After fatal fire, Minnesota senators press for money for sprinklers in public housing

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CARLOS GONZALEZ • Star Tribune

Minneapolis Public Housing Authority chief Tracey Scott said staffers and residents were “devastated” by the fatal fire.

Minnesota’s two U.S. senators are asking for $25 million to install sprinklers in public housing buildings, less than a month after a deadly fire in a Minneapolis high-rise.

Under the proposal, the money would be available each year for 10 years for public housing authorities to apply for a competitive grant through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The measure would also require HUD to compile data on how many housing authority properties lack sprinklers.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Sen. Tina Smith, both Democrats, introduced the measure in the wake of the Nov. 27 fire on the 14th floor of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority’s Cedar High Apartments that killed five people and injured four others.

The fire drew criticism over why the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA) did not

install sprinklers throughout the high-rise building. The agency has previously said it did not have enough federal funding to install the sprinklers in all of its buildings right away. Sixteen of the 42 MPHA buildings have sprinklers.

Smith said in an interview Wednesday that before the fire she was not aware of the lack of sprinklers in public housing, and “having this issue come to the fore this way is really tragic.” The lawmakers sent a joint letter to HUD last week asking about public housing sprinkler data and how Congress could better support maintenance efforts for public housing authorities (PHAs). While the bill is not proposing a mandate, Smith said it is a nod to the idea that “local PHAs on the ground know best.”

“From the conversations I’ve had with people, how can a local PHA address significant needs like installing a sprinkler system when they’re dealing with roofs that are falling in and mold and lead and significant public safety challenges?” Smith said.

U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minneapolis, announced earlier this month that she will introduce legislation requiring public housing units nationwide to be equipped with sprinklers.

The 25-story structure at 630 S. Cedar Av. has partial sprinkler coverage on the main floor and lower mechanical equipment rooms but no sprinklers on the upper levels where people lived. MPHA estimated it would cost $867,502 to expand the sprinkler system in the building. The Cedar High Apartments were scheduled for a HUD inspection on Dec. 9, but that was postponed because of the fire.

Tracey Scott, interim executive director for MPHA, said in an interview Wednesday that agency staffers and residents have been “devastated” since the fire and that “our staff and our residents are still grieving.” The agency has provided grief counseling to its workers and residents.

She said the agency is still focused on helping residents stay safe in their homes. Since the fire, access to the 14th floor of the building has been limited to family members of the victims, who have been allowed to collect items, and to officials investigating the fire. The agency is working on fixing water damage on the floors and addressing other needs.

“This is one of 42 buildings; we still have to do the business of the agency every day and make sure that every resident has a place to live, and we’re very focused on making sure that happens,” Scott said.

Asked about criticisms over why the sprinklers had not been prioritized sooner, she pointed out that the agency’s board approved a long-term plan last year for renovations at the 42 public housing buildings, including installing sprinklers. The agency has carbon monoxide and smoke detectors in the units and in recent years updated its fire alarm systems and added range hoods over stoves. She reiterated that federal funding is part of the challenge when it comes to the sprinklers.

Scott declined to comment on specifics of the agency's conversations with HUD and other elected officials, how often fire alarm drills are done in the building, or whether there should be a federal mandate for public housing authorities to install sprinklers.

Correction: Previous versions of this article included an incomplete description of the funding available.

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