

Deeply Exploring the Problem Before Fixing It: Lessons Learned about Accessing Rental Housing Data

What started as a website development project to share rental housing energy data evolved into a thoughtful multi-phase process that is tackling data access and incentivizing energy efficiency in rental housing.

Let's Start from the Beginning: In 2013, Jacqui Bauer from Bloomington IN was talking with Matt Naud from Ann Arbor MI. They were lamenting barriers to achieve community sustainability goals with rental properties. The nut they couldn't quite crack was how to achieve energy reductions in student rental housing. This conversation started as many do between USDN members: great exchange of information, plenty of humor, and a dash of peer counseling. Later when Jacqui was talking with Barbara Buffalo from Columbia MO about the same issue, Barbara mentioned a website called www.toolsfortenants.com. This website helps renters factor energy usage into their housing decisions in Gainesville FL. From this conversation, the ideas started to cascade.

The three Sustainability Directors put their heads together and submitted a Letter of Intent to the Innovation Fund. The idea was to scale the Gainesville model beyond energy information to include additional sustainability factors like solid waste, water, and transportation. To their disappointment, they didn't get funded... at first. "Later, we pitched the idea at an open space session during the Portland USDN Annual Meeting. There were 14 people in the conversation, and it confirmed for me that we were onto something." Jacqui shared. From there, Ann Arbor and Bloomington carried the project forward and successfully won an Innovation Fund award in a subsequent grant round. When asked why she thinks their initial proposal wasn't funded Jacqui said, "I think it's such a hard problem to fix, and we needed to understand the barriers more."

Lessons Learned about Accessing Rental Housing Data: Most renters are not aware of the full cost of housing: rent, energy, water, solid waste, and transportation. Some resources exist to guide renters, but they rarely incorporate multiple sustainability considerations. This presents two challenges: 1.) People are often unaware of sustainability considerations, such as high energy bills, until they've signed a lease and moved in, and 2.) Renters don't have access to the information that articulates market demand for sustainable rental options to landlords. This *data deficit* is the first large barrier to motivating sustainable behavior change in rental housing - such as installing energy efficiency retrofits. The collaborative project of sustainability directors explored these issues.

Here are their lessons learned about handling the data deficit:

1. Several cities determined that even the basic data needed to start a website (i.e., a list of all rental properties) was not maintained by the city. Others struggled to obtain existing internal data. They also discovered significant variation in the types and quality of data between the different cities. From the beginning, the group anticipated challenges to obtaining energy and other utility data, but had not foreseen the number of barriers that exist within their own organizations. The project helped participants consider improvements to internal processes for maintaining data.
2. Bulk acquisition of energy data via utilities is unlikely in the near term. Of the 14 cities involved in the project, none were able to obtain access to energy data on a large scale. (note: Columbia's municipally owned electric utility later came on board and agreed to share rental usage data.) Privacy concerns and mistrust about how data might be used were both factors.
3. Filling in data gaps is still a challenge, but crowdsourcing data will become a critical tool in demonstrating the value of detailed data.
4. With access to better information and a website to show how data will be used, utilities may be more willing to consider a partnership role (if not in the website itself, then in other efforts to share data). Utility websites and applications for new accounts could be set up to make it easier for customers to opt into data sharing, thus bypassing privacy concerns. Municipally owned utilities in particular may be more receptive to this approach.

While clear solutions are still distant, the deepening conversations and experimentation with new approaches, like crowdsourcing data and data disclosure laws, all point in the right direction. The final goal is to transform the way the rental market works, and USDN member cities are working together towards this goal.