owners.

“We got a lot of heat from rehabbers and others, including aldermen,” he said.

Pulling a permit triggers an inspection by the city’s electrical experts who can verify whether the work was done properly.

In the house where Colston and Murrell died, inspectors ordered a permit be pulled for electrical repairs in 2017, two years before the fire. The Journal Sentinel could find no permit on file.

Danell Cross, a longtime resident of neighborhoods next to the 53206 ZIP code who herself escaped a blaze in a unit she was renting, said the problem begins with a lack of accountability.

“People are dying, and they are not telling us who is responsible for that loss of life,” said Cross, now director of Metcalfe Park Community Bridges, a nonprofit neighborhood improvement group. “And that is something that needs to change.”

Regarding the duplex where Carter, Zollicoffer and her two young daughters narrowly escaped, Cross said: “If this was a young white family in a white neighborhood, they would not have even been allowed in that house with



‘People are dying, and they are not telling us who is responsible for that loss of life,’ says Danell Cross, Metcalfe Park Community Bridges director, shown at a community event in 2014.

those code violations.”

State lawmakers outlawed the city’s residential rental inspection program five years ago at the prompting of the Wisconsin Realtors Association and the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin. Both groups had lobbied the Legislature to pass a law banning such programs.

The inspection program required rental units in certain neighborhoods with many negligent landlords to be certified by building inspectors.

The Realtors and apartment associations argued such programs were costly and unfair.

Representatives of at least two neighborhood associations wrote to city and state officials expressing support for Milwaukee’s program and their concern that lawmakers sponsoring the changes had conflicts of interest, emails obtained by the

Journal Sentinel show.

“Inexplicably, this bill will reward the bad apples,” wrote Bill Werner, president of the Mariners Neighborhood Association, in a 2015 email to city and state lawmakers. “It is troubling that of the five sponsors/co-sponsor of the bill, three are listed in the Blue Book as realtors and one is a former broker.”

At least one study showed Milwaukee’s residential rental inspection program worked.

A 2014 analysis by the city’s Department of Neighborhood Services found the number of violations spiked in the previous five years and then declined over time, indicating problems were being addressed, according to the authors. And, the analysis found, complaints from renters to city aldermen about the condition of their apartments and the responsiveness of landlords dropped substantially.

The program allowed inspectors access to properties in vulnerable areas and routinely exposed violations for such things as defective electrical switches, improper wiring and missing fire safety alarms, the authors wrote. They also said the program encouraged landlords to take a more proactive approach to maintenance.

The program was so successful they recommended expanding it into other neighborhoods.

Since the routine inspections ended, the number of properties being cited for violations in the neighborhoods that the program targeted has dropped nearly 80%, a Journal Sentinel analysis showed. City officials say that’s most likely because tenants are afraid to call and complain and, as a result, inspectors aren’t getting to the properties.

In another change in 2016, then-Gov. Scott Walker signed into law a provision that said properties did not need to be inspected and brought up to code at the time of sale. In Milwaukee, that nixed an exterior inspection of all properties changing hands.

Wisconsin law changed again in 2018 and now allows rental inspection programs but caps the fees that cities can charge landlords to do inspections. City officials say the change makes it cost-prohibitive and therefore they are not doing them.

“It is the responsibility of the landlord to maintain their property and provide a safe unit for the tenant,” said Mishefske, the neighborhood services official. “If we get a complaint, we’ll investigate.”

That kind of complaint-based system is deeply flawed, according to tenant advocacy groups.

Tenants often don’t have the expertise, and they worry

they may be evicted for complaining, said Gregory Miao, an attorney with ChangeLab Solutions, a national health equity and housing improvement group based in Oakland, California. He said at least 15 of the nation's largest cities, including Baltimore, Minneapolis and Boston, have various types of residential rental inspection programs.

"It saves lives," Miao said.

Violations preceded fatal fire

In October 2019, Patricia Colston was already renting from Will Sherard — known in Milwaukee for his poor upkeep of dozens of properties — before she moved to the North 14th Street duplex where she died.

Sherard, who was jailed for several days in 2011 by a federal judge for failing to follow court orders and clean up lead paint in his units, was also threatened with jail in 2018 for failing to pay more than \$60,000 in fines from code violations. Faced with being locked up again, Sherard paid a portion of the fines and set up a monthly payment schedule.

Sherard had sold the place where Colston had been living. He offered her the option to move to another of his rentals on North 14th Street, just off West Capitol Drive. Family members told the Journal Sentinel Sherard didn't mention



Landlord Will Sherard attends a sheriff's sale of foreclosed properties in 2016.

any problems with the electricity in the house. But records show the property had been repeatedly cited for "potentially hazardous" electrical wiring that was "improperly installed or defective."

The place was also a mess, the family members said; somebody else's belongings were still scattered throughout when Colston moved in.

Her friend, Clarence Murrell, offered to help her clean on the evening of Oct. 11.

Before sunrise, a downstairs neighbor smelled smoke and called 911.

"It smells like it's burning," the woman told the dispatcher. "It smells like something electrical is set on fire and it's burning."

Firefighters arrived at 6:17 a.m. They saw no smoke outside, the reports say. They inspected the basement and entire first floor with a thermal imaging camera. When they moved up to the second floor

they still found no heat.

But when they opened the door to Colston's apartment, heavy smoke poured out. They could see fire burning in a living room wall. It took them less than 25 seconds to put it out.

When firefighters moved to the back of the house, they found Colston and Murrell on the kitchen floor, 10 feet apart near the back door. They were covered in soot and unresponsive and were pronounced dead soon after.

The autopsies list their cause of death as "smoke and soot inhalation."

Murrell's family last year filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Sherard and his company, Morocco Investments, alleging the landlord failed to maintain the electrical system in the duplex where Murrell and Colston died. The family's attorney, Justin Padway, said he is taking depositions and that no trial date has been set.

Angel Sodamade, Murrell's daughter and a plaintiff in the case, said her father deserved to be safe.

"I lost a father, and my son lost his grandfather," she said. "We want justice and to ensure that no other family is harmed at the hands of Sherard and other reckless landlords."

Sherard's attorney in the case, Robert Meyeroff, declined to be interviewed.

Sherard bought the house

where Colston and Murrell died from a sheriff's sale for \$12,100 in 2014, records show. Following complaints three years later, the city cited the property for 28 code violations, including several pertaining to electrical problems. It's unclear whether the electrical problems were properly fixed as the Journal Sentinel could find no permit on file — despite the city's orders that a permit be pulled.

"You don't just buy some property and slap some paint on the wall and throw somebody in it," said Tiffany McCarver, Colston's daughter. "(Sherard) should have had it up to date, and it should have been checked out. ... When you pay rent somewhere, you pay to feel safe, not to worry about if your house is going to catch on fire."

Sherard sold the house several weeks after the fire for \$20,000. The new owner took out a permit in March to upgrade the electrical service to the building, according to city records.

McCarver, a 35-year-old from Milwaukee, said she could not salvage any of her mother's belongings after the fire because they were all destroyed, covered in black soot.

And, she said, the landlord refused to return the rent or her mother's security deposit.

"He said he wouldn't because her stuff was still in the house," McCarver said.

Wires and Fires | **Video**

Published August 25, 2021

Tenant describes suspected electrical problems to police the night his apartment caught fire



‘The only thing that actually works perfectly fine is this bedroom,’ Ricky Carter says.

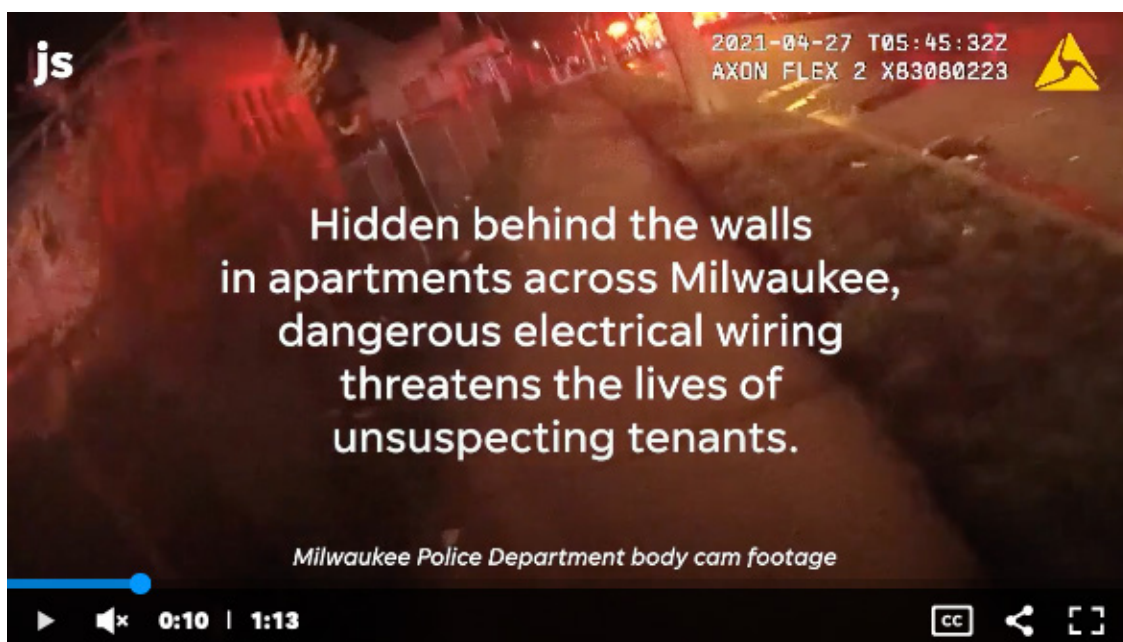
Click here to watch online

<https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/08/25/tenant-ricky-carter-points-out-electrical-problems-police-night-his-apartment-caught-fire/8244812002/>

Wires and Fires | **Video**

Published August 25, 2021

Electrical fires pose a higher risk to low-income Black renters in Milwaukee



The majority of Milwaukee's suspected electrical fires are in rental units, many in low-income neighborhoods.

