

Syracuse's Housing Crisis

Syracuse faces a multi-dimensional housing and homelessness crisis years in the making. Tenants, who make up at least 60% of the city's residents, are facing displacement at high rates; they are being priced out of apartments and are often living in uninhabitable homes. The homes that are available, affordable, and in good condition, are few and far between. These factors can destabilize the lives of tenants and their families, leading to a high number of evictions granted to property owners in Syracuse City Court.



Regionally, the number of unhoused families in Central New York far outpaces that of individuals without a home for the first time in the past decade. Homelessness overall is the highest it has been in the past six years. At the grassroots level, Syracuse tenants have rallied to advocate for two major legislative actions from the Common Council: passing eviction protections and reforming the way code enforcement officers inspect property conditions.

Living in safe, affordable, stable homes, prevents homelessness, saves taxpayer money, and contributes to a healthier socioeconomic climate where it is easier to build more housing.

Evictions and homelessness by the numbers

Since 2019, the last year before the federal and state governments instituted halts on evictions, as well as other renters protections tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of evictions has been rising. Part of why evictions are occurring at a high rate is due to rising rents. An analysis of U.S. Census data performed by statewide advocacy group Housing Justice For All shows that 46% of Central New Yorkers spend a third of their earnings on rent.

These displacements have contributed to CNY's highest number of unhoused people since 2019.

Evictions reached a four-year high in 2023, when judges granted warrants of eviction in 64% of cases filed - a pace that continued throughout 2024.

150%

The percentage that homelessness has increased in CNY since 2019. The majority live in Onondaga County.

1,192

The number of unhoused individuals across Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oswego counties, an almost 30% increase from 2023.

22%

The percentage that Syracuse rent prices grew in 2024, the highest rate increase of any city in the nation.

The state of Syracuse's homes

Code violations in Syracuse range from ill fitting doors and windows, to improper and hazardous plumbing and electric features, and even lead-infested surfaces and utilities. There are another 175 homes, typically structures riddled with glaring violations of the property code, that are unfit for human habitation.

The city's approach to ensuring properties are in compliance is known as the rental registry, a program that directs landlords to get their one and two-family homes inspected every three years for a \$150 fee.



If no violations are found, code inspectors issue a rental registry certificate. But even though the policy has utility beyond its stated purpose, as it allows tenants to challenge an eviction from a property without a certificate, some elected leaders say the rental registry is not implemented properly.

Recently, a report by City Auditor Alex Marion raised concerns about the city potentially undercounting how many properties qualify for the registry.

33%

The percentage of Syracuse's 35,000 residential properties that are in a state of disrepair.

20,000

The number of active property code violations impacting city tenants.

55%

the percentage of rental properties that are outside of compliance with Syracuse's rental registry standards.

Where do we go from here?

Local representatives, nonprofit leaders, and housing activists agree that there is a crisis, and that it requires multiple solutions. However, not everyone is in alignment on what those approaches should be or which ones should be prioritized. For some, building more housing should be the top priority. They say housing in Syracuse is a supply and demand issue.

Housing advocates say they agree, but that building new housing is an expensive and slow process that would still leave tenants facing high costs. Data from a study commissioned by the city in 2023 indicates that, due to high development costs, the required asking rent if no rental subsidies are involved would be \$2,400 a month. That drops to \$1,800 with the use of state subsidies during development.

A more immediate approach to curbing rising eviction numbers and unfair rent increases, housing advocates have argued, would be to pass a local version of "good cause" eviction. "Good cause" is a statewide bill that allows tenants to challenge an eviction filed without a fair justification. The common council is currently divided on the issue and a vote on the law does not appear likely in the short term.

What is “Good Cause Eviction” legislation?

The bill the council could adopt would allow tenants to challenge evictions without a “good cause” in court.

- A “good cause” includes non-payment of rent, violations of a lease agreement, negligent damage to the premises, and unreasonable refusal of access to the property for necessary repairs.
- Tenants could, under the bill, also challenge in court a landlord’s ability to refuse a lease renewal. A landlord would have to prove to a judge they have a “good cause” to not renew a tenants’ lease.

Under “good cause,” tenants at eviction hearings would be able to contest rent increases above 10% of the yearly rent or the inflation index, whichever is lower. A judge can overrule this if they deem that property tax expenses and/or extensive repairs on the property merit a high rent hike.

The city auditor’s recommendations

Syracuse City Auditor Alex Marion’s report includes a series of recommendations, including the following:

- An increase of the rental registry inspection fee to \$250 and an increase of the financial penalty of noncompliance to \$1,000, with escalating fees for continued neglect.
- The creation of a compliant landlord list to best inform tenants and amending the ordinance to allow the revocation of certificates to landlords who are not providing adequate housing.
- Offering information sessions through local nonprofits to inform landlords of the registry.
- Organizing more proactive code enforcement inspections and notifying landlords of expiring registry certificates ahead of time and requiring landlords to notify tenants of lead fixtures and withholding certificates of rental registry compliance until those lead sources are remediated.
- Requiring lead swipe testing at properties as they are inspected and when new tenants are moving in.

The city’s housing strategy

The city’s plan will prioritize stabilizing the middle-income neighborhoods of Salt Springs and Tipperary Hill. These areas were picked because they are teetering between prosperity and blight, consultants told the city. By committing funds to homeowners who otherwise would not be able to spruce up their homes, the city believes it could increase the values of those homes and increase the city’s tax base. The first phase of the strategy, meant to last 10 years, would commit \$25 million to beautify and improve homes in those areas. The city has already secured \$7.5 million to get the first phase underway, offering:

- Small block grants with no income restrictions for exterior improvements around the neighborhood like overhauls to porches and fences, as well as landscaping, that help neighbors work on projects together.
- Home improvement assistance funds in the forms of matching grants and loans that can convert to grants.
- Rental property assistance loans for landlords to maintain their properties at above-market standards. These can turn into grants if property owners freeze rents for a negotiated period of time.
- Subsidies for infill housing. This type of construction typically takes the place of vacant lots and sites of demolished properties.