



GrassRoots Organizing Western Wisconsin



Housing in Menomonie: A Community Report

Housing Justice Team • January 2025

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Introduction

A home is not just four walls and a roof, it's the dignity of having a place where a person can build a stable life for themselves and their loved ones. We believe everyone in Menomonie deserves safe, affordable, and clean housing; no matter what our differences are, whether we rent or own, whether we are a student or a senior, or the color of our skin. Like air to breathe and food to eat, housing is a basic human need.

Menomonie’s housing crisis demands urgent attention. The voices captured in this report describe the human cost of inaction, from unsafe living conditions to the constant stress of housing insecurity. The time to act is now—before the crisis deepens further. That’s why GROWW is organizing people to win housing solutions in Menomonie. Because something has to change.

Interested in joining our local movement to work towards change? Go to gro-ww.org to learn more.

Our Methodology: The Art of Listening

During the summer of 2024, members of GrassRoots Organizing Western Wisconsin (GROWW) launched a community-wide “listening campaign” that aimed to better understand the human

impact of housing challenges facing Menomonie residents, building trusting relationships, and to identify leaders in the community.

We engaged **250 members of the community** through a mix of door knocking, listening sessions, digital outreach, and one-to-one meetings. This report is a summary of what we heard.

From June to October, a team of 15 GROWW members **knocked on 558 doors** across Menomonie, speaking directly about their struggles with housing, the causes of those challenges, and their ideas for solutions. Our team used a technique called “deep canvassing” which prioritizes active listening and storytelling to uncover personal experiences and perceptions of an issue.

We organized **three public listening sessions** which were held at the Shirley Doane Senior Center. These sessions were designed to create a space for participants to share their personal stories and explore potential policy or community-driven solutions.

Our digital outreach efforts connected with **41 individuals**, some who were willing to participate in interviews about their housing experiences. These interviews offered deeper insights into the day-to-day realities of housing insecurity, discrimination, and neglect, as well as the impact of systemic barriers on vulnerable populations.

In addition to these efforts, two UW-Stout students conducted research about off-campus housing using a survey (sent to 850 UW-Stout students with 189 responding), a focus group, and interviews.

This report contains key findings from these conversations and draws upon personal stories to highlight the **human impact** of Menomonie’s housing crisis. By centering the voices of those impacted, we aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges facing our community and potential solutions to address them.

Executive Summary

Menomonie is facing a housing crisis of rising costs, limited availability, declining quality, and systemic inequities. This report highlights what we heard were the most urgent challenges and proposed solutions to address the problem.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Affordability Crisis:** Some rents in Menomonie have increased by \$50–\$100 annually, outpacing stagnant wages. Many families spend over 30% of their income on housing, leaving little for other necessities like groceries. Homeownership is increasingly out of reach due to rising prices and interest rates.
- **Limited Availability:** The housing market lacks options for middle-income families, seniors, and individuals with disabilities. Demand for housing from UW-Stout students further impacts availability, and student renters can feel as though landlords are unfairly prioritizing long-term renters.
- **Declining Quality:** Substandard rental conditions, including mold, structural damage, and landlord neglect, are widespread. Renters sometimes perceive that large property management companies prioritize profits over maintenance, leaving tenants in unsafe and unhealthy environments.
- **Homelessness and Precarity:** Some residents live one crisis away from eviction. Menomonie's harsh winters pose dangers for the unhoused, while accessing housing assistance remains a challenge for vulnerable populations.
- **Systemic Barriers:** Discrimination, corporate ownership of properties, and lack of accountability for landlords posed housing inequities.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

People we spoke with proposed the following solutions:

- **Policy and Accountability:** Implement municipal rental inspections, strengthen landlord accountability, and establish a Renters' Bill of Rights.
- **Expanding Housing Stock:** Incentivize affordable housing development, reform zoning laws, support alternative housing models like co-housing and tiny homes, and attract local builders.
- **Community Action:** Increase transitional housing, create tenant advocacy centers, and renovate underutilized properties.

