

1 Building Governmental 2 Support for Healthy Housing

THIS IS THE THIRD in a series of briefs about building stakeholder engagement in healthy housing efforts. This series is intended to share lessons learned from municipal-level healthy housing efforts. The first two briefs discuss partnerships with health system stakeholders (Gaining Community Health Allies for Healthy Homes Programs) and with other community interests (Aligning Housing Quality with Diverse Community Interests). The focus of this brief is on ways to engage policy makers and key staff in relevant agencies to support innovative housing quality practices. It also addresses strategies for promoting collaboration with other agencies and levels of government in support of these efforts.

Overview

THIS BRIEF DISCUSSES:

How municipal leaders can help develop public support for healthy homes efforts.

Paths cities have taken to increase policy makers' support for healthy homes programs.

Strategies for cultivating support among staff who play diverse roles in implementation.

How to sustain partnerships with other divisions and levels of government to promote effective healthy homes initiatives.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. **Local elected officials and city staff can contribute to building support among key stakeholders and community groups:** Public support for strengthening cities' healthy homes efforts is essential. Municipal officials and staff can help make healthy housing a community priority by working with community groups in a variety of ways.
2. **Key policy makers' support is essential and takes time to cultivate:** The existing level of commitment among local elected officials and key city staff may vary. While some leaders may have a strong commitment to addressing housing problems, others may need more convincing as they consider related impacts on the housing market and other competing interests. In this case, intentional, long-term efforts may be needed to address specific concerns and to build political support.
3. **Pay close attention to developing capacity and support across agencies within City Hall:** Implementing healthy homes programs often requires collaboration between multiple departments. Cities have successfully taken varied approaches to get internal stakeholders on board with changes in training, workload, and processes. This process is often supported by a champion who has authority over multiple or all departments.
4. **Intergovernmental collaboration is important to successful healthy housing initiatives:** Most successful healthy homes programs rely on coordination among multiple programs, agencies, and levels of government, including local, state and federal. Municipal leaders can carefully identify barriers and promote incentives for sustaining collaboration with external governmental entities.

Background: Confronting Barriers to Healthy Housing

Healthy housing programs can face multiple barriers to implementation. Concerns raised by established economic and community interest groups, particularly those representing lower-rent private housing markets, can be challenging to navigate. Anticipating, addressing and overcoming potential resistance can require strong support by elected officials, municipal staff, community members, and other agencies involved in implementing the changes.

Most policy makers understand that safe and stable housing is essential for people to live healthy and productive lives. As discussed in *Gaining Community Health Allies for Healthy Homes Programs*, inadequate housing can contribute significantly to health disparities because low-income people and communities of color are more likely to experience health hazards in their homes. For this reason, many cities have undertaken innovative new policies, programs, or partnerships to improve housing quality, most commonly with an emphasis on reducing exposure to lead and asthma triggers such as pests and mold.¹

Policy makers must consider the resources required by new healthy housing policies. These resources include costs of implementation, feasibility of enforcement, legal liability, and technical capacity. Healthy housing programs may compete for resources with other aspects of city governance, municipal services, and community investments. Demonstrating strong community support is critical in helping local elected officials prioritize healthy housing issues in the face of limited resources.

Municipal leaders may view health hazards in housing as the responsibility of health departments, particularly with respect to issues like lead, pests, and sanitary conditions that are regulated under public health laws. Public health departments do have an important role to play, but they are often limited in their resources, capacity, and ability to act proactively. Healthy housing efforts may also require coordination with local human services departments and other local and state-level agencies. Improving housing quality often requires collaboration across multiple departments, agencies, and levels of government. To successfully advance healthy housing efforts, it is essential that local elected officials and staff understand the opportunities for collaboration with established community interests and with a wide range of government agencies.

¹ National League of Cities. (2019, May 31). *City-Level Models to Advance Healthy Housing: Lessons from NLC's Mayor's Institute on housing, hazards, and health*. Available at: <https://nlc.org/sites/default/files/users/user75/FINAL-Healthy%20Housing.pdf>. Accessed August 2020.

Government Roles in Building Community Support

Building public support is a key part of developing strong leadership for city initiatives. Public support is particularly important for healthy housing initiatives because they face multiple barriers to implementation including competing interests. Policy makers are more likely to act if they have a clear sense that improved housing quality is a high priority for their constituents and communities. Yet, communities may not readily grasp how housing quality initiatives support their core priorities. It is important that city leaders engage community groups around how housing quality improvements align with their core interests so that they may become effective advocates.