Click here to watch online

<https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/08/25/electrical-fires-pose-higher-risk-poor-black-renters-milwaukee/5574776001/>

Wires and Fires

JOURNAL SENTINEL

Published August 29, 2021 | Online August 25, 2021

18A | SUNDAY, AUGUST 29, 2021 | MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Tips to avoid electrical problems in rentals

John Diedrich
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

As you prepare to rent an apartment, there are a number of things to know before signing the lease, including whether there are electrical issues. In Milwaukee, it is unlikely a rental unit has been inspected by city inspectors or another government agency, even if you are receiving a rent subsidy.

Under state law, landlords must ... reveal structural defects, including electrical problems.

Electrical fires present a deadly and hidden risk that falls especially hard on low-income renters, a Journal Sentinel investigation found. That burden in Milwaukee falls disproportionately on Black renters in the city's most distressed ZIP code, 53206. But suspected electrical fires are not thoroughly investigated, masking the extent of the problem. Programs that helped keep renters safe have been eliminated in recent years.

Check that outlets work

Use a cellphone or hair dryer to check if the outlets work before you sign the lease. Note any loose outlets or ones that are taped or show burn marks. Plugs should fit snugly into outlets.

Count outlets in each room

Older homes may have just one outlet per room, leading to the need for extension cords — which experts agree is dangerous. Note and question any missing outlet covers.

Turn on each light switch

Turn on each light switch and note if lights flicker, spark or do not work and if you hear a crackling or buzzing sound. Check to ensure light fixture

sockets work with a light bulb. Question any fixtures without light bulbs.

Review the basement

As you examine the basement, check that the electrical service box is accessible, has a panel cover and does not have unsecured wires coming from it. Also note any open junction boxes or unsecured wires overhead in the basement. Do not touch such wires.

Check for any violations

Check online whether the property has any current or past violations. In Milwaukee, the website is <https://tmd.apps.milwaukee.gov/MyMilwaukeeHome/indexSideBar.jsp>

Know your rights

Under state law, landlords must disclose unresolved housing code violations and reveal structural defects, including electrical problems. The landlord also must disclose if the house is not served by electricity, or the wiring, fixtures or other components of the electrical system are not in safe operating condition.

For more tips on electrical safety in a rental unit or home, go here: <https://www.safety.com/tips-for-electrical-safety-at-home-checklist/>

What to do if you have a problem

If you discover problems after you have signed the lease, the first step is to contact your landlord. It is against the law for a landlord to evict you or raise rent based on any complaints that lead to the city issuing the owner a code violation. If your landlord is unresponsive, you can pursue filing a complaint with the municipal authority. Do not try to fix electrical issues on your own.

Sources: Bruce Jancazak, master electrician and owner of Best Electric; Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection; Electrical Safety Foundation International; Community Advocates.

Continued from previous page

the option to move to another of his rentals on North 14th Street, just off West Capitol Drive. Family members told the Journal Sentinel Sherard didn't mention any problems with the electricity in the house. But records show the property had been repeatedly cited for "potentially hazardous" electrical wiring that was "improperly installed or defective."

The place was also a mess, the family members said; somebody else's belongings were still scattered throughout when Colston moved in.

Her friend, Clarence Murrell, offered to help her clean on the evening of Oct. 11.

Before sunrise, a downstairs neighbor smelled smoke and called 911.

"It smells like it's burning," the woman told the dispatcher. "It smells like something electrical is set on fire and it's burning."

Firefighters arrived at 6:17 a.m. They saw no smoke outside, the reports say. They inspected the basement and entire first floor with a thermal imaging camera. When they moved up to the second floor they still found no heat.

But when they opened the door to Colston's apartment, heavy smoke poured out. They could see fire burning in a living room wall. It took them less than 25 seconds to put it out.

When firefighters moved to the back of the house, they found Colston and Murrell on the kitchen floor, 10 feet apart near the back door. They were covered in soot and unresponsive and were pronounced dead soon after.

The autopsies list their cause of death as "smoke and soot inhalation."

Murrell's family last year filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Sherard and his company, Morocco Investments, alleging the landlord failed to maintain the electrical system in the duplex where Murrell and Colston died. The family's attorney, Justin Padway, said he is taking depositions and that no trial date has been set.

Angel Sodamade, Murrell's daughter and a plaintiff in the case, said her father deserved to be safe.

"I lost a father, and my son lost his grandfather," she said. "We want justice and to ensure that no other family is harmed at the hands of Sherard and other reckless landlords."

Sherard's attorney in the case, Robert Meyeroff, declined to be inter-

"You don't just buy some property and slap some paint on the wall and throw somebody in it."

Tiffany McCarver
Patricia Colston's daughter

viewed.

Sherard bought the house where Colston and Murrell died from a sheriff's sale for \$12,100 in 2014, records show. Following complaints three years later, the city cited the property for 28 code violations, including several pertaining to electrical problems. It's unclear whether the electrical problems were properly fixed as the Journal Sentinel could find no permit on file — despite the city's orders that a permit be pulled.

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Irene Chang of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

Contact Raquel Rutledge at (414) 224-2778 or raquel.rutledge@jrn.com; John Diedrich at (414) 224-2408 or jdiedrich@gannett.com; and Daphne Chen at (414) 224-2064 or dchen@gannett.com.

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Wires and Fires

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Wires and Fires

JOURNAL SENTINEL

Published November 7, 2021 | Online November 3, 2021

PULITZER PRIZE WINNER: 2008, 2010, 2011

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JOURNAL SENTINEL

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2021 JSOnline.com PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK



15 RENTALS INSPECTED

47 VIOLATIONS FOUND

WIRES AND FIRES A JOURNAL SENTINEL INVESTIGATION

Frayed wires. Defective lights. Fire traps.

What we found doing electrical inspections in one Milwaukee neighborhood

John Diedrich, Raquel Rutledge and Tamia Fowlkes
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

In the dark basement of a duplex on North 19th Street in Milwaukee, Bruce Janczak shines his flashlight at an electrical service panel on the wall. • “Touch that and you’ll go flying,” he says. • The aged, rusted panel is missing its cover. A web of copper wiring — second only to silver in its ability to conduct electricity — sits exposed. • Four young children are upstairs, slowly waking up from a birthday party sleepover. Their mom says she will keep them out of the basement, away from the panel.

The panel’s missing cover, while it might seem minor to a layperson, is a serious danger and violates city codes, Janczak says. Most of the components are electrically charged, and sparks can shoot out, easily starting a fire. It’s one of dozens of infractions the master electrician found while inspecting the duplex and other rental properties across this north side neighborhood as part of an ongoing investigation by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Pulitzer Center
This story was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

MORE ONLINE
To see previous stories in the Wires and Fires Investigation go to jsonline.com/wiresandfires.

AT LEAST 80% OF THE 3,300 RENTALS IN 53206 ZIP CODE HAVE VIOLATIONS, STUDY SUGGESTS

See WIRES, Page 18A

Biden hails public works bill passage

Infrastructure package promises \$1 trillion for ‘rebuilding America’

Alan Fram and Zeke Miller
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON – President Joe Biden on Saturday hailed Congress’ passage of his \$1 trillion infrastructure package as a “monumental step forward for the nation” after fractious fellow Democrats resolved a months-long standoff in their ranks to seal the deal.

“Finally, infrastructure week,” a beaming Biden told reporters. “I’m so happy to say that: infrastructure week.”

The House passed the measure 228-206 late Friday, prompting prolonged cheers from the relieved Democratic side of the chamber. Thirteen Republicans, mostly moderates, supported the legislation while six of Democrats’ farthest left members opposed it.

See INFRASTRUCTURE, Page 10A

Prevea cuts ties with Rodgers

Kelli Arseneau
Appleton Post-Crescent
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Prevea Health announced Saturday that it would no longer continue its partnership with Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers.

The announcement comes after Rodgers publicly made a series of misleading and false claims about COVID-19 Friday during an appearance on “The Pat McAfee Show.”

“Prevea Health remains deeply

See RODGERS, Page 8A

INSIDE TODAY'S SUNDAY PLUS



Caring for patients and public health

Dr. Ben Weston has helped guide the community through the COVID-19 pandemic. **Page 6A**



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Wires and Fires



Frayed wires. Defective lights. Fire traps.

By John Diedrich, Raquel Rutledge and Tamia Fowlkes,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Four young children are upstairs, slowly waking up from a birthday party sleepover. Their mom says she will keep them out of the basement, away from the panel.

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and sparks can shoot out, easily starting a fire. It's one of dozens of infractions the master electrician found while inspecting the duplex and other rental properties across this north side neighborhood as part of an ongoing investigation by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

To better understand how pervasive — and overlooked — potentially hazardous electrical wiring is in rental units, the Journal Sentinel hired Janczak to examine electrical systems at rental properties in the city's most impoverished ZIP code, 53206, which has the highest rate of suspected electrical fires in Milwaukee. Suspected electrical fires ravage homes in 53206, which is 95% Black, at five times the rate of the rest of the city.

Janczak and reporters visited a random selection of 50 single- and two-family rental properties in June and July. Renters in 15 units agreed to participate in the study, inviting Janczak and the reporters inside.

The results: The Journal Sentinel found electrical fire hazards and significant electrical code violations in all but one of the properties. In total, the inspections uncovered 47 electrical code violations, the most common being improperly installed service panels and lack of working outlets that forced tenants to rely on



Electrician Bruce Janczak inspects a rusted electrical box that was not properly grounded in a rental home on North 16th Street in June.

extension cords. Ten of the units Janczak inspected had one or both such violations.