We must act urgently to ensure safe, affordable, and fair housing. By prioritizing community-driven solutions, our town can build a stronger, more resilient future for everyone who calls Menomonie home.

1. Affordability: A Persistent and Growing Challenge

The affordability of housing is a serious concern for Menomonie residents. Rising rents and home prices, combined with stagnant wages, have left many families and students struggling to stay afloat.

RISING RENTS

Annual rent increases of \$50–\$100 are now routine, with many tenants reporting that these hikes are applied without corresponding improvements in the quality of housing. A single mother who works two jobs shared:

"Every year, my rent goes up, and every year, I have less to spend on groceries, gas, and my kids. It's like I'm paying more for nothing."

Even modest homes or apartments now cost more than many residents can afford. A retired couple living in a two-bedroom apartment shared:

"Our rent just went up to \$1,500 a month. That's more than half of what we get from Social Security. We do weekly meals at the churches to help us pay the bills."

A majority of Stout students in the survey reported struggling to pay rent, with many (35%) needing assistance from their families. A few also mentioned that landlords are no longer including utilities, further increasing costs.

BARRIERS TO HOMEOWNERSHIP

In the past, Menomonie has been an affordable place for first-time homebuyers, but that is no longer the case. With interest rates exceeding 7% and home prices rising rapidly, many long-time renters find themselves locked out of the housing market. A local teacher explained:

"My husband and I have saved for years to buy a house. We finally had enough for a down payment, but the interest rates mean our monthly payments would be higher than our rent. It's so discouraging."

For younger residents, the idea of owning a home feels increasingly out of reach. A recent UW-Stout graduate said:

"With student loans and rent eating up my paycheck, saving for a house feels impossible. By the time I have enough, prices will have gone up again."

IMPACT ON FAMILIES

The high cost of housing is forcing families to make difficult choices, from delaying milestones like having children to moving into smaller or lower-quality homes. One father shared:

"We want to buy a house so our kids can have their own bedrooms, but every place we look at is either way out of our budget or in terrible condition. We're stuck renting this cramped apartment."

2. Availability: A Limited Market with Few Options

Menomonie's housing market suffers from a severe lack of options, especially for middle-income families, seniors, and people with disabilities.

A MISSING MIDDLE

Menomonie lacks what housing advocates call "missing middle" housing—affordable homes and rentals for middle-income families. One resident who moved to Menomonie from Minneapolis described the struggle:

"When we first came here, Menomonie was affordable. Now it's this weird mix. The only rentals we can afford are old and falling apart, everything else is ridiculously overpriced. Across the street, people are paying \$1,800 a month for a three-bedroom with no basement. There's no middle ground—just high-end homes or places no one really wants to live in. Housing is treated like an investment, not a necessity."

ACCESSIBILITY GAPS

For residents with disabilities, the housing market is even more constrained. Most available properties are not designed to accommodate mobility aids or other needs. A wheelchair user explained:

"I've been searching for a wheelchair-accessible home for months, but there's nothing. The doors are too narrow, and the bathrooms aren't usable."

IMPACT ON LOCAL WORKFORCE

The lack of affordable housing is also affecting the local economy, as businesses struggle to recruit and retain workers. A manager at a local company shared:

"We've had three new hires turn down jobs because they couldn't find housing in Menomonie. It's becoming a real problem for us."

HIGH COMPETITION

Renters described a market saturated with college students, making it harder for families or older residents to secure housing. Landlords often prioritize student renters who pay higher rates, rent by the room, or lump sums upfront. A young couple with a toddler shared:

"We spent months looking for a place. We finally found a decent apartment, but the landlord gave it to a group of students who could pay six months of rent upfront."

3. Quality: Neglect in the Rental Market

The quality of rental housing in Menomonie emerged as one of the most distressing themes in our conversations. Substandard conditions, landlord neglect, and limited accountability leave tenants in precarious and often unsafe situations. 46% of the student survey respondents reported significant issues with the condition of their housing.

