

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 12, 2019

The Honorable Ben Carson
Secretary
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20410

Secretary Carson:

We write to request information relating to fire sprinkler installation in public housing buildings overseen by the U.S. Department of Housing Urban Development (HUD).

As you are aware, five Minnesotans were killed and four were injured in a tragic fire that ravaged a 25-story apartment tower in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis. This is a tragic loss for not only the families of the victims of the fire, but the entire Cedar-Riverside community. While the cause of the fire has not yet been determined, it is clear that the upper floors of the building, where the fatal fire began, did not have sprinkler systems installed. According to Minneapolis officials, the main floor and lower mechanical rooms of the building had “partial sprinkler coverage”¹ but the rest of the building did not.² HUD manages this building through the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA), but because it was built in 1969, it is exempt from the federal law passed in 1992 that requires automatic sprinkler systems in new multifamily public housing properties.³

Unfortunately, the vulnerability of this and other high-rise buildings that lack full sprinkler systems was recognized by MPHA prior to the outbreak of the fire. Earlier this year, MPHA identified \$152 million in “immediate capital needs,” including \$69 million that it required for “mechanical systems (includes plumbing & fire).”⁴ In the same report, MPHA stated that “as building codes have evolved, we need to address increased life/safety requirements such as retrofitting our high rise buildings with sprinkler systems.” Unfortunately, MPHA, like many public housing authorities, has limited funding available to address these deferred maintenance needs.

Fire sprinkler systems are widely recognized as an essential element of fire safety and properly installed sprinklers on all floors of the building may have mitigated the devastation caused by this fire. To better understand HUD’s plans for promoting the adoption of sprinkler systems in high-rise public housing buildings, we ask that you provide answers to the following questions:

¹ <http://www.startribune.com/after-5-die-in-minneapolis-high-rise-fire-calls-for-fire-prevention/565628002/?refresh=true>

² <https://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2019/11/29/minneapolis-public-housing-authority-need-for-sprinklers-cited-months-before-deadly-high-rise-fire/>

³ 15 U.S.C. 2227

⁴ <http://www.startribune.com/after-5-die-in-minneapolis-high-rise-fire-calls-for-fire-prevention/565628002/?refresh=true>

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1. What steps is HUD taking to encourage public housing authorities to install sprinkler systems in high-rise buildings whose construction predates 1992, and are not covered by sprinkler installation requirements in state and local building codes?
2. HUD's fiscal year 2020 budget request proposed zeroing out the Public Housing Capital Fund, which provides resources to public housing authorities to address maintenance and building needs. Will it be a priority in HUD's fiscal year 2021 budget request to ensure that public housing authorities have the resources to address these needs?
3. What can Congress do to assist HUD in encouraging housing authorities to retrofit high-rise buildings with full sprinkler systems?

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Tina Smith
United States Senator