

MESSAGE GUIDE:

Advancing Health and Equity Through Housing





NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

The National League of Cities is an organization comprised of city, town and village leaders that are focused on improving the quality of life for their current and future constituents.

With over 90 years of dedication to the strength, health and advancement of local governments, NLC has gained the trust and support of more than 2,000 cities across the nation. Together, our mission is to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

NLC has several tracks of work at the intersection of housing and health, including technical assistance through situational analysis, partner engagement, local data work, a peer learning lab, and city-specific resources and programming that positions local leaders as peer experts who can provide unique insights on how other cities can improve housing quality to advance health and equity. For more information, please visit <https://www.nlc.org/>.

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. NLC expresses gratitude to Metropolitan Group for their work and leadership associated with this effort.

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Introduction

Healthy homes as a strategy to improve well-being and advance city priorities

CITIES ACROSS THE country are working to make healthy housing the rule, not the exception, through policies, programs and practices. Healthy homes—safe and free from physical hazards—promote good physical and mental health,¹ and boost people’s ability to succeed in school and work, avoid health complications and reach their full potential.² They support stable housing and strengthen public and private investment.

Cities hold the responsibility for ensuring housing is safe—it’s not something we can leave to renters and families. Parents are taking action to keep their children healthy, but without affordable options they may end up in one of the 45 million houses with one or more health and safety hazards.³ It’s hard for the average person to see hidden dangers such as mold, lead, water intrusion, pests and electrical deficiencies. Others may be unaware of their rights as renters and might not know about the short- and long-term impacts of healthy housing. Healthy housing policies can help eliminate that uncertainty.

By collaborating with landlords, tenants rights groups, foundations and other decision-makers across sectors, cities can prioritize healthy homes as a strategy to advance shared goals for economic development, health and well-being, and educational success.



Who is this guide for?

This guide is for anyone working to build support within city government, among key stakeholders and across the public for healthy housing policies as part of a comprehensive housing strategy. It helps you make the case for healthy housing in general, with messages to customize based on your city’s priority issues, decision-making structure and specific policy goals.

Informed by existing message research, NLC’s experience on housing policy and insights from cities working on healthy housing, it reflects best practices from across the country.

Because the guide was created during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also takes a specific look at how healthy housing strategies and messaging have shifted during the pandemic, and the opportunities to tie the case for healthy housing into cities’ recovery and resilience strategies.

Working From Shared Values

Values are at the core of everyone’s belief systems.

POLICYMAKERS, LANDLORDS and other critical stakeholders, just like everyone, make decisions in alignment with their deeply-held values. To effectively advance healthy housing policies, we must connect with their existing values.

Think about your city decision-makers’ core values, as evidenced through their actions and statements. Healthy housing can connect with many, including:

- ◆ Children and education
 - ◆ Human potential and self-determination
 - ◆ Housing affordability, quality, access and safety
 - ◆ Property values, the appearance and safety of a city, and quality of life for residents
 - ◆ Effectiveness and efficiency in government
 - ◆ Thriving, prospering communities and people
 - ◆ Support of small businesses, including landlords
 - ◆ Livable cities, including a stable and affordable housing supply
- For landlords and property owners, aligned values may include:

 - ◆ Protection of their investment
 - ◆ Ease of management and property uptake
 - ◆ Positive image and perception
 - ◆ Ability to retain tenants

Messages

Making the Case for Healthy Housing

These messages are intended for use primarily with policymakers, as well as key influencers of healthy housing policy including landlords and property owners, tenants (including parents and grandparents, who can be powerful allies), community-based organizations (including health, education and workforce champions) and the public.

The core argument for healthy housing is based on four points:

MESSAGE POINT	WHY IT WORKS
1. Every person, and especially children, needs access to healthy and hazard-free housing to thrive and reach their full potential.	Positions housing as a basic right and connects healthy housing to human potential, a shared value among decision-makers. ⁴ Emphasizes children, whose well-being is a priority among all audiences and a driver for policy change.
2. But not everyone can count on healthy housing right now, especially communities living with lower incomes as well as [communities of color*]. Policies are often at the root of this inequity.	Illustrates the gap in healthy housing and links the problem to policies, setting up policy as a solution.
3. This is a solvable problem that aligns with city priorities. It creates opportunities for housing staff, landlords and others to be champions for people’s health, readiness to work and learn, and financial security.	Reinforces that this is a doable component of housing strategy that is mission-critical, not a nice-to-have. Housing leaders say they and theirs are inspired to realize that housing is health care and they can have impact on well-being
4. Changes in city policies, programs and practices are urgently needed to ensure that all children and families live in a healthy and hazard-free home. ⁵ We are asking you to <i>(insert specific policy ask)</i> .	Makes a direct call to action and ties action to benefits for residents.

