

Emergency Housing and Public Health Measures to Combat the Spread of COVID-19

Statement by: Milwaukee Autonomous Tenants Union

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The COVID-19 pandemic poses grave public health risks to all Milwaukee residents, but especially to those who suffer from housing insecurity, homelessness, and those in jails and prisons. The Milwaukee Autonomous Tenants Union believes that housing is a human right and that, especially in this time, homelessness and housing insecurity endanger not just those who suffer directly from these problems but all of society. If people do not have access to housing and to the resources necessary to maintain their health and hygiene, they are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and of spreading it to others.

We therefore demand that the City of Milwaukee take the following measures to protect the health and safety of all its citizens:

A moratorium on all evictions for the length of the COVID-19 pandemic

Many workers will suffer loss of pay during the pandemic, which for many will make it impossible to pay their rent. We demand that no filing or serving of evictions during the time of this shut down shall take place due to the pandemic. Evictions increase the risks to the health and safety of tenants and to the public at large and should therefore be canceled for the duration of the pandemic.

A freeze on all utility bills and shutoffs

Access to water and electricity are essential for tenants to practice good hygiene and keep themselves and those around them healthy and disease-free. But if there is no work, and no financial support, there is no money to pay for bills. A freeze on utility bill payments and any utility shut-offs should therefore be canceled for the duration of the pandemic.

Secure housing for all people in Milwaukee

Milwaukee's homeless population is at risk in the COVID-19 pandemic. The CDC guidelines calling for social distancing are impossible to follow under conditions of housing insecurity. Homeless shelters must be well-staffed, hygienic, and must work effectively and closely with public health officials and hospitals in the area. This is a vital necessity not only for the vulnerable homeless population but also in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. The City should take immediate steps to ensure that all homeless shelters and services are clean, safe, and able to handle all the medical needs of those using their services. Last year, Alderman Bob Bauman called for the opening of a downtown hotel to house the homeless. The need for housing the homeless has only grown more dire with the current pandemic. Milwaukee must clean and open vacant homes and hotels to house the homeless immediately!

Financial assistance for tenants and workers

The COVID-19 outbreak is causing financial distress among workers and residents across the City, which represents a public health risk because sick workers may feel the need to go in to work in order to continue receiving a paycheck to provide for their basic needs. We demand that all Milwaukee tenants be guaranteed an income. Without such a guarantee, asymptomatic carriers will continue to spread the disease and overwhelm hospital capacity. The City needs to step in and relieve as much of this financial distress as possible in order to safeguard public health. Options include a temporary rent freeze, universal basic income, mandatory paid sick leave for all workers (not just some, as in the currently proposed federal legislation), and financial assistance to tenants - ideally a combination that includes an immediate rent freeze and some form of payment to all tenants.

Moratorium on Arrests by Milwaukee Police Department

Release all pretrial detainees and people in jail who are not immediate danger to themselves or others. Proper treatment for those who are already sick, whether inmates or correctional officers (who are currently working while sick). Incarcerating people in confined spaces without proper sanitation creates potential epicenters for the disease. The only way to prevent the rapid sweep of the novel coronavirus through prisons, detention centers, and eventually the entire population is to reduce crowding and improve public health conditions in prisons and detention centers, for the health and safety of all Wisconsinites.

Free Healthcare to Combat Coronavirus

All medical services should be free at the point of service. We need nothing less than to treat the hundreds of thousands of southeastern Wisconsinites who will need hospitalization and intensive care and to suppress the spread of the novel coronavirus. Without comprehensive medical coverage, Milwaukee tenants will be discouraged from seeking treatment for COVID-19, which could lead to those with mild symptoms avoiding medical treatment and spreading the disease. The County and City should call on Governor Evers to assist in this process using his emergency powers as laid out in Wisconsin Statute 323(12)(4).