There are many ways that municipal staff can foster greater community support for healthy housing. For example, providing financial support to community groups can help build groups' capacity to engage by hiring dedicated staff, educating their members, or doing outreach. Whenever possible, cities should provide financial support for community groups to conduct healthy homes-related projects, participate in conferences or events, and devote staff time to ensure greater understanding of impacts of lead and other hazards. In addition to financial support, city staff can give presentations to community groups, educate their members or staff, or provide locally relevant data. Offering free space for related events is another "in kind" way city staff can build community groups' healthy homes capacity.



Cities and Coalitions for Healthy Housing

Community coalitions can play key roles in initiating, promoting, and/or sustaining healthy homes efforts. In many cases, these coalitions provide a forum for city leaders, other government agencies and non-governmental groups to work together effectively. But there can be challenges to working with community coalitions. Here are a few tips drawn from cities' past experiences:

- If a coalition does not exist, give broad consideration to who in the community might be an appropriate convener and support their involvement. Potential conveners include citywide non-profits, health interest groups, neighborhood groups, community foundations, academic institutions, housing services, community action agencies, or many others.
- Provide funding or in-kind support to foster capacity of the convener and its members, recognizing that some groups may prefer not to accept government funding to maintain independence and credibility.
- Consider participating in a “technical” or “advisory” role, rather than in a decision-making or “board” position. This can be particularly helpful if the coalition is likely to be strongly critical of city action or inaction.

Many healthy homes initiatives trace their origins to strong community advocacy work, efforts by city leaders to build political support for new policies, or both. For example, in Alameda County, CA, strong community advocacy by the grassroots organization People United for a Better Life in Oakland (PUEBLO) in the late 1990's led to establishment of a \$10 per unit fee on rental units in Oakland and several other cities within the county to fund a childhood lead poisoning prevention program. Since then, county staff have developed a strong healthy homes program, and are now working with community groups to garner support to expand the fee to all cities and increase the effectiveness of the program.

In South Carolina, the Greensboro Housing Coalition's investment in resident organizing had a significant impact on policy change. The Greensboro Housing Coalition (<https://www.greensborohousingcoalition.org/>) worked for many years to build community engagement in efforts to improve housing quality. GHC's Executive Director Josie Williams emphasized that engaging the community and building trust were essential to their success. A key strategy was working with residents of a housing complex where there were 100 cases of asthma among its 177 units. This effort started with "boots on the ground" work including door-to-door outreach, resident surveys, and regular meetings. Eventually, this led to residents speaking to the City Council and sharing findings about hazardous conditions in their apartments. These personal stories increased council members' support for implementing housing code policy changes. As GHC's Williams said, "Community project changes can lead to policy changes. We do the programmatic work but we also set strategies that lead to policy changes. If you change policy you can impact the whole city, not just a particular area."

Community-engaged pilot projects can be a particularly helpful approach to building public and political support. One of the initial efforts of Rochester's Coalition to Prevent Lead Poisoning was the "Get the Lead Out" (GLO) project, which assessed lead hazards in 100 homes. The project involved community groups and volunteers in conducting assessments, educating residents, and working with property owners. GLO produced data on the prevalence of hazards, identified gaps in existing policies, and estimated control costs. In addition, it increased the partners' understanding of lead. GLO collected stories about how children were exposed to lead despite the project's best efforts using existing resources. These personal stories made a powerful impact on elected officials. GLO also hosted a "lead lab" in a vacant house to teach others about lead hazards. Several municipal officials who visited said the "lead lab" helped them see that lead hazard control was feasible and affordable, which contributed to them becoming key supporters of Rochester's lead law.

One example of the risks associated with adopting policies prior to gaining community support comes from Benton Harbor, Michigan. Soon after passage of Rochester, New York's lead law in 2005, public health advocate professionals in Benton Harbor recognized that their city had similar lead risks due to the prevalence of older rental housing. They invited leaders from Rochester to share their approach with the Benton Harbor City Council, who quickly adopted a similar local law. Soon afterwards, the state of Michigan appointed an Emergency Manager for Benton Harbor, eliminating the ability of the City Council to oversee implementation of the law. Because the law was passed without well-developed community support, there were no advocates to serve as "watchdogs" for its implementation. To this day, the law remains on the books, but has not been enforced.²

² Korfmacher, K. S. (2019). *Bridging Silos: Collaborating for Environmental Health and Justice in Urban Communities*. MIT Press. Available at: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/bridging-silos>

Building Support Among Elected Officials and City Leaders

Along with engaging the public, successful healthy housing improvement efforts strategically build support among local elected officials. Lessons learned from recent efforts include:

- Analyze the playing field - research where local elected officials stand on healthy housing issues. It can take time to determine the position of each relevant official (typically the mayor and city council), their backgrounds, what it would take to “make it a win,” and/or neutralize opposition to develop the most effective approach to cultivating each person’s support.
- Recruit political expertise - in addition to subject matter experts, healthy homes efforts should include people from both inside and outside of government who have experience promoting policy initiatives and organizing communities.
- Identify multiple champions - reach out to multiple leaders to increase the breadth of support.
- Make persuasive connections - connect policy makers with people they are likely to trust and respect. Individuals who represent similar positions, roles, or interests in other cities may be particularly helpful.