*As possible, specify the communities most affected by lack of healthy housing in your area, e.g., Black, Latinx, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian and Pacific Islander.

Gathering The Information You Need To Customize Your Message

Every city has different policy processes, partners and advocates that shape the way policy change happens.⁵¹

Defining the issue and building your coalition

- ◆ Define the health issue in question; articulate how it ties to housing.
- ◆ In conversation with community leaders and guided by data, identify the priority populations MOST impacted by the health issue you are addressing. Identify the communities/neighborhoods in which those priority populations reside and/or where the current housing stock is most exacerbating the issue.
- ◆ Engage community leaders and members early to help define the problem, identify the solution that best meets the community's needs and identify trusted messengers. Commit to investing in a long-term relationship that advances both the communities' priorities and the city's healthy housing objectives.
- ◆ Collaborate with supportive landlords and property owners to create win-win solutions, help mitigate their concerns, identify benefits and bring others into the conversation.

Building community support and political will

- ◆ Articulate how your policy will impact the health and overall well-being of residents.
- ◆ Plan how to build broader community support, including from education, health, workforce development and other stakeholders who will benefit when people have more stable, healthy housing.

Crafting the policy

- ◆ Identify anticipated barriers or opposition to your policy, and what you need to address those (e.g., data, examples of success, etc.).
- ◆ Focus the policy and make it more effective by seeking specific language on how and where the policy will be implemented first to meet greatest need.

Expanding the healthy housing work

- ◆ If you succeed with a policy victory, share and leverage the success to pave the way forward for future healthy housing policies in your city and others.

For more information, visit:

<https://www.nlc.org/resource/housing-hazards-and-health/>.



Library of key messages, supporting messages and talking points.

As you use the four main message points, you can support them with specific facts and stories relevant to your specific city context and policy goals.

Below you'll find each message point broken out with a large library of possible sub-messages and proof points. You don't have to use them all! Please pick and choose to align with your audience's values and priorities, as well as your specific government and policy structure, and specific policy ask.

KEY MESSAGE 1:

Every person, and especially children, needs access to healthy and hazard-free housing in order to thrive and reach their full potential.

A healthy home is more than just four walls and a roof. It is a safe structure free of toxins and other hazards that make people sick, and a place that supports people to live, learn and work to their full potential.

- ◆ People spend about 70 percent of their time in their home,⁶ so the place they live has a significant impact on their ability to live well and reach their full potential.
 - ◇ The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced homes to essentially become offices and schools, has significantly increased the amount of time families spend in the home.
- ◆ Healthy homes are free from toxins and threats from the built environment such as unsafe streets, violence, poor air quality, industrial chemical exposure, allergens, mold or pests. Ideally, they are also in healthy and well-resourced neighborhoods

with robust social and cultural networks, and connections to good employment and business opportunities. The cost of living there does not divert household income away from healthy food, medical care or educational opportunities.⁷

- ◆ This is especially crucial for children.
 - ◇ The number of emergency room visits and hospitalizations decreases when they live in a healthy house.⁸
 - ◇ Childhood asthma, a major preventable health condition and leading cause of school absences, is directly tied to healthy homes. Healthy home interventions like weatherization significantly improve childhood asthma control.⁹
- ◆ It is also crucial for seniors.
 - ◇ Providing coordinated health services in an affordable housing setting can improve health outcomes and reduce costs for older adults.¹⁰ Being able to stay in their own home, rather than having to move to an assisted living community, improves the quality of life for seniors. Much of the public housing stock is in poor condition and exposes older adults to health hazards, putting them at serious risk. Over half of households in public housing were headed by a person who was 62 or older and/or was disabled.¹¹
 - ◇ There is evidence that hospital admissions and emergency room visits decrease among seniors living in healthy homes.¹²

Without a commitment to healthy housing, the home can be one of the most dangerous places for families.

