

# Hurricane Sandy hurt Atlantic City's housing stock. 6 years later, it's still rebounding

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ATLANTIC CITY — Velvet Wright loved her tiny, red row home on North Tennessee Avenue.

It's where she ran a small nonprofit for 20 to 30 Atlantic City youth called 'Taking it to the Streets,' and where, across the street, she would play "wall ball" with her siblings as a kid.

But the 62-year-old said she had to leave.

After Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Wright said her landlord didn't have the money or insurance to quickly repair the badly flooded property, where mold and mildew were growing.

She was forced to move to Egg Harbor Township, abandoning the "little island where (she) enjoyed life."

"It pushed people out of Atlantic City," she said of the devastating storm.

The stretch of 10 row homes in the 3rd Ward is still in disarray. At least one is on the city's abandoned properties list, boarded up and with at least a foot of grass growing in front.

Wright's home appears occupied, but she's unsure what happened there since she left.

It's a problem that existed long before Sandy. But in a city with an aging housing stock that's trying to attract new residents, the storm added to blight in available houses, and took some off the rolls entirely. And Atlantic City isn't unique in this-- New Orleans continues to face a similar housing problem [nearly 14 years after Hurricane Katrina](#).

The solution, some say, may be rebuilding entire blocks, using nonprofits to reclaim empty houses and continuing to amend grant programs for low-income homeowners.

Carol Ruffu, president of the Chelsea Neighborhood Association, says more than 500 abandoned properties were counted by the city three years after the hurricane, though it's unclear what percentage are empty because of Sandy. That number was never documented.

Throughout the city, namely Bungalow Park, she said properties were abandoned by those who couldn't navigate confusing state and federal grant programs, and remain empty today.

According to FEMA, there are 361 homes dotted throughout the city that are still more than 50 percent damaged, of the [more than 12,000 total households](#) that saw major or severe damage.

And years later, Ruffu contends, necessary tear downs still haven't occurred throughout the resort.

Atlantic City wasn't among the top 20 municipalities with the most demolished housing units directly after the storm in 2013 or in 2018, according to Department of Community Affairs data.

Margate and Brigantine, two shore towns only miles away, saw more demolition permits for both years.

"(Vacant houses) have been sitting there for six years and they've just gotten worse and worse and worse," Ruffu said. "There have been so many people who have passed away and never got back into their homes."

And even if buildings damaged by the storm are now occupied, the conditions inside may be substandard, said the city's Licensing and Inspections Director Dale Finch.

The city can only inspect rental units, not single-family homes.

"Some we haven't looked at in years," Finch said. "We can only inspect rental units when there's a change in occupancy... There could be mold, mildew."

Rescuing them, though, may require new approaches: rebuilding entire streets rather than individual properties and taking another look at the rules surrounding grant programs.

Elevating or reconstructing such structures— like those along Ohio and Texas avenues — is usually difficult because they share walls with other structures. Raising a single row house sandwiched between two others could cost up to \$145 per square foot, significantly more than other types of buildings, said Steve Hauck, of S.J. Hauck House Movers.

"You're practically building a new home," Hauck said. "And a lot of the row homes in Atlantic City were built in the 1930s and were already falling apart."

Owners of row houses could "elevate by abandonment," Hauck said, meaning keep the first floor as a garage and build a new level above the existing unit.

Another option: Every homeowner on the street could secure funds and lift their house in unison. Hauck only recalls two instances where his company was hired to do either in Atlantic City.

Grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the state Department of Community Affairs (DCA) can be used to lift a block of homes if all approved owners agree to the program's conditions, but that's difficult to accomplish.

Jim Rutala agrees using grants to fix entire blocks and infrastructure would be most efficient. But he said that would require a hands-on approach. The state and federal government, he said, would have to target specific streets and lead the coordination among the neighbors, by sending letters or setting up local meetings.

In total, the DCA has given more than \$46 million to Atlantic City residents to either lift or repair homes through its Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, Elevation and Mitigation (RREM) and Low-to-Moderate Income Homeowners Rebuilding (LMI) programs.

"We tried to work with adjacent homes and get approval to lift both sides," Rutala said. "We were saying 'Don't fix one house at a time, fix whole streets.'"

Rutala says another roadblock homeowners faced were FEMA and DCA rules that requires homeowners to pay for repairs and get reimbursed by the state after the work is complete. Under DCA's program, applicants are

paid up to 50 percent of the cost of the grant upfront, but some who needed additional funds upfront were forced to drop out of the program.

Lisa Ryan, a spokeswoman for the DCA, said the money is disbursed over time to ensure rebuilding projects are "in compliance with federal standards." She says the state continuously makes changes to the program to help homeowners, such as a \$50 million allocation earlier this year specifically for people who have stalled construction.

"We're always asking 'How can we change the program to make it as easy as possible for people to get back home?'" Ryan said.

Still, one standout solution lies outside of the government and private homeowners. Local, on-the-ground nonprofits could play a large role in repairing abandoned homes from Sandy and getting them on the housing market again, some say.

It's a strategy one group in Camden is trying. Though the city wasn't affected by Hurricane Sandy, it faces a similar problem, with [nearly 900 abandoned homes as of 2016](#).

For the past 30 years, St. Joseph's Carpenter Society has been renovating damaged "zombie homes" in East Camden, where the vacancy rate is now lower than the rest of the city's. The nonprofit uses donations and grants to buy and fix eyesore houses, then sells them to locals.

Each buyer gets one-on-one counseling throughout the process for \$55. So far, the nonprofit has rescued nearly 1,000 abandoned homes and repaired another 464.

Pilar Hogan Closkey, the program's director, met with the Ducktown Neighborhood Association a few weeks ago to share how the same model could be used in Atlantic City.

It's local roots and goal of changing entire blocks is what has made it successful, she says.

"Residents of neighborhoods know so much more about what's happening on their block and can impart that knowledge," Closkey said. "It's very locally driven."