It is important to recognize that housing quality efforts can be politically controversial in complicated ways. In many cities, elected officials have close ties to the landlord community, and may themselves own rental property. Understanding the political dynamics of the rental housing market is essential to successfully advocating for change. Political leaders who are seeking reelection may shy away from pushing new housing quality efforts because of the competing interests, costs, uncertainties, and complexities involved. Perhaps for this reason, several recent successful efforts to pass significant new policies were led by “outgoing” mayors. In other cities, policy change was led by officials who were elected with a strong mandate to address the dual challenges of housing quality and affordability. Sometimes a tragedy or media reports of egregious housing hazards (fires, accidents, etc.) increases public pressure and leadership support for policy change. There are also cases in which deeply skeptical elected officials eventually became supporters, usually after healthy housing proponents spent an extended period listening to their concerns, gathering data to address these concerns, and building support among community leaders with political influence.

It is important to remember that these dynamics differ significantly from place to place. Cities facing rapid gentrification and high housing costs are likely to have different concerns than those with continued disinvestment. In areas with high rents, the public and elected officials tend to be more skeptical of landlords' claims that they cannot afford to make improvements, but more concerned about loss of affordable housing.

Addressing Financial Concerns of Government Stakeholders

Concern about housing costs is often the biggest barrier to winning political support. Concerns include costs incurred by the city to implement new programs (and presumably passed along to taxpayers) as well as costs for property owners to make needed repairs. Owners' costs to make healthy homes repairs may result in rent increases. Especially in areas where many tenants are rent-burdened, the potential for increased housing costs translates directly into fears about housing instability, eviction, and homelessness. As described in *Aligning Housing Quality with Diverse Community Interests*, cities have taken diverse approaches to addressing these concerns, including housing market analyses, phased-in implementation or pilot programs, tiered systems that hold poorly-performing landlords accountable through more frequent inspections, and raising financial resources for repairs.

There are multiple ways to mitigate concerns about the implementation costs to municipalities of new healthy homes efforts. It can be helpful to estimate the true costs of the new program and openly set forth a plan for meeting these costs, such as increasing licensing fees. If a city currently has no inspection process, the costs are clearly higher than where health homes considerations can be simply added to enhance an existing inspection system. It is important to consider the full costs of implementation compared to the status quo.

Addressing Concerns About Implementation Costs

In most cases, municipal leaders are better able to support new healthy homes programs when they have a clear sense of how much they will cost and how those new costs will be supported, especially with tightened municipal budgets. These examples briefly show how four different cities addressed implementation costs:

Minneapolis, MN: Minneapolis uses a “tiered” system for efficiently allocating limited inspection resources. As described in *Aligning Housing Quality with Diverse Community Interests*, properties with a record of violations receive more frequent inspections than those that are in good repair. As a result, inspectors spend more time focusing on code enforcement in higher-risk properties. This costs less than if every property were inspected with the same frequency.

Philadelphia, PA: Recognizing that the city lacked the staff or resources to conduct inspections, municipal leaders passed a lead law that relies on private inspectors paid directly by the property owner. This kind of system reduces the city’s direct implementation costs, but it still must allocate staff resources for quality control and regulation of private inspectors.

Rochester, NY: Rochester had a system of proactive rental inspections for many years before its lead law was passed in 2005. The lead law's implementation costs included the additional time and lab costs for taking dust wipes as well as administrative support. The city estimated costs for dust wipes and requested that the county health department subsidize these costs from their state lead poisoning prevention funding. The health department has reimbursed approximately half of the dust wipe costs each year since 2006.

Syracuse, NY: When Syracuse was considering passing a new lead law, former Syracuse Commissioner of Neighborhood and Business Development Stephanie Pasquale said "part of my job was informing the Mayor and the Administration of implementation costs, such as hiring two more inspectors and a lead coordinator, providing training to all inspection staff, and allocating approximately \$150,000 a year in dust wipe testing. It was important to prepare everyone about what the number was. We enjoy strong partnerships with the philanthropic community and were successful in obtaining some grant support for training from New York State. We don't expect the city to bear all the costs and will continue look for additional support from private philanthropy and government grants." These efforts helped overcome concerns about the lead ordinance, which was adopted on July 13, 2020.

