

Statewide Initiatives Ensure Safe, Affordable Rental Units and Housing

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<http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/apartment-for-rent-s457.jpg>



Governor’s plan improves rental unit safety, rehabilitates blighted properties, expands renter protections.

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers announced yesterday a statewide plan to ensure safe, affordable housing and rental units in his 2023-25 biennial budget proposal. The governor’s plan includes 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.

The announcement Sunday builds on the governor’s 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 concluding, 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.



“The need for affordable housing is one of the issues I hear most about as I travel across our state. Whether it’s rehabilitating blighted properties, expanding renter protections, or improving safety and accountability, housing connects the dots between some of the pressing challenges facing our state,” said Gov. Evers. “Expanding access to safe, stable, and affordable housing is a key part of our work to support kids and families, bolster our state’s workforce and economy,

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and ensure our communities continue to grow and thrive.”

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 recent [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigation](#) series.

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.

A breakdown of the governor’s multi-pronged package of initiatives and investments is provided 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 allow municipalities 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.

Finally, the governor’s proposal will help rehabilitate existing housing while keeping housing affordable by providing \$100 million to create a Municipal Home Rehabilitation Program to award grants to municipalities for renovating and restoring blighted residential properties in order to help increase available affordable housing options in our communities.

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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.

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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.