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Boston lags on apartment inspections

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Landlord Allen Mathurin (left) had his apartment inspected by Marcio Fonseca Jr. of the city's Inspectional Services.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 06, 2015

The city of Boston, which two years ago vowed to improve oversight of its rental apartments, is lagging well behind its inspection goals, so far conducting only a quarter of the reviews it had aimed to complete by year's end.

The Inspectional Services Department had once hoped to have about 60,000 units inspected by the end of this year but later lowered the goal to 44,000. Even this has been difficult to meet, however, with only 10,000 inspections completed with less than three months to go. Alarmed housing activists say the city is ignoring its own rules.

“They have not taken these issues seriously,” said Brighton resident Joanne D’Alcomo, an attorney and member of the Allston Brighton Community Development Corporation’s neighborhood stabilization task force. “It’s very disturbing.”

The department countered that it was working toward meeting the goal and argued in a statement that “the number of inspections shows that ISD is making tremendous progress.”

The department’s commissioner, William Christopher, said in a recent interview that he was committed to ensuring apartments are complying with housing standards.

“Our goal is to make sure units are safe, sanitary, and up to code,” he said.

The inspections are being conducted under a recent ordinance that called for all 160,000-plus apartments citywide to be inspected at least once every five years. Landlords can be granted exemptions for good track records or because they own units in smaller buildings.

The ordinance was passed by City Council in late 2012, a few months after then-Mayor Thomas M. Menino proposed it. The action followed a January 2012 incident in which a college student had been seriously injured after jumping from the window of a burning multiunit house in

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Allston. City inspectors had also found a series of troubling violations at rental properties.

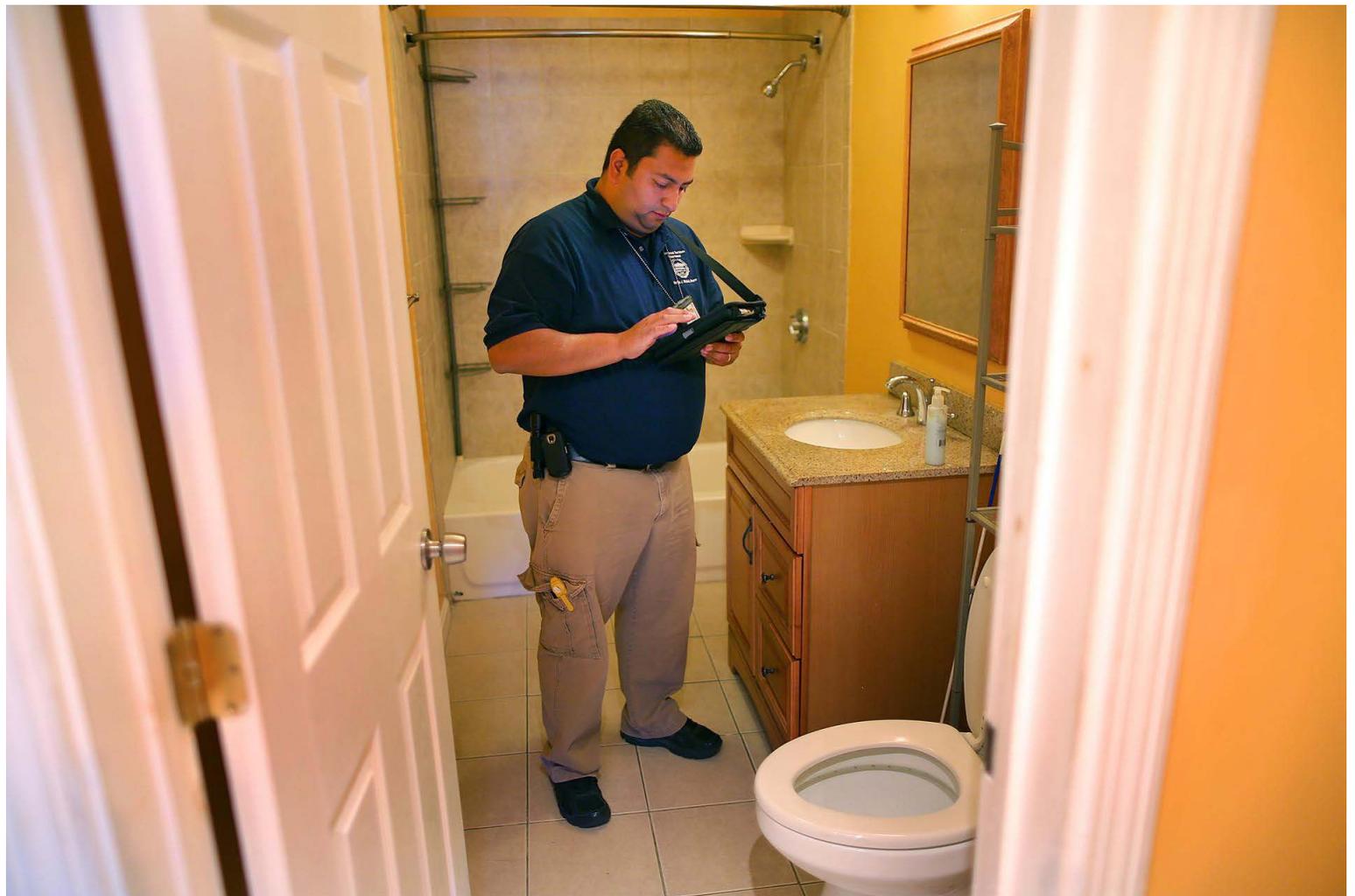
Part of the reason the city is so far behind its inspection goal, officials say, is that the department did not begin inspections until October 2014 — 10 months later than planned — because inspectors had to wait longer than expected for all landlords to register their units with the city. Once collected, the data had to be analyzed, Christopher said.

