**Project:** Building a Rental Registry

INFM 600 – Team 5

Fall ‘22

**Literature Review**

During the early stages of the pandemic, public attention shifted to tenant protections and vulnerabilities in the face of mass job loss and a public health emergency. Officials issued eviction moratoriums, rent freezes, and other tenant protection policies, but lacked clear methods for enforcement. But this isn’t a new problem – illegal eviction, building code violations, and illegal rent hikes are commonplace in the U.S., yet municipalities lack access to data to enforce tenant safeguards. In many jurisdictions, leaders do not know how many rental units exist or have a cohesive method for tracking who owns those units.

There are several rental registries in cities across the U.S. already, however of those that already exist, many only exist to proactively track violations such as building code noncompliance (Way et al, 2013; ChangeLabSolutions, 2014). Additionally, it is critical to ensure that potentially unsafe conditions are addressed early enough such that they do not displace tenants or motivate landlords to significantly raise rents (Heins, 2016).

This is an improvement to a building code enforcement system that relies on tenant reports, in that it may reduce the risk of retaliation by the landlord against the tenant, but is not the broad kind of registry that housing advocates call for. There is a great potential benefit to pulling together a database that proactively tracks building code and other municipal code compliance into a **more broad database system** that includes things like the cost of rent and any planned rent increases. This is the product we will focus on creating.

In addition to basic information to support building inspections, according to housing policy expert Shane Phillips (2020), landlords should be required to provide the monthly rent for each unit, the date of the last rent increase, whether parking or utilities are included in the cost of rent, and when the tenant first moved into the unit. “Cities currently lack this information, making it impossible to accurately measure affordability or track vacancies over time. Requiring information like rent and utility costs also establishes a record of the basic terms of the lease agreement, making it more challenging for landlords to revoke or alter them with impunity. Landlords must also include their contact information so they can be easily reached by the local housing agency for periodic inspections or to respond to complaints” (Phillips, 2020).

The city of Vancouver, Canada has a publicly available rental registry that predominantly contains building code requirements, but it’s schema will prove helpful as we develop ours:

* Business operator – (Landlord and/or owner). The ownership of the business
* DetailURL – this opens a page with more detailed information about the property and its outstanding violations. The web page is hosted on the City of Vancouver’s website.
* Street Number – address field
* Street – address field
* Total Outstanding – Combined total of current issues for all Bylaws (for main address as well as other associated entrance addresses)
* Total Units – Official space identifier for a building - combined total
* Geom – spatial representation of feature
* Geo Local Area – The local area where the feature is found, derived from the feature's coordinates or address in the source system. (The city defines these as their local planning areas)

Vancouver’s rental registry then further breaks down each property within the “has issues” database onto its own page ([example](https://app.vancouver.ca/RPS_Net/Default.aspx?num=320&street=ABBOTT%20STREET)) (City of Vancouver).

Beyond building code enforcement, another key component of a comprehensive rental registry is information about the property owner and the rental property itself. Per PolicyLink (n.d.), this includes:

* Contact information for “key individuals involved with the management and maintenance of the property and an emergency contact who can be contacted 24 hours a day.”
* Information and documentation about their last property inspection
* Number of units owned by a given landlord
* Whether a unit is vacant or occupied
* Historic, current, and future price of rent

PolicyLink also notes that “additional information can also be collected by localities to gather the important data needed to address a community’s unique housing challenges and inequities.” This is an important note, as there will not be a one-size-fits-all database; we intend to create a template of a data system that can be added to or modified based on a municipality’s needs, but that includes the best practices outlined by tenant advocates and housing policy experts.

A more comprehensive rental registry could give municipalities the power to protect tenants in a variety of manners, including its ability to “stop evictions, enforce rent freezes, or implement forgiveness,” as Los Angeles City Councilmember Nithya Raman outlined in a Twitter thread in July 2020. At the time of writing, Los Angeles and the world were grappling with the early stages of the pandemic, and city leaders found themselves incapable of truly enforcing Covid eviction bans due to a simple lack of information about landlords and the units they own.

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