SUBSTANDARD LIVING CONDITIONS

Many rental properties in Menomonie suffer from issues like mold, poor insulation, leaking roofs, and pest infestations. A single mother renting a duplex described her situation:

"Our ceiling started leaking last winter, and it's still not fixed. The landlord just tells us to 'deal with it' until they can get someone out. My kids' room smells like mildew now."

One UW-Stout student renting off-campus shared her frustration with her apartment:

"The windows don't close all the way and now we have bees in the basement. I reported both to my landlord over a month ago, and nothing has been done."

A married couple who have lived in Menomonie for over a decade said:

"Every place we've rented has had major problems. One place had a crack in the bedroom wall so big you could see outside—we had to stuff it with jeans to keep the cold air out."

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE

Tenants frequently reported that landlords delayed or ignored requests for repairs. A pregnant resident shared her frustration:

"Our ceiling had water damage, the landlord just painted over it. The stairs to the back door are broken, and we trip on them constantly. Still can't get them to fix it. I'm scared to raise a child in this house."

In some cases, tenants have been forced to pay for repairs themselves. A young family shared:

"The plumbing in our kitchen broke, the landlord wouldn't fix it. We had to hire someone and pay out of pocket just to have running water again."

GOOD LANDLORDS BEING PUSHED OUT

While some shared frustrations about landlord neglect, others highlighted examples of local landlords who go above and beyond to support their tenants. One tenant praised their current landlord for being exceptionally attentive:

"Our landlord is very responsive. When we had a leaking toilet, they came out to fix it, even on Thanksgiving. That kind of care makes all the difference."

Responsible landlords struggle to compete with corporate owners who prioritize profits over tenant welfare, leading to minimal investment in property maintenance. One long-time renter explained:

"Our first landlord was great, but they sold the building to a big company, and now everything's gone downhill."

EXPLOITATION OF SECURITY DEPOSITS

Many renters reported never receiving their security deposits back, even after leaving their units in good condition. A resident shared:

"I've lived in Menomonie for 10 years and rented five different places. Not once have I gotten my deposit back. Landlords make up bogus charges like cleaning fees or carpet replacement just to keep it."

THE EMOTIONAL TOLL

The stress of living in substandard housing takes a toll on tenants' mental health and sense of security. A veteran renting a home shared:

"I served my country, and now I'm living in a place with mold and broken windows. It's humiliating, but I don't have any other options."

4. Homelessness: A Hidden Crisis

Homelessness in Menomonie often goes unseen, as many people resort to couch surfing or living in their car, but it is a growing problem as more residents face housing insecurity.

PRECARITY AND FEAR

Many renters are one unexpected expense or emergency away from losing their housing. A part-time worker shared:

"I'm barely making rent as it is. If my car breaks down or I get sick, I don't know what I'll do. There's no safety net."

Tenants with children expressed anxiety about noise complaints potentially leading to eviction. One mother said:

"I'm constantly afraid my kids will be too loud, and we'll get kicked out. It's no way to live."

WINTER DANGERS

For those who are unhoused, Menomonie's harsh winters are life-threatening. In fact, in January of 2025, an unhoused person was found dead from exposure. A man who spent two years living in a tent by the Red Cedar River shared:

"The cold here isn't just uncomfortable—it's deadly. Without shelter, you're fighting to stay alive every night."

BARRIERS TO ASSISTANCE

Accessing housing assistance is particularly challenging for seniors and those without internet access. An elderly resident shared:

"I don't have a computer, and all the applications are online. It took me months to find someone who could help me apply."

5. Systemic Barriers: Inequities in Housing

Systemic issues, including discrimination and the growing influence of corporate landlords, further exacerbate the housing crisis in Menomonie.

DISCRIMINATION

Multiple residents shared experiences of being denied housing due to tattoos, piercings, criminal records, or disabilities. A man with a minor drug offense from his teens said:

"I've been turned away so many times. It doesn't matter how much I've turned my life around. One mistake follows me forever."

In addition, women and non-binary respondents to the student survey reported that they trusted their landlords less. One woman explained:

"My landlord is creepy. He just walks in without knocking."

