

# Tenants union wants 'Healthy Homes Guarantee'

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As the city of Springfield looks into creating a licensing and inspection program for rental housing, a group of engaged residents are getting involved. Local tenants' union Springfield Tenants Unite, or STUN, is an organization dedicated to advocating for the well-being of renters in the city. The group's first formal campaign is a demand for a "Healthy Homes Guarantee."

"Right now, Springfield doesn't really have anything to protect tenants' rights to have a safe, healthy, accessible and truly affordable home," said STUN co-founder Alice Barber. "And we know that everybody needs a stable home just to live a healthy life, to be able to work, to thrive and even just survive."

The tenants union has conducted town hall meetings with community members to help determine what they want to see from an inspection and licensing program. Based on this input, STUN is lobbying for a program in which rental properties must pass inspections at least once every five years to maintain rental licensing, inspection results are public information and tenants are protected from landlord retaliation based on complaints or inspection outcomes. The group sent the report and proposal to City Council members last week.

STUN members argue that an inspection program is badly needed in Springfield to ensure housing quality, combat homelessness and maintain the city's existing housing supply. Considering that 60% of Springfield residents rent their homes and affordable housing has become a new focus for City Council, STUN argues that inspections would provide a safety net for the most vulnerable and create structures to keep existing housing in working condition. As buildings are allowed to fall into disrepair, the city's supply of affordable housing drops.

## 'Last alternative to homelessness'

Unlike similar cities, Springfield has no system requiring licensing and inspections to compel landlords to pro-



Members of Springfield Tenants Unite, the local tenants union, attend the Springfield City Council meeting on July 23 at the Springfield Regional Police & Fire Training Center. MARTA MIEZE/SPRINGFIELD NEWS-LEADER

vide safe living conditions. Under the current system, the city only inspects properties when tenants make complaints, but STUN members argue many renters don't know how to make a complaint or fear landlord retaliation.

Daniel Behlmann, a STUN member and social worker, said he's walked clients through the city's reporting process, but has never heard back. He added that the complaint system is hard to find in the first place.

"I've never really even known if it's going anywhere or read by anyone," Behlmann said. "The first couple times I tried to report housing, I couldn't even figure out where I was supposed to go or if I was doing it right or anything."

Behlmann told the News-Leader that he's seen repeat gas leaks, bug infestations, mold, electrical problems and burst pipes going unfixed in the homes of his clients. He emphasized that his clients are "some of the poorest renters renting the cheapest properties" that are "the last alternative to homelessness."

"I think it says a lot about this city and the priorities that the city has when your last resort housing is — at times — unlivable," Behlmann said.

Milea Carbello got involved with STUN in 2022 after asking a friend about resources for getting a landlord to respond to a pest issue. She said the

past three homes she's rented in Springfield have had bed bugs, roaches, or mold. Carbello left the apartment with bedbugs but said her next unit had roaches entering from the ceiling panels.

Cabello said that other tenants in the building had complained and contacted the city. When Carbello went to the city, they referred her to the state Attorney General's Office, which sent a state inspector. Carbello got out of her lease through a consumer complaint filed with the attorney general. When she moved into her next apartment, she found mold.

"(With) my current landlord there's a mold issue, and so I don't want to keep going to new landlords and having these health concerns," Carbello said. "It's the next landlord, what's the next infestation I have to deal with?" Carbello thinks rental inspections would "just stop the cycle."

Carbello and Behlmann argue that property owners have disproportionate power in the market and that renters often can't catch issues before signing a lease, or have to choose between bad options.

"Renters already have so few choices and working families need to move in somewhere or be homeless," Behlmann said. "The property manager is going to make money whether the property is livable or not, because

someone is always going to take it."

In the past year, the city's department of Building Development Services has "overseen the demolition of just over 20 properties by city contractors," BDS Assistant Director Brad Musick said in an email. Based on data provided by Musick, the city has demolished between 19 and 36 buildings each year since 2021.

That number doesn't capture properties demolished by private property owners; Musick said BDS saw 71 wrecking permits completed in the past year including both residential and commercial properties.

Barber and Behlmann argue that an inspection program would create a structure to combat disrepair and maintain Springfield's existing supply of affordable housing.

"Withholding maintenance from what little affordable housing there is accelerates the processes of houses being torn down and condemned and makes the problem of homelessness worse," Behlmann said. "There's already a shortage of housing. We don't need to tear down more houses."

## What STUN wants to see

In addition to calling for rental inspections at least every five years, the tenants union wants the city to protect tenants from displacement and retaliation, with an emphasis on privacy and transparency.

Under STUN's proposal, large apartment complexes could have a small sample of apartments inspected as long as sample units score well on inspections and "the landlord or property manager does not have the power to decide which units are inspected."

The proposed protections would also prohibit landlords from passing the cost of inspections and repairs on to tenants; prohibit them from threatening tenants with eviction in relation to inspections; require landlords to assist tenants with relocation if and when properties are substandard; and require five days' notice for tenants before inspections.

STUN also suggests making inspection records public with an A-F grading system, comparing the plan to public restaurant health inspections.