Other common problems included homes with no electrical grounding; loose outlets where plugs didn't fit snugly, which can cause electricity to arc and spark; open junction boxes; and improperly hung or spliced wires.

"This was done by a wanna-be electrician or a handyman," Janczak said of wires taped to the ceiling running between an outlet and an old electrical service panel in the basement of one duplex. "No real electrician would do work like this. They found someone to do this who knew just enough to be dangerous."

The testing follows a Journal Sentinel investigation in August that revealed the brunt of suspected electrical fires falls hardest on Black renters and that governments at all

An exposed electrical panel in the basement presented an electrocution and fire risk.

(57)

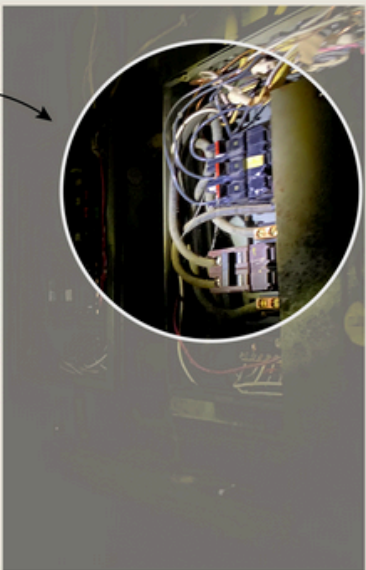
Union Cemetery

N Teutonia Ave.

N 16th St.

W Keefe Ave.

W Burleigh St.



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- ☐ Replace missing covers on electric junction boxes / outlets

“

Lloyd Morris of AMG Properties, the owner of the rental unit, said the company sold the property a few weeks after the Journal Sentinel inspection. Morris said he was unaware of any problems.

Though the sample size of the Journal Sentinel-sponsored testing was limited, the design of the study and the participation rate make the findings statistically valid and suggest widespread dangerous electrical wiring and rampant code violations in rental properties throughout the city's

most vulnerable community, according to John Johnson, a researcher who studies housing and demographics at Marquette University and who, at the request of the Journal Sentinel, provided randomly selected property addresses used in the investigation.

Johnson said that considering the margin of error, the study indicates at least 80% of the 3,300 single and two-family rental properties in the ZIP code studied have electrical code violations.

Vytenis Babrauskas, a leading expert on electrical fires who worked for 16 years at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, called the Journal Sentinel testing “pioneering work” and said it exposes an unacceptable risk low-income renters face.

Babrauskas said governmental bodies, not just in Wisconsin, but nationwide, should take the risk of electrical fires more seriously.

“There should be a movement toward electrical inspections and real inspections, not perfunctory ones,” he said. “Someone has to say, ‘That is important. Let’s go do that.’”

Mayor Tom Barrett, who has been nominated by President Joe Biden to become U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg, has repeatedly refused requests for interviews on the issue.

Erica Roberts, the city’s

commissioner of building inspections, also would not agree to an interview for this story.

In an email, a spokesperson for the Department of Neighborhood Services said the agency “continues to prioritize the safety of residential properties throughout the city of Milwaukee consistent with our departmental objectives and mission to ensure safe and healthy neighborhoods.”

Landlords have little to fear when it comes to enforcement of electrical code violations, the Journal Sentinel reported in August. The Department of Neighborhood Services does not inspect single and two-family rental properties unless it receives a complaint, and there are no monetary penalties for code violations, only a \$175 inspection fee following a complaint. The department typically receives 200 to 300 electrical complaints from renters each year, according to city officials.

And even when landlords rack up multiple violations over months and years, little prevents them from continuing to lease their properties, the Journal Sentinel reported.

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, a lobbying group for landlords, said when landlords learn of electrical problems, they should fix them promptly.



In May 2021, electrician Bruce Janczak talks with renter Tirrell Glosson about an issue with the overhead wiring outside the home Glosson and his fiancée rent on West Thurston Avenue.

“The real problem, as your study has validly pointed out, is there are tons of properties with old, insufficient wiring,” he said.

Landlords promise fixes

Janczak’s inspection findings were documented in reports, which the Journal Sentinel shared with owners and tenants. Several landlords said they would fix the problems immediately.

“This is totally a surprise,” said William Smith, owner of a duplex on North 16th Street, where Janczak found numerous problems. “I’ll have my electrician go over there ASAP.”

Lonnie Slocum, whose company owns a duplex on North 22nd Street that was included in the study, said his tenants had not complained about electrical problems but he planned to have an electrician at the property the morning after he learned of the issues.

“I do thank you for doing

what you’re doing,” he wrote in a text message. “I wouldn’t have known otherwise.”

Lloyd Morris of AMG Properties, the owner of the rental unit on North 19th Street where Janczak found an exposed panel in the basement and where children were having the birthday sleepover, said the company sold the property a few weeks after the inspection. Morris said when he bought the property several months earlier for \$39,900, he didn’t have an inspection and was unaware of any problems. Records show he sold the property for \$71,000.

Another out-of-state company that owns a property inspected by Janczak said it would fix the issues but only when the unit becomes vacant.

Still another landlord reacted with anger that the Journal Sentinel inspected his property.

“I am not happy about this, you going in there,” said landlord Jesse Stewart, who owns a house on North 13th Street where the electrician found

open junction boxes, hanging wires and a lack of outlets.

Asked by a reporter what he planned to do about the electrical issue, Stewart said, “It’s not your business, ain’t your problem.”

Some landlords would not comment or did not return calls.

Only one home inspected by Janczak had no code violations. It was a property on West Nash Street, owned by a company called Strong Blocks Milwaukee.

Carl Quindel, co-founder and manager of Strong Blocks, which owns about 100 rental homes on the near north side, said his company typically spends between \$2,000 to \$15,000 per property to ensure electrical systems are safe and up to date.

“We believe there is a lot of value in the city, not just the homes, but the people who live here,” Quindel said. “We try to reflect that in our work.”

At one upper duplex on North 26th Street, listed in city records as owned by Isaiah Retzlaff of Madison, Janczak found an overhead light not working and outlets that often lead to tripped circuits. In the basement, he found the service panel was badly rusted, indicating an electrocution risk as moisture gets in the box. There also were few outlets in the two-bedroom unit, leading to the potentially dangerous, but unavoidable, use of extension cords.

The Journal Sentinel mailed the inspection report to multiple addresses for the owner. A reporter also left repeated phone and email messages, which were not returned.

For now, Alex Jones, who lives in the upper flat with his fiancée and their daughter, said all he can do is prepare for the worst.

“We have made a plan to get out in case there is a fire,” he said.

‘Real scary situation’

Tirrell Glosson said he hadn’t slept well in months, worrying that shoddy wiring could spark a fire in the ranch-style house where he lives with his fiancée and their four children on Milwaukee’s northwest side.

“I sleep light so nothing goes wrong,” Glosson recalled in an interview with the Journal Sentinel. “I’m smelling for bad smells like electrical burning. I have to make sure nothing happens here. It’s a real scary situation.”

The Journal Sentinel learned of Glosson’s case through a tip in May and hired Janczak to inspect the property. The problems Janczak found prompted the news organization to look at additional rental units using a randomized study.

As Janczak inspected Glosson’s home, room by room, he noted a light switch in a

first-floor bathroom was held in place with a Band-Aid. Other switches, outlets and overhead lights did not work.

In the basement, Janczak found an extension cord plugged into an outlet in the ceiling, then strung about 15 feet across the room and spliced directly into an electrical junction box.

“This is not safe,” Janczak told Glosson.

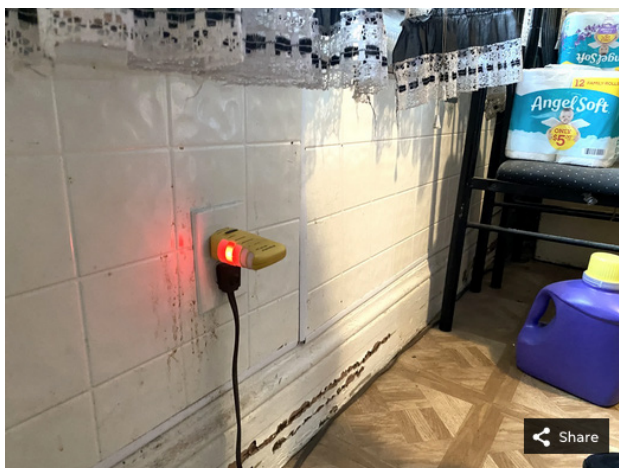
Glosson said that when it rains, the sockets get damp from a leaking roof, and an overhead light in the basement crackles and flickers and then stops working. A Journal Sentinel reporter saw the basement light flickering during an earlier visit to the home when it was raining.

The same thing happens to an overhead light in his sons’ room, Glosson said. At first, he put tape on the light switch in the room so it couldn’t be used, he said. Later, he taught the boys to use it sparingly.

“The kids know now just not to turn it on when it’s raining,” Glosson said.

The electrical problems have gotten worse in the four years the family has rented the four-bedroom home near North 67th Street and West Thurston Avenue, Glosson said. The couple pays \$1,100 a month in rent.

“It’s a lot of pay, to have a cord running across the basement, water leaking on our heads and a Band-Aid holding



This kitchen outlet in a rental home on North 11th Street was ungrounded, presenting a possible fire risk from shorting out.

on the light switch,” he said. “We could be killed here.”

According to city records, the house is owned by VineBrook Homes, of Dayton, Ohio, which owns numerous rental properties in Milwaukee. After the Journal Sentinel contacted the company, a VineBrook employee visited the house and planned to address the electrical problems and other issues, according to a statement from company spokeswoman Lucy Bannon.

But Bannon said VineBrook can’t fix the problems while Glosson and his family are living there.

