



Fire/Code Inspections Task Force

Monday, January 12, 2015, 2:30-4:00 p.m., City Hall, rm 24

Discussion Document

Overall, there are several key things the City can do to improve the safety of rental housing stock:

- Provide public education
- Hold landlords and tenants accountable
- Reinstate routine inspections of relevant housing stock by fire station personnel
- Implement a risk-based prioritization for inspections while also increasing the number of inspectors with better training, including cross-training, and other City staff working in the field who can assist in identifying potentially dangerous housing safety situations.
- Designate a Housing Safety Official with authority over housing safety who will ensure communication, coordination, accountability, consistency, training, and technology utilization across relevant City departments and evaluation of the effectiveness of the programs.
- Use existing technology more efficiently

In addition, when the State Fire Marshal's report and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms' evaluation are released, we will examine their findings to consider additional or different recommendations.

1. **Risk-based prioritization** – There are numerous municipalities using this approach to ensure safe housing and allocate inspections and enforcement resources according to a risk score generated by several variables, possibly including delinquent taxes, vacancy, foreclosure, complaints/violations, and calls for service. Public Safety Solutions Inc. (PSS) conducted an extensive and thorough review of the entire Portland Fire Department in 2013 and also recommends this approach.

What are variables that should be included to create the risk score?

- a. Fix It Portland – complaints via web, smart phone app (demo today)
- b. Urban Insight – internal software used for inspections and code enforcement functions across the City, along with other municipal functions (demo today)
- c. Searchable database on City web site

2. **Public Education** – Clearly, this is the best means of prevention. The Fire Department will take the lead on this, by reinstating school-based programs, targeting college students and 20-somethings, landlords, and other tenants. This was a major focus in PSS's recommendations around prevention.

What are venues and approaches for hard-to-reach target populations?

- a. Chief Lamoria recently named Keith Gautreau as Assistant Chief for Fire Prevention.
- b. Chief Gautreau is designing a multi-pronged education plan with assistance from the State Fire Marshal's office, Deputy Chief Jay Fleming from the Boston Fire Department, and the National Fire Protection Association.

3. Enforcement – There are many opportunities to clarify and strengthen the enforcement process, some of which require minor revisions to City Code.

What are your thoughts about the following approaches? What would you add or remove?

- a. Enforce existing requirement for landlords to register with the City annually.
 - i. Contact information, type of property, insurance company information
 - ii. Annual fee
 - iii. Fines for failure to register, provision of inaccurate information
- b. Move to immediate ticket and fine for violations. The current process of sending a letter and giving 32 days to address the violations, then sending a second letter and another 32 days is inefficient and ineffective.
- c. Also enforce existing re-inspection fees (\$75).
- d. Dedicate legal resources – one day per month dedicated to housing-related issues. The City should evaluate to ensure this is adequate and consider the feasibility of the housing court model used in other municipalities. A new City attorney was recently hired to focus on these issues in addition to Police Department’s Neighborhood Prosecutor.

4. Technology – With minimal to no new resources, the City can standardize and streamline inspection reporting processes. The PSS study noted the need for improved use of technology in the inspections functions.

What else should the City consider for technological improvements?

- a. Fire Department will move to Urban Insight.
- b. Develop and implement standardized checklists for inspectors to use in the field. *These checklists should be shared with landlords and tenants through public education.*
- c. Consider having tablets for inspectors to use in the field, greatly diminishing the amount of time required to cite an owner for violations and follow up with enforcement.
- d. Provide online capability for annual landlord registration.

5. Internal Training – The internal phase of this Task Force’s work illuminated several areas for improvement in staff training.

Are there other opportunities for internal training?

- a. Inspectors across relevant departments require additional training and cross-training to improve inspections.
- b. All relevant staff require additional training to use Urban Insight and to ensure thorough documentation of all inspections.
- c. Other City staff who work in the field will be trained on the checklist so that they can easily report any concerns for follow up.

6. Staffing – PSS’ study used a metric to recommend 10 new FTEs in the Fire Department alone to ensure widespread inspections. We believe we can achieve the intended goal of improving our ability to ensure the safety of Portland’s rental housing stock using a different approach. In order to ensure implementation of these recommendations and to evaluate whether there are indeed ensuing improvements to the city’s rental housing stock, the following new positions are requested.

- a. Housing Safety Official (title TBD) who reports to the City Manager, convenes and coordinates all relevant departments to address issues with a property and decide actions to be taken.
 - i. Three additional inspectors, all cross-trained in building code and life safety code, who will report to the Housing Safety Official.
 - ii. One administrative support position, who will coordinate the risk-based assessment of all rental properties and the online database, who also reports to the Housing Safety Official.
- b. An Education Officer at the Fire Department to implement the additional training needed.