

# Housing Hazards and Health Stakeholder Series Summary

Cities play an essential role in promoting access to quality and affordable housing through policies, programs, and practices. Failing to provide safe housing for residents often creates health costs for the whole community, and deferred maintenance can undermine the city-level tax base and erode a community's financial stability. These [three briefs](#) provide tested strategies that local leaders can adopt to improve housing conditions through effective partnerships.

## Gaining Community Health Allies for Healthy Homes Programs

**Housing is a key factor affecting community health. Health stakeholders such as public health departments, health systems, community groups, and insurers can build wider support for housing quality improvements, and leveraging health data can help “make the case” for improving housing quality in the face of cost concerns.**

IN THIS BRIEF, YOU WILL LEARN HOW YOU CAN:

- ◆ Share national data to help local health stakeholders understand how important housing quality is for community health. This may encourage them to share local data and other resources in support of healthy housing efforts.
- ◆ Learn about the incentives and opportunities of local health systems. Some health systems have invested in housing as part of their community benefit obligations or in response to payment systems that reward them for avoiding hospitalizations.
- ◆ Gather stories from health care providers about how their patients were harmed by housing hazards. These stories help frame diseases like asthma and lead poisoning as “health problems with a housing solution,” and can make a big impression on elected officials, reporters and community leaders.
- ◆ Map health data on conditions like lead and asthma to identify neighborhoods for priority action. Geographic analysis of birth outcomes is often used as an overall indicator of community health and neighborhood conditions that affect health, including housing.
- ◆ Disaggregate local analyses of housing-associated health conditions by race and income, to identify which communities, schools or neighborhoods bear the greatest health burden of hazardous housing.
- ◆ Link housing-associated health conditions, such as asthma, to medical costs. For every dollar spent on home-based prevention, there is an estimated health savings of between \$5.3 and \$14. Localized analyses will put the costs of housing improvement into perspective.
- ◆ Draw on the expertise of health stakeholders, including their knowledge of national research summaries, analyses of local data and past program evaluations, to build the case for action with key decision makers.

Explore this brief for examples and tools that can help you develop partnerships with local health stakeholders, including an overview of approaches to leverage health system funding for housing efforts (p. 8), specific tips on dealing with health data privacy concerns (p. 13), limitations on health professionals' ability to advocate (p. 6), a framework for identifying vulnerable populations (p. 14) and tools to calculate the health costs of housing hazards (p. 18).

In 2014, researchers from Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center published an article reporting that children hospitalized for asthma were nearly twice as likely to be re-hospitalized if they lived in census tracts with the highest rates of housing code violations. This piece and related analyses informed efforts by the city and Legal Aid to address hazards including mold and pests in high-hazard buildings.

## Aligning Housing Quality with Diverse Community Interests

**A successful housing improvement strategy must meaningfully engage housing providers and align with diverse stakeholders' existing priorities in the community. Local efforts can also benefit from partnerships at the state and regional level.**

IN THIS BRIEF, YOU WILL LEARN HOW YOU CAN:

- ◆ Integrate the various goals of your healthy housing effort into your community's housing system. Housing affects health in many ways, including environmental hazards, safety, affordability, and neighborhood stability.
- ◆ Initiate partnerships with groups who focus on children's health, neighborhood improvement, affordable housing and community development by linking housing hazards to these groups' core interests.
- ◆ Engage K-12 educators, children's advocates, faith communities, disability rights groups and childcare providers. These groups may be particularly motivated by connections between housing and children's development and lifelong well-being.
- ◆ Use cost estimates for special education needs attributable to home-based lead exposures or asthma triggers to mobilize educators and community leaders.
- ◆ Estimate the cost burdens that improving housing quality will have on different segments of the housing market, and develop a plan to meet those needs. Cities have successfully used this strategy to address concerns raised by landlords and housing groups that raising housing quality standards will reduce affordable housing.
- ◆ Connect housing quality to local funders' broader community goals, to encourage them to support healthy housing initiatives. Local foundations often focus on core social issues such as child welfare, education, crime reduction, environmental issues or workforce development.
- ◆ Highlight inequities to add a moral imperative to your housing quality efforts and energize support for policy change. Map areas with high rates of hazards and link housing hazards to historical inequities associated with race, income, ethnicity, and educational outcomes to help diverse stakeholders understand these connections.
- ◆ Fine-tune your programs, policies, or practices over time in order to increase cost-effectiveness and translate "lessons learned" between communities. Universities or other local partners may help with evaluation, analysis, adaptation and dissemination.