“The number and nature of the updates needed at the property would be very difficult to address while the house is occupied,” Bannon wrote in the email.

She said the company would be willing to help the family find another place to live, but

A property in the 3200 block of North 17th Street with **four** violations

In the basement, a metal conduit pipe had pulled apart, leaving a wire exposed that could start a fire.

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- ☐ Replace missing covers on electric junction boxes / outlets

A property in the 1800 block of West Clark Street with **three** violations

In this home, most rooms had just one working outlet, leading to the dangerous use of extension cords.

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LANDLORD RESPONSE:

“Landlord Jackie Beamon said she didn’t know about the problems and vowed to fix them. “I don’t want someone to lose their life over something that can be taken care of,” she said.

LANDLORD RESPONSE:

“Owner Abdullahi Mamo said he didn’t know about the problems and said he would address them. “I am worried about the people here. I will do whatever I need to to fix this.”

Glosson said he likes the size of the house and that it's close to a school bus stop. He doesn't want to move; he just wants the landlord to fix the fire hazards.

Water, electricity don't mix

All 15 houses inspected in the 53206 ZIP code were built between 1891 and 1928. But age alone does not equal a fire risk, experts say. It depends on how well the electrical systems are maintained.

Old homes in affluent neighborhoods in Milwaukee County, for instance, have a far lower rate of suspected electrical fires than in poor areas, a Journal Sentinel analysis found.

For example, in the city's section of 53211 where the median home value is \$270,100 and the median construction year of single and two-family rentals is 1910, the rate of suspected electrical fires is more than 30 times lower than in 53206, where the median home value is \$28,500 and the median construction year is 1913.

And in 53204, a predominately white area on the south side of Milwaukee where the median home value is \$58,800 and the median construction year is even older — 1895 — the rate of suspected electrical fires is three times lower than in 53206, according to the news organization's analysis. This is

true even though the ZIP codes have roughly the same percentage of renters.

The electrical system in a 126-year-old duplex on North 17th Street was far from well-maintained, Janczak found. Unsecured electrical wires hung from the basement ceiling, the service panel was badly rusted, and the original panel sat open above a sink.

“Is this to code? No. Is it unsafe? Yes. Could it cause a fire? Yes,” Janczak said. “Will it cause a fire? Flip a coin.”

The rusted electrical service panel box was concerning to Janczak and common in the homes he inspected in the study. The rust may be because of the humidity of the basement or moisture coming through metal tubing protecting electrical wires, he said.

“I can tell you that water and electricity don’t mix,” he said. “That is not good.”

Willie J. Lewis of Milwaukee, the property owner according to city records, did not return repeated messages from the Journal Sentinel. The electrician’s report was mailed to the address listed to him in city records.

In another duplex, also on North 17th Street, the metal tubing had pulled apart with the tube lying on the exposed live wire. Because there is weight on the wire, Janczak said, it is a matter of time before

the tubing wears through the wire insulation.

“Hopefully, it will cause a short, and the circuit trips as opposed to something worse,” he said.

The owner of the unit, Jackie Beamon, who lives a couple of blocks from the rental house, told a Journal Sentinel reporter she didn’t know about the problem. She said it is often difficult to get contractors to come to her neighborhood.

“I tell them, ‘Not everyone here is bad. I’ll watch out for you,’” she said, adding she will make sure the problems get fixed. “I don’t want someone to lose their life over something that can be taken care of.”

At a house on West Clarke Street near North 18th Street, the problems inside concerned Janczak but not compared to what he spotted outside.

The metal piping above the outside meter, called the raceway, appeared to have been pulled off in a storm. Repair work was done — evident by different straps that were attached to the raceway — but it was also clear to Janczak it was “handyman work,” not done by a licensed electrician.

Most alarming to him, though, was that a gutter had torn partially off the home, perhaps in the same storm, and was lying on a live electrical wire leading from the power line to the house.

The risk, Janczak said, was that the aluminum gutter could slice through the wire. “That can short out, cause heat and a fire,” he said.

The electrical panel in the basement also looked like it had been replaced in the past decade, Janczak said, and it appeared to be amateur work because it was not correctly grounded.

A check of city records showed only one electrical permit to work on the house, and that was in 2012.

Abu Abu, 21, who lives in the rented house with his parents and seven siblings, appreciated the Journal Sentinel’s review and said he would follow up with the landlord. “I don’t want to take any chances,” he said.

Reached by the Journal Sentinel, Abdullahi Mamo, who bought the 111-year-old house in November 2020, said he didn’t know about the gutter on the wire and other issues. He said he would address them.

On Oct. 11, two weeks after the Journal Sentinel showed Mamo the inspection report, a licensed electrician whom Mamo hired came to the property. The electrician agreed with the problems identified by Janczak, including the need for more outlets in rooms where there was just one, leading to a tangle of extension cords.

A Journal Sentinel reporter was present when the

electrician came for the estimate. The cost for 10 new outlets, a new circuit for kitchen appliances and grounding for the electrical system: \$3,400. The issue with the gutter would be referred to a gutter company for repair.

Mamo said he will go ahead with the repairs.

“I am worried about the people here,” he said. “I will do whatever I need to, to fix this. I don’t worry about the money. I worry that the electric is unsafe.”

Shoddy repair work

In a house she has rented near North 9th Street and West Concordia Avenue for eight years, Shorelonda Avery smelled a burning odor coming from an outlet in the kitchen earlier this year. In the bathroom, the outlet didn’t work at all.

She called the property management company in charge of maintenance. A worker came and changed both outlets. But he didn’t do a good job, Janczak’s inspection this summer revealed.

When Janczak stuck his handheld tester into the kitchen outlet — the one that was causing the burning smell — to check for proper grounding, it lit up red, meaning it was not grounded. An ungrounded outlet is prone to arcing, sparking and starting an electrical fire.

When Janczak checked the bathroom outlet, he could not plug in a three-prong tester into the three-prong outlet. That means, for example, a tenant could not plug in a hairdryer.

The city does not require a permit to replace outlets, making it legal for unskilled people to do the work. And to Janczak, these incorrectly installed outlets are the result.

City records show that Lomac Properties Corp., a Canadian company, owns the rental property. It is managed by VP Investors, a Milwaukee firm. In an email to the Journal Sentinel, VP Investors said the issues would be addressed but

failed to respond to follow-up questions.

Since the inspection, Avery has taped off the dangerous outlets so that no one uses them.

“People are doing what they have to because landlords are not doing what they should be doing,” she said. “I grew up in Milwaukee, so I know about the electric. Everyone does.”

Avery said she has picked up habits over the years to protect herself.

Now, every time she leaves her unit, she unplugs most everything in the house.

Daphne Chen of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.

Wires and Fires | **Video**

Published November 3, 2021

Electrical inspections of Milwaukee rental homes reveal dangerous risks



Electrical inspections of randomly selected rental units in Milwaukee's 53206 ZIP code revealed widespread violations and dangerous conditions.

Click here to view online

<https://www.jsonline.com/videos/news/2021/11/03/investigation-finds-electrical-hazards-older-milwaukee-homes/8568818002/>

Wires and Fires

JOURNAL SENTINEL

Published December 19, 2021 | Online December 16, 2021

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Need for substitute teachers grows dire

Wisconsin schools raise pay, but still desperate

AnnMarie Hilton and Rory Linnane
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

On a typical day this school year, the Neenah Joint School District's elementary schools are at least one substitute short of filling all their teachers' absences.

In September and October, there were 45 unfilled absences – 45 times that a music teacher or a guidance counselor or a principal had to teach a class because a substitute wasn't available.

In the district's middle and high schools, where substitute teachers are also in short supply, students without a teacher join a study hall or go sit in the auditorium for that class period.

"It's a dire situation," said the district's communications manager, Jim Strick.

Educators have said for years that there's been a critical need for full-time and substitute teachers in Wisconsin, but COVID has exposed the need like never before – and it's not getting any better.

With new cases reaching levels not seen since last fall's peak, and with most schools now teaching in person, droves of Wisconsin's educators are missing school because they've tested positive, been exposed to somebody with COVID or felt symptoms that could be COVID.

Schools have raised substitute pay, but they're still failing to fill all the absences.

The Kimberly Area School District has seen a tenth of its staff absent on a

See SUBSTITUTE, Page 22A

INSIDE TODAY'S

SUNDAY PLUS

Great Lakes an 'incredible' inspiration

Geo Rutherford, a printmaker and adjunct lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, has more than 1.1 million followers on TikTok, where she posts videos sharing her passion for the Great Lakes and the art she creates from her walks on the beach.

Page 6A

WIRES AND FIRES

A JOURNAL SENTINEL INVESTIGATION

How your tax dollars help keep city renters in danger from

FAULTY WIRING

Daphne Chen, John Diedrich and Raquel Rutledge

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

In the spring of 2020, city inspectors discovered hazardous wiring in a rental duplex on West Vine Street in Milwaukee and ordered the owner, Absolute Properties, to pull an electrical permit and fix the violations promptly. • For more than a year, city records show, the company didn't do as ordered. It didn't pull the permit, and it didn't resolve the outstanding violations. • But the company did do one thing: It collected taxpayer money for rent.

Tax dollars in the form of rent assistance to low-income families regularly flow to landlords who neglect to fix electrical issues, a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analysis found. Samples of data between 2018 and 2020 show that rental assistance went to the owners of at least 62 single- and two-family Milwaukee homes that had

See WIRES, Page 20A

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BILL SCHULZ/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Barbara Smith is the housing coordinator for Amani United, a community group working to improve housing conditions in the north side neighborhood. ANGELA PETERSON / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

"How do you know that something is wrong on a property – because it's in your records and it's documented somewhere – but you're still sending the check?"

