The Better Government Association has won a Pulitzer Prize for its investigative stories with The Chicago Tribune that exposed the failure of Chicago city officials to keep tenants safe from deadly fires in dangerous residential buildings.

The Pulitzer board announced Monday afternoon the BGA and Tribune would share the award for local reporting – one of the highest honors in American journalism – for “The Failures Before the Fires.”

It is the first Pulitzer in the BGA’s 99-year history.

The April 2021 series followed more than a year of reporting and uncovered 61 deaths from 42 fires in buildings the city knew had fire safety issues, sometimes for years. The investigation revealed the city’s failure to follow up on complaints about hazards and how it put the interests of landlords above the safety of tenants.

Most of the 61 people who died were Black.
Mayor Lori Lightfoot responded by putting out a new landlord “scofflaw list” aimed at shaming landlords. The list, however, left off numerous properties where city officials found life-threatening housing violations, and tenant advocates said the city should be more aggressive to improve inspections and enforcement. The father of a 7-year-old girl who died alongside her three siblings in a 2014 fire said the city’s effort was “an insult.”

The investigation was led by former BGA reporter Madison Hopkins and Tribune reporter Cecilia Reyes. The work was edited at the BGA primarily by David Kidwell and John Chase. Editing at the Tribune was led by Kaarin Tisue.

Hopkins said Monday the award is a “huge honor.”

“I also want to express my deepest gratitude to the many families who shared their time and memories with me and Cecilia,” she said.

David Greising, president and CEO of the BGA, said the BGA is honored by the peer recognition, and hopes the award will draw attention to a problem city officials have done little to address.

“There’s a lot left to be done,” Greising said. “The city is little better off today than it was when dozens of people died in preventable fires. A ‘problem landlords’ list does not keep people safe.”

Greising said the award will motivate BGA staff to continue doing rigorous, high-impact work that helps to protect people from failures in government. “All of us who get involved in journalism dream of publishing this kind of work,” he said.

The series collected numerous honors even before Monday.

The Pulitzer recognition comes as the BGA expands its newsroom with funding from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. The “Fires” project included nine potential solutions to the hazardous situation uncovered by the BGA and Tribune reporters.

The Pulitzer win comes nearly 100 years after a group of clergy, lawyers and businessmen founded the BGA to spotlight Chicago’s rampant government corruption. The BGA evolved over decades to collaborate on investigative projects with other news outlets. Those collaborations included the Mirage Tavern investigation, in which the BGA and The Chicago Sun-Times teamed up to buy a
bar and use reporters working undercover to expose pervasive bribe-taking among public employees.

That investigation was a strong candidate for a Pulitzer in 1979.

A few months after the “Fires” series debuted, Hopkins left the BGA for a job as health accountability reporter for The Kansas City Beacon.

Monday’s Pulitzer is the 28th all-time for the Tribune. Executive Editor Mitch Pugh said the award demonstrates the value of partnerships between newsrooms. “We don’t do this just for the awards but I think anytime you see this kind of recognition it’s just reinforcement of the value of the work we all do,” Pugh said.

Click here for a full list of this year’s Pulitzer winners.