Syracuse Tenant-Owner-Proactive (TOP) Code Enforcement Program

OVERVIEW

Program Basics
- Syracuse’s Tenant-Owner-Proactive (TOP) program is the city’s proactive, data-driven approach to housing code enforcement.
- The TOP program has transformed the way the city conducts rental inspections, shifting away from a reactive model of enforcement and instead assigning each code inspector a dedicated territory for which they are responsible.
- Code inspectors walk and drive throughout their territories on a regular basis to proactively identify code violations and build relationships with tenants and landlords.
- Code inspectors score each block of their territory based on its relative health and prioritize visits to blocks with low scores.
- Syracuse TOP inspectors prioritize cultivating strong relationships between the city, tenants, and landlords by participating in regular community meetings, hosting home health and safety education events, and soliciting feedback after inspections.

How Does Syracuse's TOP Program Improve Economic Mobility?
- Syracuse TOP increases health and safety code compliance in rental units, especially for the most urgent and dangerous violations. Research shows homes with safety and health hazards are linked to a range of negative economic mobility outcomes, including poor educational performance for children and psychological suffering among adults.
- Syracuse TOP increases home energy efficiency and consumption through proactive inspections and connecting landlords to funding for remediation. Many low-income families face trade-offs between energy costs and other essential needs, like food and health care, that are crucial to upward mobility, according to various independent evaluations.

EVIDENCE LEVEL: PROVEN (HIGHEST TIER)

Healthy home environment assessments are ranked as having the highest level of evidence by County Health Rankings and Roadmaps.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target population</th>
<th>Program cost</th>
<th>Implementation locations</th>
<th>Dates active</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low- and moderate-income households</td>
<td>Utilizes existing housing inspection resources</td>
<td>Syracuse, New York; healthy home environment assessments are utilized nationwide</td>
<td>2017–present</td>
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Renters in Syracuse, many of whom are low-income residents of color and/or immigrants, often lived in housing units with health and safety code violations. These include smaller violations like mold and major structural hazards like poorly built staircases.

Typically, inspectors used home visits to look for specific violations related to a filed complaint. Inspectors rarely conducted comprehensive inspections during such visits.

Many residents were not aware of how to file a complaint or whom to ask for help with housing safety issues. As a result, tenants with legitimate health and safety concerns likely never filed complaints.

The city primarily issued fines for major violations, leaving smaller health and safety hazards, like windows that would not fully close, unaddressed. Fearing major costs, landlords often sought to deny inspectors entry.

Inspectors did not have a formal system to quickly and regularly check on open cases; as a result, some cases simply closed after a fine was paid, whether or not the violation was actually resolved.

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Pilot inspectors proactively identified 115 housing code violations during the 6–week pilot in 2017, 229% higher than other inspectors averaged over the same period.

Owners doubled their rate of successfully resolving “Unfit for Human Occupancy” violations between 2017 and 2020 in Syracuse, from 17% to 35%. This category represents some of the most urgent health and safety risks to tenants.

Since TOP was launched in 2017, Syracuse doubled its compliance rates both for health and safety violations (from 12% to 23%) and overall (from 16% to 33%).

### IMPLEMENTATION IN SYRACUSE

#### The Challenge

- **Unsafe conditions for renters:** Renters in Syracuse, many of whom are low-income residents of color and/or immigrants, often lived in housing units with health and safety code violations. These include smaller violations like mold and major structural hazards like poorly built staircases.

- **Reactive code enforcement:** Typically, inspectors used home visits to look for specific violations related to a filed complaint. Inspectors rarely conducted comprehensive inspections during such visits.

- **A lack of awareness:** Many residents were not aware of how to file a complaint or whom to ask for help with housing safety issues. As a result, tenants with legitimate health and safety concerns likely never filed complaints.

- **Owners avoiding inspections:** The city primarily issued fines for major violations, leaving smaller health and safety hazards, like windows that would not fully close, unaddressed. Fearing major costs, landlords often sought to deny inspectors entry.

- **A lack of follow up:** Inspectors did not have a formal system to quickly and regularly check on open cases; as a result, some cases simply closed after a fine was paid, whether or not the violation was actually resolved.

#### The Solution

- **Tenant–Owner–Proactive (TOP) Code Enforcement:** Syracuse TOP is the city’s data-driven approach to code enforcement, which was designed through an intensive community engagement process. The program is made up of seven changes to its previous model: assigned territories for inspectors, proactive community engagement, comprehensive inspections, real-time data collection, data-based route planning, enhanced customer service for tenants, and follow-up calls to owners.