Barbara Smith

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'Big, big task' against Ravens

Columnist Tom Silverstein says the clock is ticking for coach Matt LaFleur to fix the Packers' awful special teams. 1C

'Reindeer Tracks'

Greg Borowski, a Journal Sentinel editor, writes a Christmas story every year for his family and friends. 1E

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Wires and Fires



How your tax dollars help keep city renters in danger from faulty wiring

By Daphne Chen, John Diedrich and
Raquel Rutledge, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

In the spring of 2020, city inspectors discovered hazardous wiring in a rental duplex on West Vine Street in Milwaukee and ordered the owner, Absolute Properties, to pull an electrical permit and fix the violations promptly.

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didn't do as ordered. It didn't pull the permit, and it didn't resolve the outstanding violations.

But the company did do one thing: It collected taxpayer money for rent.

Tax dollars in the form of rent assistance to low-income families regularly flow to landlords who neglect to fix electrical



Barbara Smith is the housing coordinator for Amani United, a community group working to improve housing conditions in the north side neighborhood.

issues, a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel analysis found. Samples of data between 2018 and 2020 show that rental assistance went to the owners of at least 62 single- and two-family Milwaukee homes that had unfixed electrical violations at the time of payment, totaling nearly \$200,000. The actual numbers are likely much higher.

The Journal Sentinel also found local government agencies and nonprofits that distribute federal rental assistance to landlords often do so without conducting thorough safety inspections or reviewing publicly available records online to see, for instance, if landlords have outstanding arrest warrants for failing to make repairs.

Community leaders and housing advocates said they

were troubled by the Journal Sentinel's findings.

"How does that occur?" said Barbara Smith, housing coordinator for Amani United, a resident-led community group that has worked for years to improve housing conditions in the north side neighborhood. "How do you know that something is wrong on a property — because it's in your records and it's documented somewhere — but you're still sending the check?"

The problem of electrical fires in Milwaukee's predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods reveals how money and power tilt against tenants and in the favor of landlords, some of whom take advantage of an ineffective inspection system.

The risk is far higher in

these areas compared with the rest of the city, the Journal Sentinel reported in August. In the 53206 ZIP code, which has the highest rate of suspected electrical fires, as many as 80% of the single- and two-family rental properties may have electrical code violations, based on a series of home inspections sponsored by the Journal Sentinel in November.

Yet landlords in low-income neighborhoods can charge steep rents for often-unsafe apartments, in part, because affordable housing is scarce, and tenants, especially those with credit trouble and eviction history, feel trapped. They must accept what they can get, they say.

The Journal Sentinel's newest findings reveal that tax dollars are being used to pay for these overpriced and potentially dangerous rental units.

Each year, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development sends roughly \$51 million in rent assistance funds to the Milwaukee County Housing Division and the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, which then distribute the money to landlords whose tenants qualify for the subsidy. Since the pandemic began, the federal government has also released about \$70 million in emergency rent assistance to local governments, which contract with nonprofits to disburse the funds.

Although the Journal Sentinel's analysis of the samples of data suggests that only a small fraction of that rent assistance money was sent to landlords with unresolved electrical problems, the consequences of these hidden hazards can be deadly.

When contacted about the Journal Sentinel's findings, officials at those agencies said they were unaware that landlords with outstanding electrical violations were receiving payments. But they offered no solutions for the problem.

Some of those same officials argued that adding conditions to rent subsidies, such as there being no outstanding code violations, could hurt tenants by taking aid from them. But one housing expert said providing public assistance for properties that have not been inspected for safety perpetuates a system that puts people in dangerous housing, with the government essentially bankrolling the risk.

Court records show that in March, three months after receiving a \$2,000 rent assistance payment for a woman living in the duplex on Vine Street, Absolute Properties moved to evict her. She was \$880 behind on her rent.

One day after the eviction, the apartment was listed on Twitter.

"\$775/month," the advertisement read. "Call us today!"

Curtis Hoff is listed in city inspection and court documents as being the owner of companies that collectively own hundreds of properties in the poorest parts of Milwaukee, including the one on Vine Street. Hoff's own house is a nearly 5,000-square-foot mansion in Mequon that is assessed at \$842,900, records show.

Reached by cellphone at a Milwaukee Bucks basketball game earlier this month, Hoff said he could not talk and asked a Journal Sentinel reporter to email him questions.

He has not returned phone calls and emails since.

Hazardous electrical conditions unfixed for months

Another duplex listed to a company owned by Hoff, this one on North 22nd Street, had defective electrical wiring and was cited in September 2020 by the city Department of Neighborhood Services. The city gave the company five weeks to make the electrical repairs.

Months passed. No fixes were made, records show.

Rental assistance records show a \$4,500 payment was made to the company, Accurate Properties, in December 2020, three months after the city's order for repair had been issued and while the violations were ignored.

Serious electrical problems



Galen Dumas said outlets and overhead lights were not working as he prepared to move into a unit in the 2900 block of North 22nd Street.

in the upper unit of the 110-year-old duplex went unfixed for a year. That changed in late November — but not because of any action by the city.

Galen Dumas, who was preparing to rent the unit, said he noted that several outlets didn't work, resulting in a tangle of extension cords snaking through the apartment and feeding into surge protectors. Also, several overhead lights on the first floor and basement were broken, he said.

Dumas, 39, said he demanded that Accurate Properties fix the electrical problems before he, his girlfriend and their daughter moved in and started paying

the \$795 monthly rent for the three-bedroom unit.

On Nov. 29, just two days before the family was to move in, an electrician arrived at the property and replaced the defective outlets and switches, according to Dumas, who then agreed to move in.

“Now every outlet and switch is doing what it is supposed to be doing,” he said.

Less than a mile and a half away, at a similar duplex off West North Avenue, Ricky Carter spotted smoke coming from the floor late one night in April.

Carter, his fiancée and her two young daughters had moved in less than six months earlier. According to Carter, the family had no idea that city inspectors had previously cited the property for multiple electrical violations. Records show the problems went unfixed for years and resulted in an arrest warrant against landlord Dominique McKinney.

As Carter and his family ran outside, they watched as fire destroyed most of their belongings. Investigators with the Fire Department suspected the cause was electrical.

One day after the fire, Community Advocates, one of the nonprofit agencies contracted with local government to distribute federal pandemic rent assistance in Milwaukee, gave McKinney \$2,700, according

to Shawanna Lindenberg, the nonprofit’s housing department manager. She said the nonprofit was not aware there had been a fire or a warrant for McKinney’s arrest.

According to Lindenberg, Community Advocates case workers do not check whether a landlord has a warrant for unpaid violations. Those checks are not a requirement of its contract with Milwaukee County, she said.

The group does conduct in-person “habitability checks” on units that it funds, but they were suspended during COVID, according to Community Advocates CEO Andi Elliott. They resumed in November, she said.

McKinney has not responded to repeated calls from the Journal Sentinel.

Carter and his fiancée said Community Advocates never told them about the electrical problems and neither did their landlord. And the couple said they were outraged when told by the Journal Sentinel that McKinney received rent assistance after she failed to make fixes.

“I feel like the whole system failed us,” Carter said.

Inspections look stringent — on paper

On paper, the rules are firm: Outlets and lights must be working. Broken and frayed wiring isn’t allowed. And the

electrical system must ensure safety from fire.

Those are the basic housing standards for any property to qualify for the HUD rent assistance program known as housing choice vouchers or “Section 8,” according to federal regulations.

At the local level, the protections on HUD rent assistance funds are even stricter.

Across 26 pages of regulations, the Milwaukee County Housing Division adds that “any electrical problem” that could result in shock or fire must be corrected within 24 hours. If not, the rent assistance could be withheld and the contract could be terminated.

At the city’s Housing Authority, the safety regulations are less strict than the ones at the county, but they still mandate that exposed electrical wires or sparking outlets be fixed within a day.

City and county officials say they inspect homes before rent money is distributed, but the inspections are usually limited to problems that are easily seen.

“When visible issues are detected, the county Housing Division gives landlords a date by which the issues need to be fixed or resolved,” said Brandon Weathersby, spokesperson for Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley.

That’s a typical approach, said Robert Dicke, the former



Landlord Mohammad Choudry had about 70 properties taken over by the city and sold after he allowed them to fall into disrepair.

executive director of the Dane County Housing Authority. He said inspectors will look for missing or charred outlet covers but usually won’t go further, such as bringing circuit testers to check whether outlets are wired properly.

“They’re not going to move furniture and inspect every outlet. They’re not going to take covers off and check if there’s loose wires,” Dicke said. “It’s not that deep.”

In a statement, city Housing Authority spokesperson Amy Hall said renters should alert the agency about safety issues. If problems are verified, the agency will demand fixes and potentially terminate the contract with the landlord, she said.

But tenants and housing experts say it’s unrealistic to expect renters to spot wiring problems and risk retaliation for reporting their landlords to authorities.

Plus, data from the city Housing Authority shows that enforcement happens infrequently. Over the past six years, the agency terminated an average of 16 contracts per year — just 0.3% of the roughly 5,900 landlords who receive rent assistance money annually.

Rent assistance funds for tenants affected by the pandemic have fewer regulations than the regular assistance given out by HUD, the Journal Sentinel found.

Tatyana Warrick, the spokesperson for the Wisconsin Department of Administration, which passes the federal rent assistance funds to local agencies to distribute, said the pandemic funds were designed to be one-time, emergency cash infusions to prevent evictions during the pandemic.

As a result, no inspections were required, she said.

According to Warrick, the federal government prohibits local officials from using pandemic resources on repairs or putting conditions on the money.

“Requiring a landlord to come into compliance with building codes/inspections, while it may seem to make logical sense on one hand, would actually limit what assistance a renter could access by no fault of their own,” she said.

