

City of Moorhead, MN

Performance Indicator

- Average number of calendar days from case initiation to voluntary compliance

For FY 2006, the city of Moorhead reported an average number of six calendar days from case initiation to voluntary compliance. The mean and median values for all jurisdictions reporting were 36 and 15, respectively.

Encourage voluntary compliance with clear expectations

Although all residential and commercial properties in the city of Moorhead are subject to code enforcement, the majority of Moorhead's code inspections are on rental properties connected with the three colleges located within the city limits.

The city's neighborhood services division requires that all rental properties be inspected once a year by its rental registration and inspection unit. The unit comprises a full-time rental-housing code technician, two building inspectors (who assist during off-peak building construction periods), and several firefighters (who assist during two blitz inspection periods each year).

By informing rental-property owners of expectations and penalties in advance of their annual inspections, Moorhead has enjoyed a great deal of success in boosting voluntary compliance with checklist items and citations issued during inspections.

Routine rental-housing inspections are scheduled in advance. Code violations in rental properties may be addressed on an ad hoc basis as complaints are received.

Prior to a routine rental-property inspection, the city sends to the property owner a detailed preinspection checklist and a list of fees that may be assessed if a reinspection is required or if a violation is found and not remedied. Property owners are asked to use the checklist as a guide to ensure that their properties will pass the initial inspection. If a reinspection is required, the fee is \$100. If a code violation is found and not corrected within a prescribed time period, penalty fees range from \$100 to \$2,000 per violation.

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Identify and educate property owners

To identify unregistered property owners—and make sure they receive their preinspection notices—Moorhead's code enforcement staff patrol the city

Case Profile

Population:

34,244

Square miles:

19

Median household income:

\$34,781

Form of government:

Council-manager



For additional information about the practices described in this case study, please contact Lisa Vatnsdal, neighborhood services manager, at lisa.vatnsdal@cityofmoorhead.com.

for rental signs, peruse the real estate section of the newspaper, and cross-check their findings against registered properties and city tax rolls. Failure to register a rental property results in a \$100 fine.

The city of Moorhead also operates a crime-free housing landlord education program wherein property owners are taught about fair housing regulations, crime prevention, property management, and applicable city codes. Attendance at this class is required within six months of registration for new landlords. By teaching landlords about what is required of them, the city speculates that it may be preventing many code violations.

Apply administrative instead of criminal penalties when possible

When voluntary compliance cannot be achieved, the city of Moorhead has the approval of the Clay County district court to apply civil penalties for nuisance, property maintenance, and zoning violations. This civil process allows quicker resolution of less serious but hard-to-resolve cases than the criminal process would. To ensure preservation of violators' due process rights, Moorhead's civil adjudication process incorporates appeal and judicial review provisions.

Organize staff to maximize efficiency and effectiveness

To ensure that all cases are addressed in a timely manner, in 2005 the city of Moorhead reorganized its code enforcement staff. The neighborhood services division merged its own inspection staff with inspection staff that were previously housed in the fire department. This change encouraged a more holistic approach to property inspections, and it also boosted inspector efficiency. (Firefighters still independently inspect larger, multifamily apartment complexes, however.)

Each week, members of the city's code enforcement staff meet to discuss any emerging trends in code enforcement activities in the city and address open or overlapping cases. This enables staff to reinforce the community development philosophy of the division.

Staff in the code enforcement division also attribute much of their success in achieving high rates of voluntary compliance and other code enforcement triumphs to the support of the city council. The council has upheld penalties and suspensions of rental registration when documented efforts to bring properties into compliance have not been heeded by property owners. Neighborhood residents have also been strong supporters of the division's efforts.

Moorhead's city code may be found on its Web site (www.cityofmoorhead.com). The rental registration program is included in Chapter 9-7. The administrative citations and civil penalties structure is included in Chapter 1-4-4.