- **Assigned territories for inspectors:** Inspectors are assigned a small territory in which they and a partner are responsible for ensuring all health and safety standards are met by owners. By working only within specific geographic zones and managing roughly equal caseloads (typically including between 900–1,100 rental units), inspectors deeply familiarize themselves with the housing stock and more frequently visit blocks at high risk for violations.
The Solution, continued

- **Proactive community engagement:** Syracuse TOP inspectors cultivate strong relationships with tenants and landlords in their assigned territories through three types of community engagement: regularly walking their territory; presenting on code enforcement at community meetings in venues like churches and adult education classes; and hosting annual home health and safety education events. During these activities, inspectors seek to proactively schedule comprehensive inspections with tenants (rather than wait for a major issue to arise or complaint to be filed). They also speak with landlords about remediation strategies for potential violations. Tenants can request inspections, anonymously, at any time.

- **Comprehensive inspections:** During each home visit, inspectors work through a comprehensive checklist of potential health and safety violations. This approach ensures inspectors prioritize thoroughness rather than speed, and increases the likelihood that they will proactively identify new violations unrelated to existing complaints.

- **Leveraging data collection and software:** To plan routes and prioritize inspection areas within their territories, inspectors use “Building Blocks” software, a predictive modeling program for potential code violations. Inspectors also score each block’s relative housing health on a regular basis using tablets in the field, which helps to inform the predictive model.

- **Tenant and landlord customer service:** Shortly after a resident files a complaint, clerks contact landlords. The clerk gives the landlord a brief window (typically a few days) to resolve the issue before an inspection. This gives landlords a time-bound incentive to fix the problem before possibly facing a fine. After a case is closed, clerks call tenants and landlords to get feedback on the experience.

**Major Accomplishments**

- **From a neighborhood pilot to citywide:** After a successful six-week pilot in 2017, the Division of Code Enforcement successfully scaled the program across Syracuse. The city is now divided into nine territories with roughly equal caseloads. Two inspectors are assigned to each one.

- **Proactive community engagement:** Since the launch of the Syracuse TOP program, many violations are now identified during comprehensive, proactively scheduled inspections, rather than in response to a specific complaint. The Division of Code Enforcement increased case note documentation and phone calls with tenants and landlords by 43 percent.\(^2\)

- **Landlord self-compliance:** With TOP clerks providing landlords windows of opportunity for pre-violation compliance, inspectors report that rapid self-compliance has become more common. As a result, overall code violations are down nearly 20 percent from 9,243 in 2015 to 7,792 in 2019.\(^2\)

- **Safe & healthy homes education:** The Division of Code Enforcement launched the annual Healthy Housing 101 event. During the event, inspectors lead tenants and service providers through a house and show them how to identify health and safety violations. The events averaged roughly 100 tenants and landlords during the 2018 and 2019 events. The virtual event in 2020 (due to COVID-19) drew more than 200 viewers.\(^3\)\(^4\)

**Keys to Success**

- **Piloting the program:** Syracuse launched the TOP program as a six-week pilot in the Northside neighborhood, which has a high share of rental properties and violations. In 2016, the neighborhood had 1,068 code violations, nearly double the neighborhood with the second most violations.\(^2\)

- **Support from two mayors:** Mayor Stephanie Miner and her successor, Mayor Ben Walsh, championed the program’s expansion. They both encouraged the Division of Code Enforcement to scale up TOP by using the mayor’s Office of Accountability, Performance, & Innovation (API) to support the program’s design, data, and evaluation needs.
Keys to Success, continued

- **A data-centered approach:** The Division of Code Enforcement, with support from the API team, incorporates data and evidence into nearly all aspects of the model. For instance, territories are carefully drawn to provide inspectors with similar caseloads; inspectors are provided with tablets to allow for real-time data collection and analysis; and inspectors use that analysis to carefully plan their routes.

- **Extensive, individualized stakeholder engagement:** TOP staff members regularly engage tenants, landlords, and inspectors individually, allowing each group to provide input in a comfortable setting. For instance, for tenants, inspectors hold regular "Meet Your Inspector" events and attend ESL classes to share more about the program; landlords and inspectors, meanwhile, complete surveys and participate in interviews and focus groups.

- **Prioritizing accessibility and education:** To ensure as many residents as possible understand their housing rights, the TOP program prioritizes making code enforcement accessible, including through developing education materials in multiple languages and bringing translators to community events. These materials emphasize tenant rights, such as filing complaints without fear of reprisal from landlords.

Biggest Challenges

- **Inspector buy-in:** Several veteran inspectors were unwilling to overhaul their day-to-day approaches to the job. Ultimately, three of the city's 21 inspectors chose to retire or leave the division. Additionally, a union grievance was filed late in the expansion planning process, delaying citywide implementation by almost a year.

