Omar, Dziedzic, Noor: Cedar-Riverside high-rise fire must prompt action

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Aaron Lavinsky • Star Tribune

An early morning fire killed five people in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood. This must spring us to action, the authors say.

The day before Thanksgiving, families across the country gathered around their dining tables to give thanks and break bread. But many families in the Twin Cities were not sitting down for a holiday dinner — instead they were facing indescribable tragedy. On Wednesday, Nov. 27, a fire broke out in a 25-story public housing building in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, near where all of us grew up. Five people lost their lives that day. And weeks later, residents are still in the hospital recovering from their injuries and from the devastating effects of smoke inhalation.

The community knows pain and loss, but they also know the power of unity and hope. The Cedar-Riverside community has been tirelessly working to help the families affected by the fire. In the wake of this tragedy, groups like the People's Center Clinics & Services and the Dar Al-Hijra Mosque raised more than $80,000 to help those impacted by the fire. That includes financial assistance, medical assistance and more. Rep. Ilhan Omar's staff has been

helping distribute food to those in need and will continue to aid the families impacted. Cedar-Riverside truly understands what it means to live in community. They survive and thrive together.

But as we work to recover from this fire, we must also address the root causes. After the brave men and women of the local fire department cleared the scene and controlled the blaze, we discovered an almost unbelievable reality: These homes were not equipped with sprinklers. The building is so old that it's exempted from laws that require such lifesaving equipment.

And that isn't the only egregious safety issue that our public-housing residents are forced to endure. There's been a ban on building new public housing since the 1990s. In fact, the Cedar-Riverside building that sustained the fire was built in the 1960s. And the federal government has been underfunding the repair and maintenance needs in this housing for years. In Minnesota, the backlog of repair needs totals more than $350 million. So not only are these homes half a century old, they are practically being held together with little more than hope and duct tape. Make no mistake: We as lawmakers bear responsibility for the deplorable conditions of our public housing and for the deplorable and unsafe conditions that millions of Americans are living in today.

We cannot pretend that we cannot see the crumbling buildings in our district. We cannot ignore the hundreds of thousands who experience homelessness because of the waitlist for housing assistance. And it goes beyond the homeless and public housing population. Millions of Americans are living every day in fear of eviction. Twelve million Americans are paying more than half their income in rent and about 6,300 people are evicted every single day.

How can we as lawmakers call ourselves leaders if we continue to ignore this crisis? We refuse to continue down that path. It's time for solutions at both the local and federal level.

We have been diligently working in the community to ensure that this tragedy does not happen again. We know a requirement for sprinklers would have saved lives. It is a simple, highly-effective tool that should be fully employed in all high-rises, new and old. As Shane Gray, the president of the National Fire Sprinkler Association, has pointed out, it costs a lot more money and a lot more lives to have a fire and not be prepared than to install sprinklers. That is why we are partnering at the state and federal levels to pass legislation to require retrofitting older public-housing buildings with lifesaving sprinkler systems. This is a simple way to ensure that Minnesotans feel safe and secure in their homes. Along with U.S. Reps. Betty McCollum, Dean Phillips and Angie Craig, Rep. Omar is requesting that the Department of Housing and Urban Development determine how many facilities are currently exempted from the sprinkler requirements and how much it would cost to install them. By requiring sprinklers in each unit of public-housing buildings, we can avoid another preventable tragedy.

But without a historic investment in our public-housing stock and greater accountability for the safety of residents, we'll continue to face tragedies like the one that claimed five lives in Cedar Riverside. Last month, Rep. Omar introduced the Homes for All Act — which would make a historic $1 trillion investment in public- and low-income housing and build a record 12 million new homes over the next 10 years. It would also ensure that public-housing residents are guaranteed access to important wraparound services like employment assistance, child care and financial literacy courses. And just as important, the bill would make public-housing funding a mandatory part of our federal budget, meaning the government wouldn't be able to abandon these new homes or neglect their maintenance. Public housing would be treated just like other basic services such as Social Security and Medicare.

The Cedar-Riverside community is doing its part to ensure that the families affected are taken care of. Its resilience and compassion are more than inspiring; they require action. Now, it is our turn to do our part.

Ilhan Omar is the U.S. representative for Minnesota's Fifth Congressional District. Kari Dziedzic represents Minnesota Senate District 60. Mohamud Noor represents Minnesota House District 60B.