

HOUSING QUALITY & BLIGHT



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BACKGROUND

As a post-industrial city that lost one-third of its population during the latter part of the 20th century, and which has a high percentage of renters and a high percentage of out-of-town landlords, the twin challenges of housing quality and blight continue to be visible and persistent challenges in the city.

In recent years, the City of Hartford has undertaken a number of initiatives to increase accountability for landlords, increase the responsiveness and effectiveness of housing inspections and enforcement, and dedicate new resources to protecting tenants, promoting housing quality, and combating blight. This report provides a high-level overview of the efforts currently underway.

CODE AND BLIGHT ENFORCEMENT

HOUSING CODE REVISION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RESIDENTIAL LICENSING PROGRAM (RLP):

In 2019, Hartford overhauled its housing code, after extensive consultation and collaboration with community organizations, tenant advocacy groups, and property owners.

Among other provisions, the new code created a proactive Rental Licensing Program for multifamily properties. The RLP includes mandated inspections and compliance with housing and zoning codes, as well as with the State building and fire safety codes. To prevent lead poisoning, the RLP also requires a lead risk assessment certifying the building is lead safe if occupied or will be occupied by a child six years or younger. The RLP represents a fundamental shift in the method of housing enforcement, supplementing a purely reactive response to housing complaints with a proactive and comprehensive licensing requirement. The new code also mandated greater transparency about ownership, to address the persistent problem of unresponsive out-of-town landlords. The code includes heavy penalties for non-compliance.

- The RLP is being implemented in phases, beginning with buildings with 40 or more units, hotels, rooming houses and group living. However, owners of buildings with multiple Housing Code violations can be ordered to apply in advance of their original date.
- The City is currently implementing the first phase of the RLP. Approximately 87% of buildings with 40 or more units have applied for the Rental Licensing Program. The same rate of hotels in the city have applied. The City has received 411 rental license applications and issued 64 licenses, with inspections ongoing.

HOUSING CODE ENFORCEMENT: For years, housing code enforcement in Hartford lacked transparency, organization, and consistent follow up. While still requiring additional process improvement, the City has made significant improvements to the housing code enforcement process, more than doubling the number of inspectors and utilizing new technology to track complaints, increasing the number and speed of inspections and reinspections significantly.

By December 2023, the City had conducted nearly 13,000 housing code inspections and reinspections, roughly triple the number of inspections conducted annually prior to 2022. In addition, the city has become far more aggressive in following through with enforcement actions, assessing more than \$650,000 in fines for non-compliance over the past two years.

- **Referrals for Criminal Prosecution:** In recent years the City has also made more than a dozen referrals to the Office of the State’s Attorney for serious violations of the blight and housing codes. These are cases where the City has issued multiple violations, or violations have been particularly egregious, and property owners have failed to respond to notices of violation.

ANNUAL HOUSING CODE INSPECTIONS AND REINSECTIONS

Year	Cases
2016	5,803
2017	4,419
2018	4,444
2019	4,152
2020	3,359
2021	4,539
2022	8,137
2023	12,793



BLIGHT REMEDIATION: Over the last eight years, hundreds of blighted properties have been remediated or renovated, using a combination of tools, including a stronger and more consistent enforcement regime. Similar to housing code enforcement, the City has added inspection capacity and dramatically increased the number of inspections over time. To date in 2023, the City has conducted more than 800 blight inspections and reinspections — more than 10 times the number of inspections conducted in 2016 and 2017.

- **Anti-Blight Ordinance:** In 2017, the City enacted a new Anti-Blight ordinance that strengthened its enforcement ability while encouraging property owners “Fix It Up, Pay It Up, or Give It Up,” which is a model of code enforcement successfully used around the country to fight blight.
- **Blight Remediation Team:** Early in the Bronin administration, the City created a dedicated Blight Remediation Team. Today, that team includes an enforcement officer who writes violations of the blight and property maintenance code, a senior project manager, and three inspectors who are cross-trained as blight and building inspectors. This is a distinct team from housing code enforcement, which has significantly expanded in recent years.
- **Other Initiatives:** There are several other blight-related initiatives, including the creation and work for the Hartford Land Bank, and the City’s support for organizations like SINA and NINA, which are discussed in the housing and economic development report.

ANNUAL BLIGHT INSPECTIONS AND REINSPCTIONS

Year	Cases
2016	60
2017	67
2018	280
2019	401
2020	261
2021	187
2022	322
2023	863

PROBLEM PROPERTIES WORKING GROUP: In 2021, the City began convening a Problem Properties Working Group with representatives from multiple City departments to address recurring health and safety issues at specific properties in Hartford. In response to repeated violations of State or city codes or serious criminal activity, the working group directs a coordinated, multi-department response that leverages all of the City’s inspection and enforcement tools to address systemic issues affecting residents’ health and wellbeing. Depending on the specific issue, the City can require a property owner to pay for police presence, issue code violations, and issue fines and liens when issues aren’t corrected. The end goal is to identify and then use the specific tool(s) that will maximize the likelihood that health and safety issues don’t reoccur and residents have the living experience they deserve.