- ◆ Many landlords take great pride and satisfaction in creating opportunities for low-income families to afford decent, safe and sanitary housing, and prioritize safety in their properties.
- ◆ But nearly 40 percent of metropolitan homes have at least one health or safety hazard, including lead, mold, broken heating and plumbing, and rodent and roach infestations.¹³
- ◆ Landlords who strive to provide safe housing may lack the information or resources to do so successfully.
- ◆ This causes serious health issues for those living there, resulting in rising health care costs, time missed from work and school, and strains on mental health. It also costs the United States billions of dollars annually to address asthma, lead poisoning, carbon monoxide poisoning, radon-induced lung cancer and other unintentional injuries.¹⁴

- ◆ The hazards associated with lead-based paint, mold, pests and other health threats often leave families and children living in unsafe conditions, thereby diminishing their ability to lead healthy and successful lives.
- ◆ *Add specific points based on the health challenges in your city that are being caused or worsened by unhealthy housing.*

Cities hold the responsibility for ensuring healthy housing—it’s not something we can leave to renters and families. It is an essential, basic right.

- ◆ Parents are taking action to keep their children healthy, but without affordable options they may end up in one of the 45 million houses with one or more health and safety hazards.¹⁵
- ◆ It’s hard for the average person to see hidden dangers such as mold, lead, water intrusion, pests and electrical deficiencies.
- ◆ Others might be unaware of their rights as renters and unaware of the short- and long-term impacts of unhealthy housing.
- ◆ Healthy housing policies can help eliminate that uncertainty.
- ◆ For cities focusing on environmental justice, healthy housing is an integral component.



KEY MESSAGE 2:

Not everyone can count on healthy housing right now, specially communities living with lower incomes as well as communities of color.

Some people—especially children—are more likely to get sick from the place they live.

- ◆ The risk of lead poisoning falls disproportionately on children of color, with Black children nearly three times more likely than white children to have elevated blood-lead levels.¹⁶
- ◆ Health disparities like high rates of diabetes, cancer, heart disease and asthma are related to the overcrowded housing situation in Indian Country.¹⁷
- ◆ *Add specific points based on your city’s demographics and who is in greatest need of healthy housing policy protections.*

Where people live directly impacts their quality of life and life expectancy. Housing is health care.

- ◆ Medical care is estimated to account for only 10 to 20 percent of a person’s health. The other 80 to 90 percent is tied to socioeconomic and environmental factors, usually beyond a person’s control.¹⁸
- ◆ Life expectancy can change block-to-block in a city, and unhealthy housing can be a prime culprit. ([This site](#) offers maps showing life expectancy by ZIP code.)

Many people, including working families, don’t have a choice in where they call home. Many factors impact where people are able to live, such as income, access to jobs, housing availability and affordability, access to housing services and a history of discrimination based on race.

- ◆ In many cities, Black, Indigenous and people of color, as well as people living with low incomes, have historically been forced into neighborhoods with a higher share of unhealthy housing. Systemic racism, especially prevalent in today’s credit scoring system and some lending practices, continues to present barriers to minority homeownership.¹⁹

- ◆ There is a dire shortage of affordable and available homes for people with incomes below the poverty level or 30 percent of their area median income. Most of the time those people are either Black, Native American or Latino/a/x because racial disparities in income are the result of systemic racism that has led to differences in educational attainment, wages and employment rates, among other factors.²⁰
 - ◇ Black people and Latinos/as/x are more likely to live in communities with higher eviction rates, and these are usually linked to discrimination by landlords.²¹ Mothers and children are also more likely to experience eviction.²²
 - ◇ Families of color who have low incomes tend to live in neighborhoods with low housing quality. These families also have higher rates of asthma than white families.²³
 - ◇ Old housing stock and inconsistent maintenance by some landlords pose pervasive threats in many cities, and also in rural areas and Tribal communities.
- ◆ Sixty percent of households that receive federal rental assistance are working families. Yet wages for many jobs have not caught up to the spike in rental costs. There are 10.7 million households that pay more than half their income for rent, which often means people have to choose housing over other crucial needs, such as food and medicine.²⁴
- ◆ Landlords renting affordable housing to families through Section 8 tend to have lower vacancy and turnover rates while receiving reliable, on-time payments. And tenants have more incentive to stay in good status with the landlord's policies to avoid losing their voucher.²⁵
- ◆ While many cities have systems in place that provide financial assistance for housing, not every person has access to those programs, for a variety of reasons. For instance, immigrants and people who are undocumented are not eligible to receive state housing funds.

