

Launching a Healthy Homes Program Scenario

For more than a week, temperatures have been dipping below freezing, reaching the 40s only in the afternoon. Mary and her family of four are cold. They live in a duplex and although the furnace is running full-time, the air from the vents feels cold. The thermostat read 45 degrees last night when they went to bed.

Mary relies on a kerosene space heater in the children's room and the oven in the kitchen to keep warm. The quilts she made years ago and the sweaters she picked up at Goodwill only go so far. She sends the children to a friend's house during the day but has no options for the night.

Mary called her property management company several times. They sent out a maintenance person who says that the furnace is fine – just too small for big drafty building like hers in such cold weather. He says that the house was built in 1940 and with the original windows in place what can she expect. He reminds her that she is getting a good deal on the rent and that the neighbors in the other half of the duplex are not complaining.

She cannot afford to hire a furnace repair person. She pays the utility bill. She is keeping up paying the bill but is worried about the bill this month. She does not want to have to choose between rent and heat but . . .

Her neighbor next door is Phyllis. Phyllis complained to her about the cold but said she did not want to annoy the property manager. Her son and two grandchildren live there. They are not on the lease. Mary did not tell the maintenance person about Phyllis' concerns.

Mary lives in the home with her three children who are 3, 7, and 11 years old. The two youngest have asthma. She is worried that the cold will stress their lungs – triggering an attack. The doctor has not tested the children to determine what triggers the asthma, but she heard that dust mites and mold may make their asthma worse. The doctor said to wash the bedding in very hot water. Her bathroom has mold around the shower. Sometimes she runs the shower to warm up the upstairs. She thinks she has the cockroaches under control after using the fogger last week. She found lots of dead cockroaches afterwards - even a dead mouse.

When Mary called the property management company again, she was told that the maintenance person said that the furnace was fine. At wits end, she starts calling numbers in the phone book. She calls you. You decide that the situation sounds bad enough that you need to take a look. You know that you are not required to help but no one else seems to be doing so.