- **Mistrust and misperceptions:** During various tenant and landlord engagement sessions, both groups expressed mistrust of the Division of Code Enforcement. Many tenants, for instance, believed they personally could be fined if a violation was found in their home. Meanwhile, some landlords felt the city actively sought to levy large fines without regard for remediation.

- **Talent pipeline:** With some inspectors leaving the Division of Code Enforcement, Syracuse struggled to quickly hire and train new staff, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without being able to rapidly hire new inspectors, TOP staff had to redraw territories, which required significant support from the Department of Neighborhoods and Business.

- **Anonymous complaints:** Despite a tenant's ability to anonymously file complaints (for instance, as a "concerned neighbor"), landlords often assume that tenants are responsible for initiating interior inspections. However, retaliation against a tenant for filing a complaint, including in the forms of eviction, raising rent, charging fines, or any other form of harassment, is explicitly outlawed by New York State Law.
TIMELINE

API TEAM BEGINS HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN RESEARCH
March 2017
Mayor Miner tasks the API team with identifying and evaluating potential housing solutions to advance economic mobility in Syracuse. The team conducts eight months of interviews, focus groups, and data analysis. The result is seven key changes to code enforcement that together form the TOP model: assigned territories for inspectors, prioritizing community engagement, comprehensive inspections, real-time data collection, data-based route planning, enhanced customer service for tenants, and follow-up calls to owners.

SYRACUSE LAUNCHES SIX-WEEK TOP PILOT
November 2017
The pilot launches in Syracuse’s Northside neighborhood. Program administrators prioritize monitoring metrics, including code violations, health and safety violations, and proactively identified violations. “Using new strategies, data, and technology, we can enhance relationships between code inspectors and the community and work with tenants and property owners to develop solutions to neighborhood concerns,” Mayor Miner said.

MAYOR WALSH TAKES OFFICE AS TOP PILOT RESULTS ARE PUBLISHED
January 2018
Just as the TOP pilot publishes strong results showing an 18% increase in code compliance and a 229% increase in proactively identified code violations, Mayor Ben Walsh takes office. He quickly champions the TOP program.

DIVISION OF CODE ENFORCEMENT HOSTS FIRST HEALTHY HOUSING 101 SESSION
June 2018
Code inspectors host a new healthy and safe homes learning event, explaining how to identify mold, lead, insect and rodent infestations, and unsafe staircases. They also provide their contact information and encourage attendees to reach out. Nearly 100 tenants and landlords attend.

TOP IMPLEMENTED ACROSS SYRACUSE
October 2020
With strong results from the six-week pilot in late 2017, Syracuse launches the TOP program across the entire city. The program faced extensive implementation delays resulting from a union grievance and staffing issues. Each of the city’s 18 code inspectors are assigned a dedicated territory, the final step in fully implementing the program. Inspectors had already begun using the program’s tablets and software in 2018, shortly after the pilot.
THE PROCESS

Confronting the Problem

- **Health and safety hazards in rental units:** For years, a high share of Syracuse renters, many of whom are low-income residents of color and recent immigrants, live in units with health and safety code violations. Hazards often go unreported or unresolved due to both a lack of enforcement and awareness of potential remediation options.

- **Mistrust from landlords:** Landlords, wary of large fines, often seek to deny property access to inspectors, perpetuating a cycle of non-compliance.

- **Improving economic mobility through housing:** Seeking to implement a program advancing economic mobility in her final year in office, Mayor Miner tasks the Office of Accountability, Performance, & Innovation (API) with researching solutions related to housing quality.

- **Human-centered research:** Working closely with the Division of Code Enforcement, the API team spends eight months conducting extensive interviews and focus groups with stakeholders involved in the rental housing market. Their conclusion: tenants need a proactive inspection system built on trust between themselves, landlords, and inspectors, to ensure homes are safe and healthy.

Designing the Strategy

- **Comprehensive suite of initiatives:** The API team zeroes in on seven changes to code enforcement: assigned territories for inspectors, prioritizing community engagement, comprehensive inspections, real-time data collection, data-based route planning, enhanced customer service for tenants, and follow-up calls to owners. The program is founded on a guiding principle of proactive engagement and communication between the Division of Code Enforcement and each stakeholder group.

- **Dedicated territories for inspectors:** Each inspector is assigned a dedicated territory. They are expected to develop relationships with tenants and landlords through community events and regular engagement as they walk the neighborhood during the course of their workday. This allows inspectors to familiarize themselves with the territory’s housing stock, residents, and owners.