Significantly, a male student with the same landlord was part of the conversation and he had this to say:

"Yeah, I can agree, [he is creepy, but] he doesn't just walk in though. With us, he actually knocks."

CORPORATE INFLUENCE

Out-of-town investors are buying up properties in Menomonie, increasing prices and reducing availability for locals. A homeowner said:

"It feels like housing isn't for people anymore—it's for corporations, driving up rent, getting rich, pushing people out."

6. Proposed Solutions: Building a Better Future

Residents shared several ideas to address the housing crisis, focusing on improving quality, expanding availability, and increasing accountability. Here are some of the ideas we heard during our conversations.

POLICY AND OVERSIGHT

- **Municipal Rental Inspections:** Regular inspections to enforce safety and health standards.
- **Landlord Accountability:** Stronger mechanisms for tenants to report neglect and hold landlords responsible.
- **Renters' Bill of Rights:** Accessible documents outlining tenant rights and protections.

EXPANDING HOUSING STOCK

- **Incentives for Affordable Housing:** Subsidies for developers to build ADA-compliant, family-sized homes.
- **Zoning Reform:** Allow for accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and mixed-use developments.
- **Alternative Housing Models:** Support tiny homes, co-housing, and cooperatives.

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN SOLUTIONS

- **Transitional Housing:** Expand capacity at shelters like Cairn House.
- **Tenant Resource Centers:** Create hubs for legal aid and housing support.
- **Renovate Vacant Properties:** Partner with contractors to repurpose rural homes.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Menomonie's housing crisis demands urgent attention. The voices captured in this report describe the human cost of inaction, from unsafe living conditions to the constant stress of housing

insecurity. By organizing together with our neighbors, Menomonie can ensure that housing is safe, affordable, and accessible for all. The time to act is now -- before the crisis deepens further.

About This Report

OUR ORGANIZATION

GrassRoots Organizing Western Wisconsin (GROWW) is a homegrown people's organization that builds power in our communities to create the change we need for all of us to make ends meet, live with dignity, and have a voice in shaping the decisions that impact us. We believe that the people closest to a problem are closest to the solution. We work in seven counties: Barron, Buffalo, Dunn, Pepin, Pierce, Polk, and Saint Croix. To get connected or learn more about GROWW, visit us at gro-ww.org.

OUR CORE TEAM

The GROWW Housing Justice Team originated at Grassroots School in January 2024, where some of us first met and learned that we shared concerns about housing challenges in Menomonie. A few months later, we formed a team and began meeting regularly to lay the groundwork for a housing justice campaign. From the start, we prioritized listening - talking with as many people as possible before launching a campaign. This report summarizes our first step taken towards building a local movement to address this urgent issue.

Core Team Members

Andrew Hagen, Monica Berrier, Ingmar Amberson, Nichole Manson, Caitlin Doerr, Cody Gentz, Tina Lee, Bill Hogseth

Our Canvassers

Nichole Manson, Ingmar Amberson, Andrew Hagen, Tina Lee, Joan Pougiales, Ann Vogl, Zack Lear, Brittney Legowski, Cody Gentz, Quinn Britz, Brandon Nunnery, Richard Breen, Jenelle Ludwig-Krause, Danny Akenson, Bill Hogseth

Stout Student Researchers

Corey Brisiel and Nik Nelson

OUR METHODS

- The findings in this report reflect the lived experiences and views of those who shared their perspective with us during one-to-one conversations and in listening sessions. The findings do not necessarily represent verified data.
- Quotes from this report are paraphrased from field notes taken by GROWW members during one-to-one conversations and listening sessions. Quotes are not verbatim. The one exception to this is the quote from the student researchers about “creepy” landlords. This was taken from a verbatim transcript.
- Proposed solutions in this report are ideas we heard at people’s doorsteps and during listening sessions. The solutions are presented here to inform the conversation and promote further discussion and not necessarily advocated by GROWW.
- The GROWW Housing Justice Core Team will conduct additional research to identify solutions to be advanced and won through a local grassroots organizing campaign.
- Analysis of field notes was assisted using ChatGPT4.