- **Example:** A single out of state LLC owned a series of residential buildings in the Gillett Street area that were in severe disrepair and frequently the site of criminal activity, including common area drug use. The owner was non-responsive to housing and police officials, and so the City required the owner to pay for a special police detail for two months. When the owner did not pay, the City covered the cost through its emergency repair fund, placed a priority lien for the cost of the police detail and emergency housing code repairs, and then began a lien foreclosure. At that point, the lender involved in financing the properties came forward, and the owner agreed to transfer the deeds to the lender in lieu of the foreclosure process. Since then, the lender has hired new management and is working with the City to repair the buildings and enhance residents’ safety.

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY: In recent years, the City of Hartford has led the advocacy effort to support key changes in state law that strengthen municipalities’ ability to fight blight and improve housing. Some key changes include:

- **Reforming Notice Requirements:** During the most recent state legislative session, the State reformed onerous notice requirements related to housing code violations. Previously, municipalities were required to make a wide range of notifications when issuing housing code violations, and inadequate notice could jeopardize enforcement actions. The change to state law streamlined initial notification requirements, making it easier for cities and towns to hold delinquent and unresponsive property owners accountable.
- **Authorizing Funding for Revolving Loan Fund for Receivership:** The City of Hartford successfully advocated for the reestablishment of a state revolving loan fund to support housing repairs under court-ordered receivership. In 2023, the State authorized \$50 million in bond funding for the loan fund, which has yet to be allocated by the State Bond Commission.



TENANT PROTECTION

PARTNERSHIP WITH GREATER HARTFORD LEGAL AID:

- In 2022, Hartford allocated \$750,000 over three years to Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA) to support GHLA's representation of tenants in housing disputes with landlords. While GHLA had previously represented tenants in eviction proceedings, this new partnership allows GHLA to represent residents in cases concerning housing quality. GHLA also uses the funding to engage with community organizations who work with tenants, helping them expand their knowledge of tenants' legal rights and the legal process.
- In 2023, the City of Hartford allocated \$1,000,000 to establish an Emergency Rental Assistance program administered by Greater Hartford Legal Aid (GHLA). Funds may be disbursed to Hartford residents who are facing eviction, homelessness and/or poor housing conditions — and to be used for security deposit, first month's rent, or back rent owed. A tenant may be granted up to \$4,000, with the goal of providing meaningful support to as many residents-in-need as possible.

REPAIRS FOR HOMEOWNERS & RENTERS

REVOLVING LOAN FUND FOR EMERGENCY HOUSING

REPAIRS: In 2022, Hartford announced a \$1 million revolving loan fund to provide emergency funding for extreme and urgent repairs to residential buildings. When housing conditions endanger children, seniors, or disabled residents, the City can now directly engage and fund contractors to perform critical repairs. The landlord must pay back the cost of the repairs to the City, but the city's initial funding ensures that emergency repairs are expedited for the safety of vulnerable residents.

- **Funding:** The program was funded through a combination of city general fund revenue and American Rescue Plan funding. It currently has a balance of \$817,000.

SENIOR HOMEOWNER REHABILITATION PROGRAM: In 2023, Hartford launched a \$1.25 million forgivable loan fund for Hartford seniors who own their homes and want to make exterior repairs, aimed at seniors who make up to 80% of the area median income. The program provided loans of up to \$10,000 each for a range of eligible repairs including improving handicap accessibility, fixing porches and decks, installing railings, fixing driveways, and more.

- **Implementation:** The City received strong interest, with nearly 200 inquiries to Housing Division staff, and anticipates awarding nearly all of the funding allocated soon.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **SUPPORT AND MONITOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RESIDENTIAL LICENSING PROGRAM:** The RLP represents the most significant change in housing enforcement in decades, and is the most proactive and comprehensive licensing and inspection regime in Connecticut. Effective implementation of the RLP requires a substantial commitment of staffing and resources, particularly during initial implementation. It will be important to ensure that the phased implementation of the RLP proceeds on schedule, with careful attention to submission deadlines, notice deadlines, inspection and reinspection timetables, and coordination between the multiple departments and divisions responsible for certifying compliance.
- **CONTINUE TO IMPROVE HOUSING CODE ENFORCEMENT:** The City has made meaningful improvements to the housing code enforcement process, but more remains to be done. The incoming administration should maintain the significant staffing expansion and continue to carefully track and monitor housing complaints, to ensure that reinspections and appropriate enforcement actions are pursued in a timely and consistent manner.
- **MAKE AGGRESSIVE USE OF RECEIVERSHIP:** Receivership can be an important and powerful tool for taking control of properties with the most egregious violations. The City should continue to look for opportunities to utilize receivership, and should advocate for the allocation of the \$50 million receivership revolving loan fund authorized in the 2023 state budget.
- **CONTINUE TO HOLD LANDLORDS ACCOUNTABLE USING THE NEW TOOLS AT HAND:** With more than 75% of housing occupied by renters, the City has a fundamental responsibility to hold landlords accountable for providing safe and healthy dwelling units. The City of Hartford must continue to send a clear and strong message that property owners who do not fulfill their obligations will face real and reliable consequences, including hefty fines and criminal prosecution, where warranted.