- **Leveraging data & software:** The TOP program uses Building Blocks software, a predictive modeling tool, to help inspectors optimize their routes and visit areas that are more likely to have code violations. Inspectors also provide real-time health scores via tablet for each block of their territory as they conduct inspections. This data is then incorporated into the predictive model.

- **Committing to customer service:** A team of clerks ensure a smooth customer service experience, including processing complaints, communicating timelines for compliance to landlords, and conducting extensive follow up with stakeholders to gather feedback.
Allocating the Funding

- **A grant for ideation:** An existing three-year, $1.35 million grant for government innovation and research from Bloomberg Philanthropies allowed API staff to dedicate significant hours to the 8-month research and program design process. Funds were restricted to use for staff and contracting, rather than program implementation.

- **Reallocating existing resources:** The Syracuse TOP program did not require any additional funding; rather, the program simply reallocates existing resources. The only new costs are $3,420 per year for tablets, which are funded through the Division's existing budget.

- **COVID-19 causes budget shortfalls:** Faced with severe budget constraints exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with a talent shortage, the department dropped from 21 inspectors to 18, and from five clerks to three. However, the city is now in the process of hiring to fill all of those roles.

- **State grant for software:** As part of a nearly $1 million strategic housing grant the New York State Office of the Attorney General, the City of Syracuse received access to the Building Blocks software. The grant also included technical and implementation assistance from the software developer, Tolemi, and the Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation. Fine revenue stable: Syracuse created the Bureau of Administrative Adjudication (BAA) in 2018 (unrelated to TOP) to enforce housing code standards using the legal system. Inspectors pass citations to the BAA for collection. As a result, fine revenues have increased since TOP launched.

Implementing the Plan

- **Extensive stakeholder research:** With a mandate from the mayor, a two-person team from API develops and executes an eight-month research plan, including interviews and focus groups with landlords, tenants, and inspectors; data analysis; and weekly ride-alongs with inspectors to better understand the code enforcement process from each stakeholder’s perspective.

- **Pitching the mayor:** With a plan informed by data, community input, and the Division of Code Enforcement, the API team pitches the TOP program to Mayor Miner. She quickly signs off on the recommended six-week pilot. The Mayor oversees the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development, whose director supervises the Division of Code Enforcement. The Code Enforcement Director manages each team of inspectors.

- **Piloting the program:** The API team works closely with the Division of Code Enforcement to select and train two inspectors for the six-week pilot. They are both open to change and have exhibited strong customer service skills. The program launches and the results are extremely promising.

- **Preparing to scale:** With clear results and a supportive new mayor, the Division of Code Enforcement begins training inspectors on soft skills like customer service, as well as technical skills such as operating the Building Blocks software on new tablets. Data analysts from API and the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development draw and refine territories for each inspector.

- **Launching across the city:** After inspectors are trained and assigned new territories, the city’s new approach to code enforcement begins. Inspectors start holding community events, meeting with tenants and landlords, and familiarizing themselves with each block of their new territory.
The case for scaling: With data collection and evaluation at the core of the TOP pilot, the Division of Code Enforcement made a clear, compelling case to expand the program in the midst of a mayoral transition.

Measuring success: The TOP program is driven by one underlying goal: code compliance. The Division of Code Enforcement collects numerous key performance indicators, such as complaints, violations, and community engagements, which are interim measures indicating progress toward compliance.

Real-time data collection: The TOP program changed the Division of Code Enforcement's approach to data collection. Each inspector uses a tablet in the field to record healthy and safe home data in real time. Previously, inspectors wrote notes by hand and a clerk manually entered the data later.

Prioritizing blocks: By using historical data and new software to predict which blocks are likely to have violations, inspectors are able to optimize their hours spent in the community meeting with tenants, conducting visual exterior inspections, and scheduling interior inspections.

Redrawing territories: To ensure each inspector has a manageable workload and to maximize community engagement opportunities, the Department of Neighborhood and Business Development plans to redraw territories every three years based on complaint and inspection data and stakeholder input.
3. Internal data from Syracuse API team
4. Healthy Housing 101: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kidxf6-Wyms&list=PLS27XplCe7Rl4GOCY-9g_iE6voms5Y8o6&index=3
5. Healthy Housing 101 overview: http://www.innovatesyracuse.com/blog/healthyhousing101
RESOURCES

- TOP Pilot Expansion Report

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THE ECONOMIC MOBILITY CATALOG

This case study is part of Results for America’s Economic Mobility Catalog, a tool designed to help local government leaders identify and implement evidence-based strategies to improve economic mobility outcomes for their residents. The Economic Mobility Catalog is supported by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation.

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