KEY MESSAGE 3:

This is a solvable problem that aligns with city priorities. It creates opportunities for housing staff, landlords and others to be champions for people's health, readiness to work and learn, and financial security.

Increasingly, cities are including healthy housing policies in their comprehensive housing strategy, in collaboration with residents, property owners and others.

- ◆ City leaders don't have to do it alone. Policies, programs and practices that leverage all available partners and assets within municipal agencies and multisector stakeholders are urgently needed—and city governments are well-positioned to bring housing, health and other sectors to the table.
 - ◇ In Oregon and Washington, the Portland-Vancouver Metro Area Smoke-Free Housing Project worked with landlords and tenant advocates to implement no-smoking rules in multi-unit housing in a win-win way.²⁶ This policy change encouraged more people to quit tobacco and reduced second-hand smoke exposure among people living with lower incomes.²⁷ (Partners: American Lung Association of Oregon, Multnomah County Health Department and Clark County Public Health)
 - ◇ In Boston, a cross-sector group created the Healthy Start in Housing program, which helps high- and at-risk pregnant women secure and retain stable housing. The program receives more than 100 referrals annually and shows statistically significant improvements in participants' mental health.²⁸ (Partners: Boston Housing Authority, Boston Public Health Commission, the city's Inspectional Services Department, the Boston Foundation, and local universities and medical institutions)
- ◆ Community-based organizations working with specific populations can be liaisons with people who need support to understand their tenant rights and navigate services, including people who are undocumented or immigrants.

Housing staff, landlords and others can play a powerful role in people's health, helping them save money and stay in jobs and school by building healthy housing measures into existing policies.

- ◆ City housing teams, landlords and others providing in-home support to tenants can help make people's living environments healthier, directly improving their health.
- ◆ Many of the causes of unhealthy housing also cost tenants and landlords money—for example, improving energy efficiency can both improve air quality and reduce energy bills.

Healthy housing aligns with other city priorities and creates back-end savings in other city programs.

- ◆ People are healthier because their homes are no longer making them, their family and their children sick. Having a healthy population advances many other community goals, such as having a skilled, engaged and productive workforce and strong educational outcomes.
- ◆ Landlords and property owners save money and protect their investment when housing issues are immediately addressed instead of festering over time and causing more significant damage to the property. Making properties safe for families can reduce costs, risk and liability.
 - ◇ Covering the management and control of pests can avoid the costs of hiring a pest control company.²⁹
 - ◇ Complying with smoke-free housing regulations results in less maintenance and reduced risk of fire.³⁰
- ◆ Local economies benefit from higher-quality housing, which impacts neighborhood stability, economic development and housing value.
- ◆ Cities save money when residents thrive. Health and safety hazards in the home are estimated to cost the nation billions of dollars annually in health care costs and are associated with lower educational attainment, loss of housing equity, neighborhood deprivation and more.³¹
- ◆ Health care and public health stakeholders gain an additional way to address conditions that affect people's health and lead to disparities in chronic disease and health outcomes.

We have an opportunity to incorporate healthy housing strategies and funding into cities' COVID-19 recovery strategies to create more resilient communities.

- ◆ The COVID-19 pandemic illuminated significant cracks in all systems—from health care to education to housing. Healthy housing policies can help patch multiple cracks.
 - ◇ People have been forced to spend more time in their homes. For those in unstable or unhealthy housing, this was not only an inconvenience but a health risk.
 - ◇ Routine home safety inspections were halted and complaints slowed as renters didn't want inspectors in their homes. Programs, such as WIC, were forced to close and weren't able to perform crucial services such as lead testing for children. Lead poisoning and other hazards never stopped. As we get caught up, there is a new opportunity to commit to healthy housing measures.
 - ◇ The financial impact on individuals makes their housing situation even more fragile. They may not be able to afford to move out of unsafe housing, or they might not ask their landlord to fix safety issues in the home out of fear of losing their lease.
 - ◇ As of December 2020, an estimated 11 million families, homeowners and renters are overdue on their mortgage and rent payments and at risk of eviction.³² Evictions and lack of affordable housing may push people into crowded living situations and accelerate the transmission of COVID-19.³³
- ◆ As cities work to address the economic and social crisis caused by the pandemic, now is the time to incorporate healthy housing policies to ensure a safer and healthier future for all. In collaboration with landlords, inclusive of financial resources and other supports for them to enact healthy housing, putting policies in place now will not only help people immediately, but will also protect people in the future.
 - ◇ This is an opportunity to prioritize our residents' well-being—their ability to live healthy and fulfilling lives and create the futures they want—not solely economic gain, as we rebuild.