In all these cases, realistically estimating costs of healthy homes inspections based on the experience of other cities and identifying ways to cover these costs was key to garnering leaders' support. Similar strategies can be applied to develop support for other kinds of healthy homes programs, including education, housing courts, or repair programs.

A growing number of cities are implementing new healthy homes policies. The experience of these early adopters can help other cities estimate their likely costs. For example, when Rochester's lead law was first passed in 2005, the cost of a "clearance inspection" on the private market was around \$350. After the law passed, the increased demand for clearance testing encouraged additional firms to meet this need, and competition quickly brought the cost down to around \$150. Designing an evaluation and reporting system to track actual budgetary impacts can inform future adjustments if costs exceed what was expected.

Overcoming Internal Barriers To Change

Another important consideration is how healthy housing efforts impact city staff. City staff may have concerns about the challenges of implementation, budgetary impacts, training needs, conflict with stakeholders, and competing priorities for time. These concerns are likely to be heightened by tight budgets and the Covid-19 pandemic. Involving staff in the development of concrete plans for how such challenges can be addressed may help them become more comfortable with change.

New housing quality programs sometimes face resistance from inspection staff. Particularly those staff who have been in their positions for a long time or already feel overburdened by their workload may not readily embrace new requirements. Several cities have worked to overcome these concerns by proactively retraining staff and collaboratively setting new expectations. Some examples include:

- Working with unions to increase understanding of the changes, their goals, and their implications for workers.
- Using staff trainings, reviews, and promotion pathways to build 'soft skills' and promote a culture of customer service and tenant protection.
- Listening to staff concerns and addressing them through additional training, modifications, or resources.
- Inviting health professionals and community groups to speak to housing inspectors about the important role they play in protecting children's health.

Another important consideration is fostering collaboration between offices or divisions within city government. However, it is also important to acknowledge that collaboration takes time and energy. The field of healthy homes is rich with examples of staff who found ways to collaborate, informally coordinate programs, and pilot innovations that eventually led to broader systems change. For example:

- The City of Minneapolis recently proposed a new staff position responsible for promoting collaboration between the health department and housing inspection programs.
- Nearly 10 years ago, Alameda County received grant funding from the Kresge Foundation to fund a City of Oakland employee focused on healthy housing. This position was so successful in establishing new partnerships that the city chose to continue funding it for several years after the grant ended. This work helped pave the way for current discussions regarding a proactive rental inspection program.
- When the mayor of Cleveland committed to passing a lead law in 2019, he directed several departments to work together to develop an effective, integrated approach.
- As these examples show, strong leadership, strategic organization, dedicated resources, and job descriptions that include coordinating duties can be effective tools.



Promoting Collaboration Between Agencies and Units of Government

Understanding government agencies' incentives and constraints is key for gaining their support and designing sustainable healthy homes partnerships. Collaboration is essential because responsibilities for health, housing, environmental quality, infrastructure, and community development are often shared among different agencies and levels of government.

Connections across state and local governments can promote healthy homes efforts. However, it can be difficult to sustain partnerships. Collaboration can be particularly challenging when agencies report to elected officials from different parties or with different priorities. For example, when the Rochester lead law was passed in 2005, the elected leadership of the City of Rochester was entirely comprised of Democrats, while the county leadership was Republican. Strong public support helped overcome the partisan divide and support the necessary collaboration between the county health department and the city's housing inspections department. A key factor was focusing on the welfare of low-income children, which was a high priority for both governments.

Before reaching out to governmental actors beyond City Hall, it is important to assess these agencies' goals, incentives, capacity, and constraints related to healthy housing. Because collaboration takes time and resources, partnering may be perceived to detract from the agency's core mission and ability to achieve its primary responsibilities. Identifying barriers to collaboration can help inform the structure of partnerships, relationships, and resources needed to sustain them. Strategies to promote collaboration include:

- **Asking leaders to clearly voice support for healthy housing initiatives:** High-level support can encourage implementing staff that it is acceptable to spend time on collaborative activities outside of their core responsibilities.
- **Working with willing partners:** When support by agency leadership is not forthcoming, working directly with interested lower-level staff on an operational level may be a productive strategy.
- **Sharing credit widely:** Publicly sharing credit for progress with all partnering agencies can help sustain goodwill for collaboration.
- **Acknowledging that the costs of collaboration are real:** When possible, seek financial resources to offset the costs of collaboration for all partners in the form of grants, dedicated staff positions, and program costs.
- **Identifying “win-win” opportunities:** Many initiatives can help meet agencies' core goals while improving housing quality, even if housing is not directly their responsibility.
- **Hunting as a pack for funding:** Many funders are impressed by strong intergovernmental and community partnerships; a functional collaboration may help generate new funds for implementation.
- **Reaching out to peer cities:** Leaders often find models from cities they consider to be leaders or peers most persuasive, particularly those nearby. As an added bonus, similarly situated cities may identify common needs and be able to advocate more effectively as a group for changes in state policies, programs, or funding.

