

## CASE STUDY

# Boston: Creating Safer and Healthier Living Conditions for All Renters

Healthy Rental Housing policies, also known as proactive rental inspections, ensure that homes in our communities meet basic safety standards from good plumbing to lead-free paint. Proactive rental inspections, aided by rental registry programs, can prevent injuries and help detect life-threatening toxins like mold and asbestos. When communities have Healthy Rental Housing policies, families are protected from harm and can feel safer and healthier at home.

### BACKGROUND

Several factors contributed to the creation of Boston's Healthy Rental Housing policies in 2013. Given the city's old housing stock, substandard rentals were not uncommon. This was an issue especially for low-income renters, immigrants, and communities of color. Many of Boston's college students also rented substandard off-campus housing due to their limited budgets and the limited availability of on-campus housing.

In 2013, a student died in an apartment fire due to a faulty fire alarm system and an inadequate number of exits for her attic apartment that was rented to her illegally (Altman & Altman, 2014). The student's unfortunate death caught the attention of community leaders, housing advocates, and city officials who determined that responding to building code violations reactively was not enough to protect the well-being of Boston's renters. In response, the city established a rental registry program so that Boston's Inspection Services Department (ISD) could proactively inspect rental units for code violations. Up until that point,

98% of ISD's more than 20,000 annual inspections were in response to complaints (Conti, 2012).

As the policy was developed, two areas of contention emerged—the scope of which rental buildings would be required to have proactive rental inspections and the cost of the registration and inspections to landlords. Community-based organizations advocated for a wide scope while landlord associations advocated for omitting smaller landlords, as well as lower fees.

### POLICY OVERVIEW

Ultimately, the Boston City Council approved an ordinance that established the city's Healthy Rental Housing policies which mandates that all non-exempt units have interior and exterior inspections at least once every five years. The city worked with landlord associations to create a fee exemption for owner-occupied units in rental buildings with six or fewer units (roughly 15% of Boston's rental units) (Conti, 2012). Additionally, the ordinance was designed to prioritize properties that chronically fail to correct viola-

“Tenants shouldn’t have to complain to the city in order to ensure that their units meet minimum health and safety standards. This revised ordinance allows us to proactively manage issues before they become hazardous to occupants.”

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Brian Swett, former Chief of Environment & Energy

tions (Conti, 2012). The city designed a registration fee structure that makes the Healthy Rental Housing policies revenue-neutral without being overly burdensome for landlords.

## OUTCOMES

Over 133,000 of Boston’s rental units have been added to Boston’s rental registry between 2014 through 2022, which represents roughly 75% of all of Boston’s rental units. Between October 2021 and October 2022, over 7,500 rental units were proactively inspected and over 9,500 inspections were conducted (some units required multiple re-inspections). In FY22, the program generated \$2.38M in revenue, including \$1.9M from registration fees and \$480K for inspection fees (ISD, 2022).

The policy primarily benefits tenants who would not normally make complaints, including those who fear retaliation, are not sure how to report code violations, do not have time to work through city processes, or do not know they are living in unhealthy conditions.

A variety of best practices and lessons learned emerged as Boston designed and implemented its Healthy Rental

Housing policies. Ensuring that inspection data is collected electronically helps city staff to evaluate data more efficiently. Tailored exemptions, like those for smaller landlords and newer buildings, help the city to allocate resources efficiently. Last, establishing a reasonable fee structure that results in a revenue-neutral program proved crucial for getting landlord associations on board while being fiscally responsible. Establishing and implementing an intentional rental inspection policy has helped to foster safer and healthier living conditions for all renters.

## REFERENCES

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