Social Development Commission, one of the nonprofits



Landlord Elijah Mohammad Rashaed, left, pictured in 2017. Disrepair in the 150-plus properties linked to Rashaed overwhelmed court-appointed property managers.

contracted to distribute pandemic rental assistance in Milwaukee, does not inspect properties before giving out money, said James Hall, an attorney for the organization. He said the group also does not check for unresolved building code violations or arrest warrants.

The Journal Sentinel’s findings that tax dollars are going to landlords who fail to fix potentially dangerous electrical violations are “shocking and terrible,” said Mitch, a housing law expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who legally goes by just his first name.

“It would be as if a health inspector found rats at a restaurant and said, ‘Here’s a whole bunch of government coupons that you can use to give out and make your food less expensive — never mind the rats,’” he said.

Mitch, who oversees the

UW-Madison Neighborhood Law Clinic, which primarily serves low-income renters, said it's possible to hold landlords accountable while still protecting tenants.

"We can have safe cars, and people still buy cars," he said. "We can have regulations on restaurants, and we still have restaurants. We have regulations on banking, and we still have banks. Every industry has regulations, and it still survives."

Low-income rentals are a booming business

The vicious cycle in low-income housing churns along largely due to Milwaukee's rental ecosystem, characterized by its aging housing stock, high levels of segregation and lack of renter protections.

Landlords who are willing to exploit these factors can often recoup their cash investment in a few years, the Journal Sentinel found. There is little pressure for them to address violations. The city's Department of Neighborhood Services lacks follow-through, and the state Legislature passed pro-landlord laws in the past 10 years that limit the ability of cities to run rental inspection programs. The changes came from a group of state lawmakers, some moonlighting as landlords.

The inner financial workings

of landlords are typically tightly held secrets, but lawsuits filed by the city against several Milwaukee landlords show glimpses into the value that can be extracted from low-income renters.

Court-appointed property managers who took over the portfolio of landlord Mohammad Choudry in 2017 reported the 70-plus properties were generating \$531,000 to \$780,000 in rental income per year from 2017 to 2020. According to civil court records, the properties had accumulated more than 1,700 open violations. Many were dilapidated beyond repair with electrical wiring problems, caving ceilings, cockroach infestations and mold. In September, a judge ordered his properties sold or razed.

Another central city landlord, Elijah Rashaed, was bringing in even more around the same timeframe — approximately \$1.3 million per year, according to court records. The disrepair in the 150-plus properties linked to Rashaed overwhelmed court-appointed property managers, who detailed years of neglect, including faulty electrical systems, broken furnaces and rotted pipes.

Housing and economics experts say this is not an accident or a tragedy but a purposeful business model of certain property owners.



Reginald Reed's company buys abandoned houses on the north side and uses them to teach construction trainees about home rehab.

It's a peculiar puzzle of Milwaukee's poorest ZIP codes: The rents are shockingly high. Landlords are able to charge comparatively exorbitant rents even on houses that they may have bought for relatively small amounts.

For example, the duplex on Vine Street: The six-bedroom, three-bathroom home was purchased by a company linked to Hoff for \$37,000 at the height of the Great Recession in 2008. Advertisements online show the two units lease for about \$750 per month, generating nearly \$18,000 per year in rental income when fully occupied.

Rents in Milwaukee do not vary much between its poor and rich neighborhoods, said Yaidi Cancel Martinez, a housing researcher with the

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Decades of racially discriminatory housing and criminal justice policies mean that poor families and communities of color can find themselves trapped in a cycle: Often lacking generational wealth, such tenants are more likely to sacrifice a significant share of their income for rent, making them more vulnerable to eviction and subsequently ineligible for other apartments.

A 2019 study by Princeton University sociologist Matthew Desmond, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Evicted" about housing in Milwaukee, found that landlords in poor areas of the city profit more than those in wealthier parts because they are able to charge relatively high rents for

cheap properties while deferring maintenance.

National research from UCLA economists earlier this year similarly found that profits for single-family rentals in the poorest ZIP codes are 2.5 times higher than those in the richest, even when accounting for the costs of evictions or vacancies.

The potential for profit has drawn interest from Wall Street investors who have discovered Milwaukee as a place to make money off desperate tenants.

Mike Gosman, executive director of the Milwaukee non-profit Acts Housing, said its clients, usually low-income Black and Latino aspiring homeowners, are increasingly getting outbid by out-of-state corporate investors.

“What we see with investors is that they’re almost always making cash offers and not having any inspection contingencies,” Gosman said.

Reginald Reed, an entrepreneur in the construction industry who grew up on Milwaukee’s north side, said officials are not doing enough to protect renters from negligent landlords. He had one word for the city’s housing stock: “Trash.”

Many renters could become homeowners but are unable to because banks refuse to lend to them, and landlords continue to exploit them for profit, Reed said.

“How is it that the bank

doesn’t trust me with a \$600 mortgage, but they trust me to pay the landlord \$900?” Reed said. “Make it make sense.”

That’s why Reed launched an effort this year to increase home ownership on Milwaukee’s north side. His idea: buy 100 blighted homes and allow his staffing company’s trainees to use them for renovation practice. After the projects are done, the homes will be offered at below-market rate to the trainees who worked on them.

But Reed said he’s found little financial support from fellow business owners or city officials.

Meanwhile, proposals to strengthen renter protections have been opposed by landlord lobbying groups, which have argued that more enforcement would drive landlords out of business.

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, agreed that profits can be substantial in poor neighborhoods but said that owners aren’t always able to collect all the rent.

Kail Decker, a former assistant city attorney in Milwaukee who prosecuted negligent landlords and is now the West Allis city attorney, finds the plea of poverty by landlords hard to believe.

“Most landlords do have the money to fix their properties,” he said. “It’s just not money they want to spend.”

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Wires and Fires | **Flyer**

If you are a renter in Milwaukee and are concerned about the risk of electrical fire, contact the following agencies for assistance ...

City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services

city.milwaukee.gov/DNS/About-Us/Complaints
or call (414) 286-2268

Fields housing complaints.



UW Neighborhood Law Clinic

law.wisc.edu/eji/nlc/

Provides legal services to renters and others in Wisconsin.



Community Advocates

renthelpmke.org

Helps tenants with rental assistance and other aid.



Milwaukee Autonomous Tenants Union

matunion.org

Advocates for tenant rights.



Milwaukee Justice Center

<https://www.milwaukeejusticecenter.org/>

A legal aid clinic for low-income residents.



Legal Action of Wisconsin

legalaction.org

Provides free legal services to low-income people.



Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee

lasmilwaukee.com

Helps low-income residents with landlord disputes and other matters.



State Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection

datcp.wi.gov/Pages/Programs_Services/FileConsumerComplaint.aspx

Receives renter complaints.



Tips for renters to avoid electrical problems

<https://bit.ly/3ldRD4N>



Wires And Fires: A Journal Sentinel Investigation

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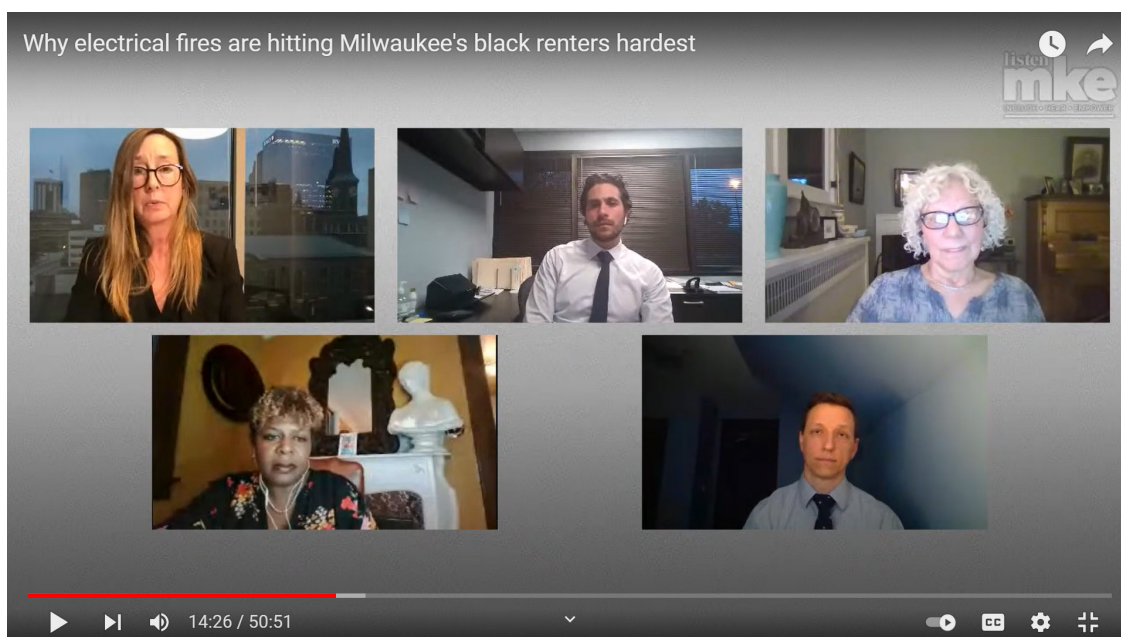
A project of Listen MKE, a collaboration between the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel; WUWM 89.7-FM, Milwaukee's NPR; Milwaukee PBS; and the Milwaukee Public Library.

The Journal Sentinel produced and distributed a flier with easy-to-scan QR codes to help renters facing dangerous electrical situations.

Wires and Fires | **Community Forum**

Published October 5, 2021

Why electrical fires are hitting Milwaukee's black renters hardest



The Journal Sentinel hosted an online forum on the danger faced by renters in Milwaukee and ideas for how to address the problem.