Here in (city/state), tenants, property owners and city leaders are already making investments in stable, affordable housing. This is an opportunity to make that strategy even stronger, more sustainable and more effective.

- ◆ *Give some kudos to action already happening in your city—strong investments in affordable housing creation, landlords who are leading the way, and efforts to support health and well-being.*



KEY MESSAGE 4:

Changes in city policies, programs and practices are urgently needed to ensure that all children and families live in a healthy and hazard-free home.³⁴ We are asking you to (insert specific policy ask).

- ◆ *Use specific policy talking points about why that policy is the solution to the challenge you've outlined.*
- ◆ *Add proof points that reinforce benefits to people, property owners and the city.*
- ◆ *Be sure to emphasize available funding streams, tax breaks, incentive programs and other resources to help landlords implement and enforce healthy housing measures—or make an overt case for this funding.*
- ◆ *Additionally, any information you can add on return on investment, feasibility, support, tenant demand, etc., will be powerful.*
- ◆ *If possible, be specific in your policy ask about where healthy housing policies will be implemented first to have the greatest impact (e.g., in specific parts of your city, in low-income housing, etc.)*



Facts For Discrete Healthy Housing Issues and Policy Solutions

LEAD³⁵

The Cause	The Impacts	The Financial Impact
Houses and apartments built before 1978 have a high likelihood of containing lead paint and related lead dust, which is often hidden under layers of newer paint and is hard to detect.	Lead and lead dust can harm a child’s brain and cause lifelong learning and behavior problems, even when inhaled or ingested in minuscule amounts.	Each dollar invested in lead paint hazard control results in a return of \$17 to \$221 in savings from reduced costs related to crime, delinquency and special education. ³⁸
Lead can also be found in water, ceramics and toys, and in soil.	Children with lead poisoning are seven times more likely to drop out of school and six times more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system. ³⁶	
	Lead poisoning also impacts adults and can result in a 46 percent increased rate of early mortality. ³⁷	

ASTHMA TRIGGERS³⁹

The Cause	The Impacts	The Financial Impact
Hazards in the home—such as mold, dust mites, cigarette smoke, wood-burning stoves, pest droppings, nitrogen dioxide and chemical irritants —can trigger and exacerbate asthma symptoms.	Asthma impacts an average of 1 out of every 10 school-aged children ⁴⁰ and afflicts 25.7 million Americans each year, causing: 774,000 emergency room visits ⁴¹ 14 million missed school days ⁴²	Asthma causes more than \$56 billion in economic costs annually. ⁴³ Forty percent of asthma episodes are caused by preventable triggers in the home and represent \$5 billion annually in preventable medical costs. ⁴⁴



MOLD and MOISTURE⁴⁵

The Cause	The Impacts	The Financial Impact
Mold grows in warm, damp conditions and can cause respiratory issues. Mold can be found in basements, around windows where condensation collects, in or around air conditioners, and in places where there is leaking water.	Mold and moisture can trigger asthma symptoms, cause eye and skin irritation, and coughing and wheezing.	Mold can trigger asthma, which is a health condition that causes more than \$56 billion in economic costs annually. ⁴⁶ Forty percent of asthma episodes are caused by preventable triggers in the home and represent \$5 billion annually in preventable medical costs. ⁴⁷

ASBESTOS⁴⁸

The Cause	The Impacts	The Financial Impact
Asbestos can be found in manufactured products and building materials used in the home, such as insulation, fireproofing and floor tiles. When these products and materials are disturbed, asbestos fibers are released into the air. Any home built before 1980 is likely to contain asbestos, usually found in walls and roofing. ⁴⁹	Asbestos can increase the risk of lung cancer, mesothelioma (a cancer of the lining of the chest and abdominal cavity) and asbestosis (a condition where lungs become scarred with fibrous tissue). Children are at an increased risk of exposure because their lungs are smaller and they breathe at a faster rate, meaning they can inhale more asbestos fibers with every breath. ⁵⁰	Unknown

Addressing Common Questions and Concerns

CONCERN:

The cost of regulation/over-regulation is bad for business.

