



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

For release:  
Dec. 10, 2021

**Contact:** Mark Sommerhauser, Communications Director & Researcher  
(608) 982-0324 or [msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org](mailto:msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org)

## **Milwaukee's Amani Housing Pilot: A Model for Neighborhood Revitalization?**

*Measures to address financing, implementation hurdles could help inform future projects*

Future efforts to replicate an initiative that is improving housing in one Milwaukee neighborhood likely would require extensive planning and resident engagement and flexible funding sources, and could benefit from streamlined access to city of Milwaukee home repair programs, according to a new report.

Launched in 2019, the Amani Housing Pilot is a comprehensive, community-engaged effort to improve housing conditions on a single block of Milwaukee's Amani neighborhood. Involving partnerships between neighborhood residents, community organizations, and the Northwestern Mutual Foundation, it was created to help guide future housing efforts in Amani and other neighborhoods in Milwaukee and beyond.

This report, commissioned by the Northwestern Mutual Foundation, lays out the pilot's objectives, accomplishments to date, key challenges that have arisen, and lessons learned. Using quantitative data collection and interviews with stakeholders, we seek not to evaluate the success of the pilot -- which is still in progress -- but rather, to present a case study that can help inform and strengthen similar efforts in the future.

### **A concentrated approach**

Focusing on the 2900 block of N. 26th Street in Milwaukee, the Amani Housing Pilot sought foremost to improve its housing stock. Three vacant homes are being fully renovated, while smaller repairs and upgrades are being made to many other homes that are currently occupied, including code violation corrections, roof and lead pipe replacements, electrical services, exterior improvements, and more.

Other key pilot objectives 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. The pilot also aims to build community pride and strengthen relationships among neighbors.

In the last two years, pilot leaders have experienced significant challenges but also made substantial progress. Overall, the report finds the Amani Housing Pilot shows the promise of concentrating housing revitalization efforts in a targeted geography while also working toward broader goals like workforce and community development. It also illustrates the complexities of such a model and the many elements needed for it to succeed.

## **Financing challenges**

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

One reason is that most city home repair programs are supported by federal funding sources that are restricted to certain uses that often do not include worker training, community engagement, or program administration. Another is that pilot leaders initiated much of the home repair work on the block using flexible funding from Northwestern Mutual and tried to fill in gaps later with more restrictive city funding, which was not always possible. The report suggests that on future blocks, a more effective approach would be to identify and secure city funding sources first while turning to more flexible funding from private sources should gaps be identified.

Even if that approach is used, future replication of the Amani pilot may require the creation of more flexible sources of financial support by both philanthropic organizations and the city. Should that prove unworkable, it demonstrates the need to develop a business plan, secure funding sources that can cover each component of the plan, employ those resources at the right time, and carefully document their use.

## **Resident engagement, understanding city programs key**

When the pilot launched, Dominican Center, a community organization based in Amani, was designated lead organization due to its roots in the neighborhood, and Amani United, a neighborhood association, was engaged to play a guiding role. Still, many residents initially were skeptical of the pilot and of seeking city assistance. It took extensive outreach and the relocation of Ezekiel CDC (another lead partner in the pilot overseeing construction and training) to the block to build relationships with residents and bolster participation.

If the pilot is replicated on other blocks of Amani, it likely will require a similar investment in community outreach and engagement. If it is replicated in other neighborhoods in Milwaukee or other cities, anchor organizations like Dominican Center will be needed.

The complexity of the city's home repair programs has been another major challenge. 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; replicating this pilot elsewhere may therefore require capacity building among community organizations.

## **Access hurdles**

To facilitate the pilot, the city worked 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 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, 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.

The report concludes that community leaders and organizations in other Milwaukee neighborhoods can learn a great deal from the Amani Housing Pilot and that it provides important lessons in how to tackle neighborhood revitalization while also benefiting the larger community. Nevertheless, city, county, and philanthropic leaders should consider the pilot's challenges and the insights into addressing them that the report discusses should they seek to replicate and improve it for future blocks.

Click here to read "Block by Block: Milwaukee's Amani Housing Pilot as a Model for Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization."

*The Wisconsin Policy Forum is the state's leading source of nonpartisan, independent research on state and local public policy. As a nonprofit, our research is supported by members including hundreds of corporations, nonprofits, local governments, school districts, and individuals. Visit [wispolicyforum.org](http://wispolicyforum.org) to learn more.*