http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/home-affordable-s446.jpg



Gov. Evers to spend week explaining proposed investments in affordable housing with visits to communities across the state.

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers this week will travel across the state highlighting initiatives in his 2023-25 biennial budget proposal to promote local housing development and affordable housing solutions, as well as a comprehensive, multi-pronged package of initiatives designed to address the unique challenges facing Wisconsin renters, including renovating existing housing, improving rental unit safety, providing legal aid for evictions, and expanding renter protections.



“Lack of access to affordable housing will hold our families, our workforce, and our economy back, and there is important work ahead of us to ensure that local communities have the resources and infrastructure necessary to support a strong workforce and safe neighborhoods,” said Gov. Evers. “That’s what our budget proposals will do by investing in development to build new, affordable housing, supporting the renovations and revitalizations of existing properties, and bolstering and balancing the landlord-tenant relationship for renters. I hear about this issue everywhere I go in Wisconsin—this is a bipartisan issue that should see bipartisan support, so

let's make it happen."

A breakdown of the governor's plans to invest in safe, affordable housing for Wisconsin workers and families, including promoting local housing development and solutions and ensuring protections for renters, is provided below.

Affordable Housing and Neighborhood Development
The governor is proposing a $150 million investment to continue the successful Neighborhood Investment Fund Grant Program, which was previously supported by federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding and provides grants to local and Tribal governments to invest in community- and regionally-based solutions to bolster the workforce for the future, including building affordable housing, increasing transit and transportation access, expanding child care, and boosting cultural and economic opportunities in neighborhoods. In addition to the $150 million investment in the Neighborhood Investment Fund Grant Program, the governor is also proposing to expand access to affordable housing for the workforce by:

- Establishing an Affordable Workforce Housing Grant program and providing $150 million to provide funding to local municipalities to encourage the development and maintenance of additional affordable workforce housing in the state, including costs for infrastructure projects related to new residential developments, such as water, sidewalks, and sewer. Additionally, municipalities that change zoning criteria in order to support additional affordable housing development would qualify for a bonus;
- Providing $100 million to create a Municipal Home Rehabilitation Program to award grants to municipalities to renovate and restore blighted residential properties with the goal of increasing available, affordable housing options within the municipality;
- Providing $100 million to support a revised and more robust Workforce Housing Rehabilitation Loan Program at the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority. The revised program would provide low-interest and forgivable loans to low- to moderate-income households to renovate or repair their current home, including lead remediation;
- Creating a veteran rental assistance program funded at $1 million in each fiscal year;
- Modifying the State Housing Tax Credit program to help address the need for affordable housing in the state by: (a) increasing the limit on the total amount of state housing tax credits that may be authorized annually by the authority from $42 million to $100 million; and (b) increasing the credit period from six taxable years to 10 taxable years;
- Extending from one year to three years, the allowable extension of the lifespan of a tax incremental finance district for the purpose of using surplus funds for investments in affordable housing projects. Requires joint review board approval for a further two-year extension; and

- Modifying tax incremental finance policies to support the development of workforce housing by increasing the amount of a tax incremental finance district's area that can be comprised of newly platted residential developments to 60 percent instead of the current law of 35 percent.

Safe, Affordable Rental Units and Housing

In addition to the governor's investments to develop affordable housing, Gov. Evers recognizes that renters across the state are facing unique challenges, and the governor's budget proposes several updates to ensure folks have safe, affordable housing, including initiatives to help renovate existing housing, improve rental unit safety, provide legal aid for evictions, and expand renter protections.

The governor's budget proposal builds on his previous investments during the coronavirus pandemic to ensure Wisconsinites continued to have access to secure, stable housing. In 2021, Gov. Evers created the Wisconsin Emergency Rental Assistance (WERA) program, which provided rental and utility payment assistance to lower-income households to prevent evictions and housing instability. The program distributed nearly $250 million to almost 40,000 unique households statewide. With the WERA program having concluded on January 31, Gov. Evers' 2023-25 budget, in addition to efforts to make rental units safe and affordable, proposes a bold $60 million investment into civil legal aid, focusing on creating a statewide right to counsel in eviction proceedings.

In recent years, there have been countless instances of mothers, individuals with disabilities, survivors of domestic and intimate partner violence, low-income individuals and families, young people and students, aging and older adults, and many others that have been wrongfully evicted, taken advantage of by predatory landlords and left to live and raise their families in dangerous and unhealthy living conditions. Electrical fires and impacts on renters in the Milwaukee community, for example, have been the ongoing focus of a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation series.

Additionally, from 2011 to 2019, the Wisconsin Legislature passed more than 100 changes to landlord-tenant law, including eroding the ability of local governments to enact ordinances regulating the landlord-tenant relationship and hindering the ability of cities like Milwaukee to manage problematic landlords.

Therefore, Gov. Evers is also proposing a comprehensive, multi-pronged package of initiatives designed to address the unique challenges facing Wisconsin renters, including renovating existing housing, improving rental unit safety, providing legal aid for evictions, and expanding renter protections, as detailed below.

Upgrade Existing Properties

To ensure Milwaukee residents have access to safe rental properties, Gov. Evers is proposing to provide $5 million to create a Housing Safety Grant Pilot Program for the city of Milwaukee for activities that support the improvement of rental housing safety, including:

- Design and implementation of a central, searchable database for renters that discloses the history of rental properties;
- More robust property inspection programs; and
- Funding to help landlords remedy minor violations following inspections.

Additionally, the governor's budget will provide $7.25 million to create a pilot program for whole-home upgrades within the city of Milwaukee with the goal of reducing energy burdens and creating a healthier living environment for households with lower incomes.

Expand Renter Protections

To ensure communities statewide have the tools they need to keep tenants safe, Gov. Evers is proposing modifying landlord-tenant responsibilities to provide a better balance of rights and protections by allowing local governments to:

- Limit the types of information a landlord may obtain to consider a tenant;
- Impose requirements on inspections, including building out enforcement programs to proactively enforce code violations more earnestly;
- Require a landlord to disclose certain information to tenants;
- Require a landlord to report information to the municipality;
- Impose certain requirements or fees related to the inspection of a rental premises; and
- Impose moratoriums on eviction.

Additionally, Gov. Evers is proposing requiring landlords to disclose to a prospective tenant a building code or housing code violation, regardless of whether the landlord has actual knowledge of the violation, if the violation presents a threat to the prospective tenant's health and safety.

Expand Civil Legal Aid

Gov. Evers is proposing to expand access to civil legal aid, including in eviction proceedings, by providing $60 million over the biennium to create a new civil legal assistance program for low-income individuals, focusing on establishing a statewide right to counsel for evictions. Civil legal services may also include unemployment compensation, consumer law, domestic violence, and health insurance matters. The governor also proposes expanding the civil legal assistance program at the Department of Children and Families by $1 million over the biennium to include providing legal services related to eviction matters.