

National League of Cities: Culture of Health Spotlight
Syracuse, New York: Addressing housing & health to improve outcomes for children and families.

For decades, the City of Syracuse has been working to remediate lead in housing stock to address high rates of childhood lead poisoning. The result has been greater collaboration with a range of stakeholders including the Housing Authority, Public Health Department and non-profits like Home Headquarters. To further address this issue, Syracuse has recently moved forward to seek out broad-based solutions to ensure all children and their families have safe and healthy homes by creating a Municipal Violations Bureau.

The City has historically used available tools and policies to ensure that all housing complaints were addressed, and all landlords followed city code. However, with a lengthy process associated with the traditional court system for addressing violations, significant backlogs of cases resulted in limited convictions and accountability for those familiar with the system and its deficits. Syracuse felt that there needed to be more accountability to ensure its residents have access to safe and healthy homes. To address this issue, the City Council recently passed an ordinance, creating a new Municipal Violations Bureau, aimed at significantly streamlining the process for settling housing-related disputes from years to days. Here's how it works: a Municipal Violations Bureau allows residents to enter judgments against property owners without going to court. The bureau, with greater autonomy, can work to ensure needed and appropriate actions can be taken as judgements are filed. However, they still will need to adhere to notification and due process requirements to ensure a fair and transparent process.

Former mayor, Stephanie Miner, was very interested in addressing systemic poverty and viewed housing as a critical piece of this work. She used her role to elevate the issue and engage a broader array of elected officials and other key stakeholders. The new mayor, Ben Walsh, is continuing to move this project forward. Ensuring the success of establishing a new Municipal Violations Bureau requires alignment between the city, county, and state as well as strategic community engagement through a coalition of key stakeholders including landlords and the private, public, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors.

The City of Syracuse attributes much of its success to learning from their peers in Rochester and Buffalo who also have Municipal Violations Bureaus and internal will to get this effort underway. The City hopes the creation of this new Bureau will not only create a higher compliance rate, but also shorten the number of days it takes to address claims. In the long-term, Syracuse hopes to see improved health and academic outcomes and increased property values.