Many public agencies and government actors can play collaborative roles that align with their agency's primary goals. Several examples are provided in the following table.

Potential Collaborative Roles of Public Agencies*

GOVERNMENT ACTOR

POTENTIAL COLLABORATIVE ROLE(S)

Local School District

- Support children with housing-related health problems like asthma
- Adopt quality standards and maintenance protocols to ensure healthier school buildings
- Contribute to public education through parent engagement programs
- Work with anti-truancy initiatives to track chronic absenteeism related to asthma and other housing-associated health issues

Fire, Police, and Public Safety Departments

- May support education, provide technical resources (e.g. free smoke detectors, etc.), report concerns, or assist with enforcement

Public Health Department

- Identify neighborhoods with frequent housing quality problems through public health surveillance data.
- Train non-health experts in other agencies to better understand housing-health connections
- Enforce sanitary code to strengthen healthy home initiatives
- Support primary prevention through home inspection, education, or repair programs

Environmental Agencies

- Set guidelines for environmental impact review of new programs or policies, including those related to home hazards
- Regulate worker training, licensing, waste disposal, or work practices
- Provide grants, technical assistance, or trainings
- Support programs to aid environmental justice communities

Department of State (or agency responsible for local codes)

- Set stronger statewide standards for building codes and inspections
- Review local initiatives for possible preemption of state policy

Health and Human Services

- Educate and refer clients to healthy home programs
- Provide emergency housing to families affected by housing problems
- Evaluate impact of healthy housing projects on housing affordability, turnover, and needs for emergency housing
- Coordinate inspections and standards for housing assistance programs

Workforce Development

- Train underemployed workers as inspectors or in healthy home repair or construction skills

Public Housing Authority

- Prioritize high-risk families' access to safer housing opportunities (including publicly-assisted housing)
- Apply for grants/projects to improve quality in public housing
- Enhance federally mandated inspections to align with local standards
- Contribute expertise, experience, or local workforce for training/capacity-building of local staff in healthy housing

Courts/judges/district attorneys

- Partner with city in enforcing housing codes
- Train local judges in healthy homes and relevant codes to improve consistency and protective outcomes
- Create dedicated Housing Courts to facilitate enforcement

*These are just a few examples of the diverse kinds of government entities that may be essential to sustained success. Depending on the state, these services may be carried out by different agencies or levels of government.

Conclusions

Each city takes a different path in developing governmental support for housing quality programs. Strategically building support among community and government leaders is essential to overcome the barriers often faced in adopting healthy homes programs. As described in *Gaining Community Health Allies for Healthy Homes Programs* and *Aligning Housing Quality with Diverse Community Interests*, sharing other cities' approaches for using data and evaluating various housing strategies can help address local concerns. However, even with the best available information, there will always be uncertainties about how a particular policy will play out under local conditions. Strong public advocacy, leadership, internal support, and collaboration with other government actors are essential foundations for successful innovations to promote healthy homes.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT: With generous support from The JPB Foundation, the National League of Cities (NLC) is working to advance city-level approaches and practices surrounding the health impacts of poor housing quality. The goal of this project is to support city leaders to implement effective policies, practices and programs and to engage local partners to ensure access to safe, stable housing for all residents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: NLC expresses gratitude to Dr. Katrina Korfmacher, Research Professor at the University of Rochester, for her work and leadership associated with this effort. Sue Pechilio Polis, NLC's Director of Health & Wellness, Institute for Youth, Education and Families (IYEF), is responsible for the overall initiative in collaboration with Anne Li, Program Specialist, Health & Wellness, IYEF; Anthony Santiago, Director of Programs and Partnerships, IYEF; Kathrina Maramba, Senior Specialist for IYEF, Digital Engagement, Marketing and Communications; and Clifford M. Johnson, Executive Director, IYEF.

SPECIAL THANKS to reviewers, including: Alan Mallach, Senior Fellow, Center for Community Progress; Amanda Reddy, Executive Director, National Center for Healthy Housing; Katie MoranMcCabe, Special Projects Manager, Center for Public Health Law Research, Temple University; and Mark Willis, Senior Policy Fellow, NYU Furman Center.