

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BLOCK by BLOCK

MILWAUKEE'S AMANI HOUSING PILOT AS A MODEL FOR
HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION



WISCONSIN

POLICY FORUM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past several years, the Wisconsin Policy Forum has devoted considerable research attention to affordable housing issues in Milwaukee. While that research has analyzed the city's affordable housing efforts and challenges through a systemic and citywide lens, this report narrows in on one neighborhood initiative: the Amani Housing Pilot.

The pilot was launched in 2019 and aims to take a comprehensive and community-engaged approach to improve housing conditions on one block in Milwaukee's Amani neighborhood. It involves partnerships between neighborhood residents, several community organizations, and the Northwestern Mutual Foundation and was created with the intention of helping to guide future housing efforts in Amani, other Milwaukee neighborhoods, and potentially other cities.

This report lays out the pilot's objectives, the partner organizations involved and their roles, and the project's financing. We identify the pilot's accomplishments to date, key challenges that have arisen, and important lessons learned. Our analysis involved both quantitative data collection and a series of interviews with 15 stakeholders. The interviews, in particular, shed light on the pilot's strengths, weaknesses, and potential for replication. We do *not* attempt to evaluate the success of the pilot, which is still in progress. Our primary objective, rather, is to present a case study that can help to inform and strengthen similar projects in the future.

The Amani Housing Pilot set specific goals for improving the housing stock on the 2900 block of N. 26th Street and additional objectives reflecting the pilot's multi-pronged approach to neighborhood revitalization. Those were tied to on-site construction training for residents (including those with criminal records), capacity building of community organizations and local contractors, housing education for neighborhood residents, and efforts to boost homeownership. By improving every home, eliminating housing vacancies, and providing opportunities for residents to connect with one another, the pilot also aimed to build community pride and strengthen relationships among neighbors.

In the last two years, pilot leaders have experienced a number of challenges but have made substantial progress toward those goals. One formerly vacant, foreclosed home has been completely renovated while two others will be finished in 2022, creating three affordable homeownership opportunities for community residents. Smaller repairs and improvements have been made to 16 other houses on the block, while 35 adults and more than 20 youth have been trained in construction. Several community events have been hosted on the pilot block to bring residents of the block and larger neighborhood together.



Another important outcome is the experience gained and lessons learned by the partner organizations, which should bolster similar efforts on future blocks. Indeed, the partners plan to replicate the pilot next on two blocks simultaneously (the 2800 block of N. 22nd and N. 23rd streets) and eventually to scale up the effort further, with the ultimate goal of improving every block in Amani.

Overall, the Amani Housing Pilot's distinct design shows the promise of concentrating housing revitalization efforts within a targeted geography and layering in goals that extend beyond housing quality to areas like workforce and community development. It also illustrates the complexities of such a model and the many skills and resources needed to make it successful. In light of that finding, a potential need emerges to consider changes to city programs and services and to build capacity for this type of work among community organizations in Milwaukee if the pilot is to be replicated and brought to a larger scale.

Key takeaways from our analysis include the following:

Resident engagement and a strong understanding of the city of Milwaukee's housing programs are critical to housing and neighborhood revitalization efforts like the Amani pilot. Capacity building may be required to foster this work in Milwaukee neighborhoods.

When the pilot launched, Dominican Center (a community organization based in Amani) was designated as a lead organization in light of its deep roots in the neighborhood, and Amani United (a neighborhood association) also was engaged to play a guiding role. Despite this foundation, pilot leaders found many residents initially were skeptical of both the pilot and the idea of seeking assistance from the city of Milwaukee. It took a great deal of outreach and the relocation of Ezekiel CDC (another lead partner in the pilot overseeing construction and training) to the block to build relationships with neighborhood residents and strengthen participation.

If the pilot is replicated on other blocks of Amani, it likely will require a similar investment of time in community outreach and engagement involving the same or a similar set of partner organizations. To replicate the pilot in other neighborhoods, anchor organizations like Dominican Center will be needed. This could make it more difficult to extend this strategy to neighborhoods that do not have an obvious organization that is willing and able to play that anchor role.

The complexity of the city's HUD-funded housing programs has been another major challenge for the pilot. Those programs are subject to stringent federal and local requirements, which posed a particular challenge given that the Amani partners had limited experience with them before the pilot began. This would likely be an issue in other neighborhoods as well, as several of our interviewees noted that few community organizations in Milwaukee have experience working with the city's housing programs.

Consequently, to the extent that philanthropic organizations who are active in community revitalization efforts in other neighborhoods wish to pursue the Amani Housing Pilot model in those



communities, they may first need to invest in new anchor organizations and/or in capacity building for existing organizations as a precursor to such efforts.

Financing a block-by-block housing revitalization effort with related workforce development objectives requires careful pre-planning and development of either multiple or flexible funding sources, and most likely both.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of the pilot has been its financing. Pilot leaders hoped to tap available city of Milwaukee housing programs and funding to pay for a large portion of the work, but for a variety of reasons, almost all pilot expenses have been covered by Northwestern Mutual (NM).

One major reason is that most city home repair programs are supported by federal funding sources that are restricted to certain uses, which did not align well with the pilot's multi-faceted design and emphasis on worker training. Another is that pilot leaders initiated home repair work on the block using flexible funding provided by NM before securing available (but more restrictive) funding from city programs and before working with block residents to complete required paperwork.

Given the multiple objectives and complexities associated with the Amani Housing Pilot, extensive replication may require the creation of flexible sources of financial support by both philanthropic organizations and the city. Barring the establishment of such support, the pilot demonstrates the need to develop a business plan, secure funding sources that can cover each component of the plan (community engagement, training, construction, and administration), employ those resources at the right time in a project's evolution, and carefully document their use.

Pilot leaders and block residents found it very difficult to access city housing programs and funding, which suggests the need for the city of Milwaukee to simplify access to its home repair programs and the process of applying for them.

To facilitate the pilot, the city's Community Development Grants Administration staff convened leaders from other city agencies to identify home repair programs for which each homeowner or landlord on the pilot block could potentially qualify. When it became evident that the pilot's emphasis on worker training made it incompatible with most existing city home repair programs, city staff established new eligibility criteria on a special basis for two programs to make it easier for homeowners and landlords on the block to qualify for assistance.

Despite this assistance, pilot leaders and block residents found the city's fragmented housing programs and lack of a universal application process for housing assistance confusing and frustrating. Streamlining those program offerings and simplifying the process of applying for them could help to improve public access. The city also could consider establishing a housing office with navigators available to assist residents (and community organizations like those involved in the pilot) in accessing city housing programs.

Community leaders and organizations in other Milwaukee neighborhoods can learn a great deal from the Amani Housing Pilot. We hope our analysis of this case study sheds light on one promising model for housing and neighborhood revitalization and that city, community, and philanthropic leaders will use our analysis and findings should they pursue opportunities to replicate, modify, and improve it for future blocks.

