



## **Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods (RON)\_Housing Survey**

### **Context**

In 2013, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council (MMFHC) won a lawsuit against Wells Fargo bank, which was found guilty of redlining. This funding supported the development of the Housing Survey and the RON coalition. The Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) had been working with residents on Housing Surveys for decades and was the lead organization in the development of the RON group. Washington Park Partners, Clarke Square Neighborhood Initiative/Layton Boulevard West Neighbors and Riverworks Development Corp were trained by SPCA and began conducting housing surveys in their respective neighborhoods.

Although the neighborhood groups have somewhat different methods that reflect specific neighborhood dynamics and available resources, they all work from the same general survey structure that notes needed repairs; lead spring and fall surveys; send letters to property owners; and participate in a meeting with landlords at the Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS) tower. The data collected from all 4 groups is entered into an application called Compass which is connected to the City of Milwaukee Master Property (MProp) data. This provides information related to owner name and address, tax delinquency, open violations from the DNS, and other useful data.

At the end of 2016, funding was no longer available through MMFHC. However, members of the RON group agreed that the effects and outcomes of both the housing survey process and the collaboration across sectors were valuable enough to continue this work without financial support. The group continued to meet monthly throughout 2017 and the neighborhood groups conducted the Housing Survey. The monthly RON meetings have regular representation from the City Attorney's Office, the Department of Neighborhood Services, Legal Action of Wisconsin, Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council, Community First, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Milwaukee, the Mayor's Office, Data You Can Use, Marquette University and the four neighborhood groups. More recently, Milwaukee Habitat for Humanity has been in attendance; both Senator Lena Taylor and State Representative Evan Goyke have attended past meetings and remain in contact.

- The objectives of the Housing Survey are to hold absentee landlords accountable for the condition of their properties; to support sustainable homeownership by offering resources to owner occupants; and to improve the conditions of Milwaukee's housing stock and neighborhoods by triaging nuisance properties.
- The objective of the Reclaiming Our Neighborhoods coalition is to work together in the development and implementation of strategies and policies that improve living conditions for all Milwaukee residents by sharing data and knowledge from a variety of housing-related fields.

### **Overview of the Housing Survey Process**

1. Identify the nature and scope of the problems to be corrected.
2. Systematically identify and document properties in need of work.
3. Take an action to have property owners correct the issues.
4. Re-check problem properties to determine whether problems have been corrected.
5. Set priorities for intervention on uncorrected problems.
6. Establish an enforcement plan with City Officials (DNS, City Attorney), community organizations and residents.
7. Conduct follow-up and document results.

## Methodology

The first Housing Survey is conducted in spring, usually in May. Residents and volunteers are trained on the survey process with an aim to establish consistency and objectivity. Properties are examined from the exterior and critical issues in need of repairs are noted on the survey. In addition, a grade between “A” and “F” is assigned. Homes are only noted in the survey when the issues stand out from the street. Letters are sent to owners. Owner occupants are referred to appropriate resources. Landlords are asked to make repairs and owners of vacant/boarded properties are asked for plans and timelines.

The Fall Re-Survey, usually in conducted in October or November, surveys those properties identified in the spring. Properties are noted as being “Complete”, “In Progress” or “No Progress” and updated letter grades are assigned to reflect this.

Organizations and residents conduct follow-up strategies. These include: referral to repair programs and events like Resource Fairs; meeting with landlords; meeting with tenants; working with the City of Milwaukee and other agencies to target non-compliant landlords who have not responded to inquiries.

## 2018 Pilot Method

The 4 neighborhood groups select one census tract that falls completely within their survey geography. Data You Can Use pulls a random sample of 100 residential properties from each tract. All sample homes are surveyed using a detailed survey instrument that assesses level of repair needed (Major/Minor/No Repair/Not Observable/Not Applicable) for each element of the home (ie roof, chimney, gutters, porch, paint, window, etc). A group of core volunteers, most of them members of the RON coalition, are trained using materials approved by the neighborhood groups. Each volunteer will take a portion of homes in each neighborhood, so that every volunteer will experience the differences/similarities of housing stock. These data will be entered into a Google form and then entered into Compass. Neighborhood groups will send letters to property owners. The same volunteers will conduct the fall re-survey.

The aim of this pilot process is to have a consistent sample throughout all 4 neighborhoods and to maximize objectivity in the survey process. It will also be valuable to get feedback from volunteers that are active in RON but haven’t necessarily participated in the survey process before. The neighborhood groups can conduct the rest of the survey in a way that matches their needs and capacity. The follow-up activities will remain the same.