Registration was another requirement of the new ordinance. But many property owners were slow to sign up, and an estimated 50,000 units remain unregistered, the Globe reported last month.

Officials also said the inspection process was delayed because amendments were being made to the ordinance that created it.

“The rental program is a work in progress; we are working to refine and retool the process and are actively engaged in improving public outreach and education,” the inspection department statement said.

The city said it has hired five additional housing inspectors in the past two years, doubling the number now assigned to inspect rental units, along with two field supervisors who also inspect units.



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Inspector Fonseca noted the apartment had a loose toilet seat and a bathroom sink stopper that did not work.

On a recent Wednesday, an inspector left no stone unturned as he walked through a second-floor, three-bedroom unit in a three-decker on Blue Hill Avenue in Roxbury.

The veteran inspector checked the functionality of each window, blind, smoke detector, appliance, light bulb, electrical outlet, and the plumbing and heating systems. He jotted his findings down on a tablet.

He determined that the bathroom sink stopper wasn't working properly, the toilet seat cover was loose, and a couple of outlet covers were either loose or broken. The landlord was told to fix them and call the department to schedule a return visit.

In the end, the review took about 35 minutes, highlighting the practical challenges of closely

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'We are working to refine and retool the process.'

Inspectional Services Department statement

examining some 160,000 apartments across Boston.

“It usually takes a good amount of time,” said Will Onuoha, assistant commissioner of the department’s housing division.

He estimated inspections typically take 45 minutes to an hour, depending on the size and condition of the unit. “When they’re doing the inspections, it’s about taking their time and doing it right,” Onuoha said.

Any violation, no matter how small, requires a follow-up visit, unless the issues are remedied during the initial review.

“We almost always have to come back for reinspection,” he said.

The ordinance was enacted to make it easier for inspectors to ensure fixes of violations of basic sanitary and safety codes, including fire hazards, mold, overcrowding, and pest infestations.

A Globe Spotlight investigation in the spring of 2014 provided further evidence of poor conditions at some off-campus units in the city’s college neighborhoods, including detailing hazards at an Allston house where a student died in a fire in April 2013.

Landlords who violate the ordinance can be subjected to fines of \$300 per month. Christopher, the Inspectional Services commissioner, said the city has issued between 1,500 and 2,500 such fines, saying he was providing a range because some fines may be overturned on appeal. He said he preferred to work with landlords rather than fine them.

Christopher said the city had yet to tackle other aspects of the ordinance, such as creating a system to identify landlords who are “chronic offenders” of housing rules and drafting annual progress reports.

City Councilor Mark Ciommo, who represents Allston and Brighton and who voted for the ordinance, said he was concerned about the lag.

“Would I like to see more inspections and registrations at this point? Certainly,” he said. “But it’s a new and pretty complex undertaking, so I do understand it’s taking a while and there are bumps in the road.”

Ciommo said he did not believe the ordinance needed to be amended. He suggested finding a way to

speed up inspections.

“Do we need to check toilet seats?” he said. “I think we should really be focusing on life safety and code violations and real dangerous conditions.

“I applaud the thoroughness,” he added. “But if you’re looking to do more inspections, you’ve got to find a way to cut the time.”

Some landlords have decried the measure. They say it unfairly imposes new fees and additional oversight on responsible landlords, while problematic owners continue to fly under the radar.

“There are problem landlords out there,” said Gregory Vasil, chief executive of the Greater Boston Real Estate Board. “Why don’t you focus on them instead of trying to catch everyone?”

Vasil said the ordinance was a good idea in concept, but the city did not have the money or manpower to meet its goals.

Still, Vasil said, the inspection department has taken a “kinder, gentler, work-with-you approach” under Mayor Martin J. Walsh, who inherited the ordinance proposed and passed under Menino. And landlords have appreciated that change.

“In fairness to Mayor Walsh, he inherited this thing and was trying to figure out how to make it work. With the staff they have, they are doing the best they possibly can,” Vasil said.

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