Explore this brief for tips on how to engage local education groups (p. 8), approaches to addressing landlords' concerns (p. 15), specific instances in which regional engagement can be advantageous (p. 21) and framework of the "four pathways" by which housing affects health that you can use when reaching out to diverse community interests (p. 10).

Prior to passage of Cleveland's lead law in 2019, proponents estimated how much it would cost to bring properties into compliance in different neighborhoods. A local foundation supported the development of a funding plan to identify the needed resources.

Cities have developed varied strategies to use their limited inspection and enforcement resources efficiently. For example, Minneapolis, Minnesota uses a "tiered" system in which properties with a record of violations receive more frequent inspections than those that are in good repair.

## Building Governmental Support for Healthy Housing

**City leaders have an important role to play in engaging key policymakers' support, promoting collaboration within City Hall and reaching out to other public sector entities to develop successful healthy housing initiatives. Building internal support and external partnerships can be complex, but collaboration across agencies and with other levels of government is key to local success.**

IN THIS BRIEF, YOU WILL LEARN HOW YOU CAN:

- ◆ Develop your community partners' interest, knowledge and capacity related to housing hazards. There is a strong connection between community priorities and political will for implementation, so building community interest is an important first step toward increasing elected officials' support for these efforts.
- ◆ Engage community coalitions in pursuit of common goals with municipal staff. Community coalitions can play key roles in initiating, promoting, and sustaining healthy homes efforts.
- ◆ Demonstrate strong community support and highlight the co-benefits of healthy housing. This is particularly important in the face of limited resources, since healthy housing programs may compete for resources with other aspects of city governance, municipal services and community investments.
- ◆ Build a deep understanding of local political dynamics to serve as a foundation for your policy strategy. Keep in mind that housing quality improvement efforts can be politically controversial, especially when elected officials have close ties to the landlord community.
- ◆ Understand your local housing market. Cities with rapidly rising housing costs may face different challenges in advancing healthy homes programs than those with continued disinvestment. For example, in areas with high rents, there may be fewer concerns about landlords' ability to finance improvements, but more concerns about loss of affordable housing.
- ◆ Create a realistic cost estimate based on the experiences of other cities, and develop plans to phase-in, target, or subsidize programs that carry inspection fees. This can help alleviate concerns about the costs of expanded rental inspections, particularly in municipalities with tight budgets.
- ◆ Work across departments. Responsibilities for health, housing, environmental quality, infrastructure, and community development are divided among departments, so collaboration is essential. In some cities, staff have carved out opportunities to collaborate within their existing responsibilities. In others, dedicated positions have been created to promote coordination between departments.

Explore this brief to learn about the complex roles municipal leaders can play when it comes to cultivating community capacity, developing support from key elected officials, overcoming internal inertia and addressing important stakeholders' concerns about potential effects on the local housing market. You will find specific examples of how to address concerns about implementation costs (p. 9), ways to promote collaboration within the public sector (p. 14) and potential contributions from local and state government entities.

In Rochester, New York, a clinic/university/community partnership called Get the Lead Out assessed 100 homes for lead hazards. GLO collected stories about how children were exposed to lead in these homes because of policy gaps. These personal stories made a powerful impact on city staff and elected officials as they debated and unanimously passed a lead law.

Resident organizing had a significant impact on policy change in Greensboro, NC. The Greensboro Housing Coalition worked for many years to build community engagement on housing quality issues. The engagement and trust building led to a community-government partnership to improve conditions in an apartment complex where high rates of asthma were linked to mold. This success helped improve policy and enforcement citywide.

When Syracuse was considering passing a new lead law, the Commissioner of Neighborhood and Business Development carefully calculated implementation costs based in part on the recent experiences of a nearby city. This gave city leaders time to seek state and private funding for some of the start-up costs, which in turn helped overcome concerns about the ordinance.

Alameda County received foundation funding to support a temporary staff position focused on healthy housing. One task was to work with researchers to estimate the number of school days missed due to asthma associated with home hazards, since absenteeism was a key community concern. This position was so successful in developing partnerships that the city continued funding it for several years after the grant ended.