## Impact of Housing Survey

- The survey was instrumental in developing and promoting the **Compliance Loan Program (CLP)** through the Department of Neighborhood Services. It was noted across neighborhoods that owner occupants were struggling to keep up with repairs and had open violations through the DNS. Some of these homeowners were facing high monthly fees for not being able to afford repairs, a situation that increased the risk of tax foreclosure and did nothing to make the needed home improvements. The RON group determined that a different approach was needed to assist these homeowners. The CLP offers rehab assistance to low-income owner occupants who have open orders from the DNS. This not only prevents fines from compiling, but also ensures that critical repairs are made which allows the homeowner to remain safely in their home and keeps another vacant property off the City’s inventory. In 2017, the CLP won the Innovative Approach to Problem Solving award from the Public Policy Forum and RON members presented for a workshop at the Reclaiming Vacant Properties conference in May 2018 as a strategy for other cities facing similar issues. Since its inception in 2014, the Compliance

Loan Program has completed 125 projects and invested \$1,603,909 to date (May 2018); there are several additional loans approved and under construction.

- **Resident volunteers** participating in the survey are empowered by being part of a process to improve their neighborhood by identifying problem properties and taking action to resolve these issues.
- The survey connects homeowners with **home rehabilitation resources** and offers staff at the neighborhood organizations an opportunity to communicate with residents about the challenges homeowners face in maintaining their properties—i.e. health issues with someone in the home: informal ownership situations such as when the deed is still in a deceased parent’s name; credit issues; high Loan to Value ratio that makes obtaining a bank loan difficult if not impossible; etc.
- It supports better **organizational understanding of the housing stock and other conditions in neighborhood**— i.e. problem areas, blocks or properties that demonstrate resident pride and suggest opportunities to build off of these strengths; specific repairs that need to be made in a geographic area—shingles, porches, windows, etc? Organizations are ‘proactive experts’ of the neighborhood.
- It creates of a **unique database** that is connected to City of Milwaukee MPROP data. Because the neighborhoods involved cover a large geography in different parts of the city, the data can be reviewed across scales.
- Identifies problematic landlords, financial institutions and LLCs that own several properties in one or more neighborhoods, **identifying trends that need to be addressed**.
- The RON coalition demonstrates how **deliberate collaboration** across sectors can increase the effectiveness, capacity and scope of the organizations involved.
- The survey documents and identifies **trends over time**. Increases in owner occupant properties identified, board-ups or ‘zombie’ properties, ownership categories i.e. individual landlords, LLC’s, financial institutions, City of Milwaukee properties are examples. This helps us to identify where to focus our efforts and target our resources.

### **Outcomes of the 2016 Survey**

The following is a summary of improvements resulting from the Riverworks and the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) 2016 Housing Surveys. Property owners identified in the survey were asked to make repairs. The outcomes are as follows:

#### **Riverworks**

- Overall 35% of all properties showed progress – 23% were in progress and 12% showed complete progress
- Repairs showed improvements from spring to fall, the most significant were:
  - Shingles were down 20%
  - Soffit/Fascia down 20%
  - Broken windows were down 50%
  - Peeling paint was down 30%
  - Porch floors/Supports and peeling paint were down 28%
- One third (33%) of investor owners with no DNS orders showed some or complete progress between the spring and fall survey. This suggests that our intervention to encourage investors to make repairs had a noticeable impact.

- Homes with “A, B and C” grades went up between spring and fall, while “D and F” grades went down.
  - A: up 100%
  - B: up 33%
  - C: up 17%
  - D: down 18%
  - F: down 10%
  
- The number of boarded properties went down from 71 in spring to 63 in fall, an 11% reduction.

### **Sherman Park**

- Overall 37% of all properties showed progress – 27% were in progress and 10% showed complete progress
  
- Repairs showing significant improvement:
  - Soffit/Fascia down 35%
  - Gutters/Downspouts down 20%
  - Peeling paint was down 28%
  - Porch rails down 22%
  - Porch ceilings down 25%
  
- 39% of investor owners with no DNS orders showed some or complete progress between the spring and fall survey.
  
- Homes with “A and B” grade went up, “C” grade went down by 1, while “D and F” grades went down considerably. Overall properties improved their grade.
  - A: up from 0 to 3
  - B: up from 0 to 26
  - C: went down 5%
  - D: down 32%
  - F: down 23%
  
- The number of boarded properties went down by 20%.