Click here to listen online

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1oGQFo6lQU&ab_channel=ListenMKE

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Wires and Fires

Published September 5, 2021 | Online September 2, 2021

Evers calls electrical fires ‘gut wrenching’

By Raquel Rutledge and John Diedrich,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Calling the situation horrific and inexcusable, city, county and state leaders said this week they are committed to doing what it takes to improve conditions that leave Black renters in Milwaukee far more vulnerable to electrical fires than anybody else in the city.

“These people paid for a place that ultimately took their lives,” said State Sen. LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee), who represents part of the city most affected by suspected electrical fires. “That’s inexcusable. ... I have no choice but to find a way to get this addressed. I honestly didn’t know that people were literally losing their



Johnson

lives and everything they own like this.”

Johnson said she plans to reach out to Gov. Tony Evers’ office and work with colleagues in the Legislature to consider changes that could help tackle the problem.

The reaction follows a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation last week that uncovered how suspected electrical fires disproportionately harm Black renters in the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods and how systems at all levels of government fail to address the underlying issues.

The investigation revealed that fire investigators with Milwaukee police and fire departments as well as the state fire marshal’s office do not thoroughly investigate suspected

[Read the pdf or click here to read online](#)

electrical fires — anywhere — and showed how the city’s Department of Neighborhood Services allows unscrupulous landlords with histories of extensive code violations to continue renting out their properties.

“It’s gut-wrenching,” Evers told the Journal Sentinel. “It’s very disheartening.”

Wanting swift action, Evers said he already has spoken to staff members about potential ways to address the problem, which he blamed largely on legislative changes in the last decade that weakened cities’ ability to hold unscrupulous landlords accountable.

“I will do whatever I can administratively,” he said. “But because these changes were laws and part of the legislative process, major changes need to happen in that arena.”

Evers said lawmakers across the state should care deeply about what happens in Milwaukee, even when their constituents might not seem interested.

“Milwaukee is the economic engine of the state and that should mean legislators from northern Wisconsin and from western Wisconsin should care about what happens in Milwaukee,” he said. “I can’t imagine people in other parts of the state not taking this seriously.”

City Ald. Khalif Rainey said he’s taking immediate action: He took the first steps



Milwaukee County Board Supervisor Felesia Martin, pictured in 2019, is calling for further investigation into electrical fires following a Journal Sentinel investigation.

Wednesday to initiate public hearings, including testimony from city officials.

“I’ve never fathomed that there were not any qualification components when it came to rental properties,” Rainey said, adding that he’s lived in many rentals and “always assumed the properties were approved for residency.”

Rainey called it unbelievable that Mayor Tom Barrett



Rainey

would not answer questions from the Journal Sentinel on the matter. “He’s always been laissez-faire on many of the issues that affect the quality of life

for African Americans in Milwaukee,” Rainey said.

“Of all the issues we’re attempting to address here, whether it’s gun violence or reckless driving, this right here

seems to be an issue where we can really make a difference,” he said. “I really want to see City of Milwaukee step up and protect the people.”

‘Dereliction of duty’

Barrett, who has been tapped to be ambassador to Luxembourg by President Joe Biden, again declined to speak with reporters about their findings, deferring to the city’s neighborhood services department.

“We are interested in any proposals and additional tools that we can use in new and innovative ways to better protect the citizens of Milwaukee,” Steph O’Connor, the department spokeswoman, wrote in an email.

Milwaukee’s city attorney, Tearman Spencer, called the circumstances and loss of life from electrical fires “a travesty.”

“We need to get all the parties at the table to discuss how to close those loopholes and hold these people more accountable,” he said.

District Attorney John Chisholm and his staff are reviewing the issue of electrical fires, said Chief Deputy District Attorney Kent Lovern.

Lovern said they’d be examining the office’s previous successful prosecutions regarding landlord-tenant issues.

“We have some specific next steps we intend to take,” Lovern



Milwaukee City Attorney Tearman Spencer calls the deaths from preventable electrical fires “a travesty” and called on leaders to meet on the problem.

said. Details would be forthcoming, he said.

Milwaukee County Supervisor Felesia Martin, whose district includes neighborhoods where the Journal Sentinel found the number of electrical fires higher, called the investigation’s findings “disturbing.”

“It appears to be a dereliction of duty and responsibility,” she said. “The alarms that this all reveals is just beyond comprehension.”

The Journal Sentinel’s investigation found that suspected electrical fires occur in Milwaukee’s 53206 ZIP code at five times the rate of the rest of the city. The neighborhood and areas surrounding it are the epicenter for electrical fire danger in the city, the newspaper found. About 95% of the residents who live in 53206 are Black, according to census data.

And while the data show that Black renters are most likely to be victimized by electrical fires,

Martin wanted to make sure the leaders also look out for anyone who is poor and facing such danger.

“It is about people,” she said. “It is about the human lives being lost.”

Milwaukee once had several safeguards in place that helped detect dangerous wiring and other problems. But starting in 2011, a group of state lawmakers, some themselves landlords, dismantled the safeguards in a series of sweeping laws.

Martin said she is interested in working with lawmakers to restore those protections. But she said she’ll be cautious not to rush into a slew of knee-jerk changes just to “say we did this thing, raise the flag and balloons and have a parade.”

“We want to be thoughtful, methodical and strategic. No more rushing to get something out and slapping a Band-Aid on it,” she said.

She said renters should have access to an easily searchable database that discloses the history of properties. And she said it should not be the responsibility of renters to do complex electrical checks of a unit. Government inspectors should be doing that.

“I am just not going to let it go because this is too important,” she said.

Milwaukee Ald. Michael Murphy said Milwaukee’s inspection program, which was

being paid for with fees on landlords, was effective, and the city was looking to expand the effort. The Legislature’s action “gutted it,” he said.

Murphy wants it restored. He also wants to see what the city could do to improve its oversight, including its data collection. He wants to hear testimony from Erica Roberts, the city’s commissioner of building inspection, and Fire Chief Aaron Lipski.

“I want to see what we can do to change what is in our control,” Murphy said, “We need better data to make better decisions.”

Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin, a landlord trade group that lobbied in favor of a series of landlord-friendly bills passed by state lawmakers in recent years, said tenants’ actions cause far more kinds of fires than electrical ones and that responsible landlords have insurance and fix problems.

The Journal Sentinel found one of the issues that leads to a lack of in-depth investigation into electrical fires is the fact that owners of rental properties in the city don’t always have insurance. Insurance companies are often the ones to investigate the origins of fires because they have a vested interest.

A random sample of 25 rental properties in the 53206

ZIP code by the Journal Sentinel found 75% had no mortgage loans on file with the Milwaukee County Register of Deeds, meaning they likely didn't have a mortgage and thus not required to have insurance.

In a 2019 case detailed by the Journal Sentinel, a landlord told police he had no insurance on his property on North 14th street where two people, Patricia Colston and Clarence Murrell, were killed in a fire investigators suspected was caused by faulty electrical wiring.

Without insurance companies to investigate fires, the causes are frequently left as "undetermined," leaving families with no legal recourse.

State Sen. Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee) called the investigative findings "horrific" and said there are a number of ways to potentially address the issues.

"Is mandating insurance necessary or a stronger investigative arm of the state fire agency the best thing? Or halting the ability to transfer (properties) when there are all these violations?" Taylor said. "These are all legitimate things to consider."

County Board Supervisor Priscilla Coggs-Jones, whose district includes part of the 53206 ZIP code, said landlords should be required to have home insurance. She also called for expanded requirements for

electrical permits and stringent inspections when a home is sold.

"This is one more example of racism being a public health crisis," she said of the investigation. "There are clear policy steps that can be taken to begin reversing these disparities."

'Systemic violence'

Kail Decker, who prosecuted problem landlords in Milwaukee before becoming West Allis' city attorney, said faulty wiring was a common problem in rental units in Milwaukee's 53206 ZIP code.

"There is not much incentive to improve properties because (landlords) are getting the returns," Decker said. "In other areas of the city, there are incentives to clean up old wiring. Tenants will walk away from a unit."

Decker said he doesn't think that prejudice by landlords is to blame for electrical fires happening to Black renters more often than to others. Rather, the outcome stems from an economic system that is deeply flawed for Black residents, he said.

"I think the owners of these properties are not making those decisions because their tenants are Black," he said. "They are doing it because they can, and the fact the tenants are more likely to be Black is more the product of economic

opportunity than race. And in Milwaukee, they overlap far too frequently.”

Milwaukee Fire Chief Lipski said where the fires happen and who lives in the homes has nothing to do with how the Fire Department responds and investigates.

“The loss of that life is absolutely horrendous,” Lipski said of those who die in electrical fires. “I risk my members’ lives daily to try to save those lives or prevent the loss of that life, regardless of who is on the other side of that wall. And we do it with gusto.

“We investigate these fires exactly the same wherever we are.”

He said the department, like most other police and fire departments, doesn’t have an electrical engineer on staff to confirm that a fire was started by faulty electrical wiring. That is true even when all signs point to an electrical origin.

“We don’t have the bandwidth, capacity or expertise to tear into it any further,” he said. “We rely on other agencies to come in and help us with that.”

Lipski also said the city should consider doing away with the so-called grandfather clause that allows old and potentially dangerous electrical wiring to remain in rental housing.

Reggie Moore, director of violence prevention, policy and engagement at the Medical



Reggie Moore of the Medical College of Wisconsin’s Comprehensive Injury Center said electrical fires are a form of violence faced in Milwaukee’s low-income, largely Black neighborhoods.

College of Wisconsin’s Comprehensive Injury Center, said the Journal Sentinel’s investigation “highlights an example of systemic violence.”

“A system doesn’t have to be intentionally violent to produce violent outcomes,” Moore said. “At the end of the day, it is the collective responsibility as a city to ensure we don’t have a caste system when it comes to our residents renting property in our city. ... This is a public health concern just as serious as other forms of violence in our community.”

Moore said he’s deeply concerned about the lack of oversight at the time of property sales and the fact that some landlords choose not to insure their rental units. He compared it to unregulated firearm sales.

“These dangerous homes are being sold on a market with little oversight similar to guns sold at a gun show,” he said.

JoCasta Zamarripa, a city alderwoman representing the southside of Milwaukee, said she has been concerned about fires since earlier this year when several people were killed in residential fires in her district. She said she teamed up with the Fire Department to offer free smoke detectors to residents.

Zamarripa said an insurance mandate is worth considering along with other tools to hold landlords more accountable.

“I will keep brainstorming,” she said.

Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley said laws passed by the state Legislature shifted power into landlords’ favor, putting tenants’ interest “on the backburner.”

“We have allowed landlords to control the balance of power,” he said. “We need state legislators to step up and create some balance between landlords and tenants.”

Crowley also said he would be reaching out to city officials

to see if there are ways the county can partner with the city to better inspect properties and protect tenants.

“We have to show people that the city and the county have their backs,” he said.

Milwaukee County Board Chairwoman Marcelia Nicholson said the Journal Sentinel investigation illustrates what the board meant when “we declared racism a public health crisis in 2019.”

She pointed to the pro-landlord bills passed in Madison as a contributing cause in the deaths.

“Loosened regulations spearheaded by special interest groups are leading to the untimely deaths of disproportionately Black people in Milwaukee,” she said. “Policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels must come together to create solutions that ensure the safety of all renters.”

Reporter Daphne Chen contributed to this article.

Wires and Fires
Published September 15, 2021

Investigation that found Milwaukee's Black renters face brunt of electrical fires prompts city committee to call for return of inspections

By Raquel Rutledge and John Diedrich,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Saying “there is clearly an imbalance of power,” Milwaukee Common Council members called Tuesday for reinstating a residential inspection program aimed at protecting renters from unscrupulous landlords who fail to address dangerous conditions — including potentially deadly electrical wiring that can lead to fires.

At a hearing of the Zoning, Neighborhood and Development Committee, members expressed frustration at state

laws that hamstrung the city's ability to inspect rental properties and also the failure of city fire investigators to nail down the exact cause of suspected electrical fires.

Those precise causes could potentially uncover cases of negligence and better hold property owners accountable for maintaining safe rental units, experts say.

“Put yourself in the shoes of tenants in the city of Milwaukee,” said Ald. Marina

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Dimitrijevic. “It’s apparent that there is a misbalance of power. ... We have to get to the root causes.”

The hearing came in response to an investigation last month by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that exposed how electrical fires in the city disproportionately affect Black renters. The investigation detailed how such fires are often labeled accidents and how police and fire officials — at the local and state level — don’t thoroughly investigate electrical fires.

The investigation also found the city Department of Neighborhood Services has failed to hold negligent landlords accountable as violations mount, allowing them to continue renting unsafe units, and that in Milwaukee, owners of rental properties are not required to have insurance.

Moreover, the news organization’s investigation revealed how data from the U.S. Fire Administration is inaccurate and does not include all fatal fires.

Ald. Scott Spiker, who opened the communication file along with Ald. Khalif Rainey that resulted in Tuesday’s hearing, encouraged council members and city staffers not to be defensive about the issue but use the Journal Sentinel’s investigation as “an opportunity to help us work toward solutions.”

“This is a problem that needed to be brought up again

and reconsidered because people are dying,” Spiker said. “It demands our attention.”

Part of a ‘broader problem’

The council summoned administrators from the Department of Neighborhood Services and the Milwaukee fire chief to testify before the committee and invited a representative from a landlord association group to answer questions as well.

“The fire is the worst consequence of a broader problem,” said Ald. Robert Bauman.

Bauman said the city’s previous inspection program, which was dismantled in the wake of state legislation in 2016, had been successful. It had been limited to a couple of neighborhoods and was about to be expanded when state lawmakers made changes capping the fees the city could charge and making it cost-prohibitive, he said.

Bauman blasted Heiner Giese, an attorney for the Apartment Association of Southeastern Wisconsin who attended the hearing, for his group’s support of the legislation.

“We were looking at a variety of remedies to preemptively deal with investor-owned properties, to inspect them routinely, regularly and not wait for complaints to come in,” Bauman said. “And, yes, his organization heavily

lobbied against these regulatory structures that we wanted to impose. No question about it.”

Giese questioned the seriousness of the issue and argued the Journal Sentinel was attempting to “inflate” the problem.

He incorrectly told council members that one of the news organization’s online graphics included all types of fires, rather than suspected electrical fires. In fact, the graphic shows only suspected electrical fires.

Moreover, the fires included were derived from a database maintained by the U.S. Fire Administration, which is significantly incomplete because the agency does not require fire departments to report fires, even when deaths occur, the Journal Sentinel found.

Based on those numbers, there is an average of at least 30 suspected electrical fires every year across the city, the investigation found.

“Let’s look and see just how many situations there are where there is a danger and where there has been a fire caused due to something that was a code violation or unreported,” Giese said.

Giese said it would not be practical to thoroughly inspect the electrical systems in all rental properties.

The Journal Sentinel’s investigation found that fires suspected to be started by faulty electrical wiring burned homes in Milwaukee’s distressed

53206 ZIP code at five times the rate of the rest of the city. About 95% of residents in the ZIP code are Black, and more than half are renters. Electrical fires disproportionately ravage rental properties, the Journal Sentinel found.

No formal action was taken Tuesday. The committee plans to continue its discussion on the issue in the coming weeks.

Gov. Tony Evers and state lawmakers have said they are in the midst of considering ways to address the issue as well. Evers called the Journal Sentinel’s findings “gut-wrenching.”

Other elected officials, too, are advocating changes in the wake of the Journal Sentinel investigation, including County Board Supervisor Felesia Martin, whose district includes areas hit hard by electrical fires.

In discussing potential solutions with state officials, Martin said Tuesday she is mindful a balance must be struck but that clearly landlords have a duty.

“I am a believer we can protect the renters as well as meet the needs of the property owners,” she said. “We must have good, thoughtful, caring responses from property owners and have them recognize they have a moral obligation to provide safe and well-maintained properties for rental/leasing. Oversight and stronger regulations must be in place for Milwaukee to keep residents safe.”

Wires and Fires

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Jim Gaillard, vice president of Ezekiel Project Hope, removes boarding from a vacant house owned by the City of Milwaukee.

Activists, officials tackle bad wiring

By Raquel Rutledge and John Diedrich and Daphne Chen,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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

[Read the pdf or click here to read online](#)

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



Jim Gallard, vice president of Ezekiel Project Hope, a housing improvement group, examines an outlet in a home currently owned by the City of Milwaukee.

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."

Wires and Fires
Published January 12, 2022

City launching education campaign aimed at protecting against electrical fires, following Journal Sentinel investigation

By Raquel Rutledge and John Diedrich,
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

As city officials launch an educational campaign aimed at helping Milwaukee renters keep themselves safe from electrical fires, one common council member said the initiative feels like “fluff” and that more needs to be done. Other council members agreed.

“We always put the onus on the people being victimized,” Ald. Khalif Rainey said. “Let’s do something to actually prevent the electrical fires. Let’s get to the crux. I don’t think we

accomplish that by giving (tenants) a pamphlet.”

The city Department of Neighborhood Services and the Milwaukee Fire Department are pairing up to host in-person and recorded informational sessions on electrical systems, detailing things that renters can look for when seeking or leasing an apartment. City officials announced several specifics at a hearing of the city’s zoning and neighborhood development committee Tuesday.

[Read the pdf or click here to read online](#)

The effort will begin later this month on the north side of the city in the 53206 ZIP code, they said, where a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation in August found suspected electrical fires ravage single and two-family rental properties at five times the rate of the rest of the city.

The newspaper's investigation exposed how the fires disproportionately impact Black renters and how the government at all levels does little to prevent it, allowing unscrupulous landlords to continue renting unsafe properties.

A staff member of Cavalier Johnson, the city's acting mayor, told the committee that Johnson became interested in raising awareness about electrical fires following the Journal Sentinel's investigation and that he was looking for creative ways to address the issue using existing resources and city authority.

"We wanted to bring these departments together to help get out into our neighborhoods to make tenants more aware of what their rights are around electrical hazards, things for them to look out for and how they might be most safe," said Kailyn Kenney, policy director for the mayor's office.

The city will have a master electrician at the meetings to provide information and answer questions, according to Erica

Roberts, the city's commissioner of building inspections.

A "Home Safety Checklist" that officials plan to distribute describes a handful of things that tenants can pay attention to, many of which, however, are not typically within the scope of tenants' ability to fix.

One of the tips advises tenants to "Beware of Old and/or Defective Wiring" and encourages them not to overload the circuits.

It doesn't tell renters how, then, they can meet their electrical power demands. The Journal Sentinel investigation revealed how many rental properties in the city have broken outlets or only one or two outlets per room, leaving tenants with few options. The newspaper found that landlords with extensive electrical code violations who do not repair or update their properties are allowed to continue leasing them.

The city's checklist acknowledged what the Journal Sentinel also found: Most electrical fires are predictable and preventable.

"Home emergencies and tragedies don't happen by coincidence or because of bad luck, they happen when they are given an opportunity," the checklist explains.

Ald. Michael Murphy called the educational campaign a "first step" but agreed with

Rainey that much more needs to be done to confront the issue.

Rainey, Murphy and other common council members are exploring ways the city can resurrect an inspection program for rental properties, require landlords to have liability insurance on their properties, and implement fines and other

proactive ways of encouraging negligent landlords to comply with code regulations.

“Regulatory controls and greater inspections are what’s needed to make long-lasting improvements,” Murphy said.

Murphy said he expects the city will have some new policies in place by spring.