RESPONSE:

The goal of enacting such regulations is not to eliminate or punish landlords, but rather to heighten the quality of rental housing stock in the community as well as ensure that landlords are responsible managers of safe and healthy properties.⁵²

We are working with landlords as partners to understand their concerns and address them through education, policy design or implementation strategies. *(If this is not true, consider adding this step as a core part of your strategy. See Policy Brief #3 for tips.)*

CONCERN:

The increase in housing inspections will lead to a dramatic drop in availability of affordable housing.

RESPONSE:

Housing inspections are important to identify home health hazards beyond what might be predicted based on home age and assessed value alone. Particularly in the highest risk areas, inspections may identify individual homes or specific areas where residents may be at risk from housing hazards.⁵³

In some cities, local programs can provide assistance and incentives to landlords who make necessary repairs, enabling them to still keep the rent low and avoid having to pass on the added costs to the renter.⁵⁴ For instance, the Restore, Repair, Renew program in Philadelphia helps homeowners access low-interest loans to use for a range of home repairs that focus on health, safety, weatherization, accessibility and modernizing outdated features. These repairs help improve the health of people living at the property as well as preserve the existing affordable housing stock.⁵⁵

CONCERN:

My tenant's actions caused the damage and I shouldn't be held responsible.

RESPONSE:

In most jurisdictions, landlords are responsible for providing a safe and inhabitable living environment for their tenants. Certain standards must be met in order to comply with local housing codes.

In many cases, renters are responsible for some of the wear and tear to the property, usually covered through the deposit. Depending on the lease agreement, landlords may be responsible for meeting certain standards such as:

- ◆ Plumbing
- ◆ Heating systems
- ◆ Pests
- ◆ Electrical systems

CONCERN:

It's the individual's/parental responsibility to provide a healthy home. We should do more education for families.

RESPONSE:

Public awareness is critical to preventing exposure to health hazards in the home, but we can't leave this to individuals and families. People should be able to trust that the place they are living won't harm them. Besides, many people don't have a choice in housing. And when they do, they often don't have the expertise to assess the health and safety of a house or apartment for hidden dangers such as lead and mold. They may not have the ability, resources or permission (if renting) to address those risks.

CONCERN:

If there are increased costs to the landlord/property owner, they will just be passed down to the tenant and could make their housing unaffordable. That could lead to evictions and homelessness.

RESPONSE:

Cities are finding creative ways to address this, and we can, too. *(Insert your specific solution or proof point that this will not happen, or how it will be mitigated.)*

For example, Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, uses a performance-based licensing model to incentivize landlords to provide decent, safe and sanitary housing and to avoid situations where the property becomes a nuisance to the community. Rental license categories are determined based on property code and nuisance violations noted during inspections.⁵⁶ This model effectively rewards high-performing landlords and encourages compliance.

The city of Rochester, New York, passed a lead law in 2006 that required several implementation costs. Instead of the costs being passed down to landlords and tenants, some of them were shared with the county health department. Besides, after the law passed, the increased demand on certain services, such as inspections, has been shown to create a competitive market, driving down the costs.⁵⁷

CONCERN:

Implementing and regulating new housing measures will increase training needs, bring potential conflict and compete with other key priorities, and we already have limited staff capacity.

RESPONSE:

In some cities, Healthy Homes activities are incorporated into the regular duties of people already making home visits (e.g., public health nurses, environmental health professionals and community health workers). In others, health insurers are covering some of these activities.⁵⁸

(Insert your plans to address this with your coalition.)

CONCERN:

I'm nervous about renting to someone who uses the Housing Choice Voucher Program (formerly Section 8) because there is too much red tape involved.

RESPONSE:

Housing vouchers greatly help people who are struggling to pay their bills. Studies have shown that housing vouchers result in tenants paying their rent on time and reduce the need for landlords to have to chase rents, go through the eviction process or deal with collections. In many cases, rent is paid directly to the landlord.

Landlords renting affordable housing to families through Section 8 also tend to have lower vacancy and turnover rates. And tenants have more incentive to stay in good status with the landlord's policies to avoid losing their voucher.⁵⁹

The Housing Authority inspects the property before a contract is signed with the landlord, and annually or biannually thereafter. The inspection focuses on health and safety problems, such as working smoke detectors and plumbing issues. If left unchecked, these issues can result in significant and expensive property damage for the landlord.

People using housing choice vouchers are not representative of one "type" of person. They include parents, wage earners, elderly people, people living with a disability and people who need assistance for a variety of reasons. When landlords accept housing vouchers, people have access to more housing options. They can choose to live closer to their work, school and family.

CONCERN:

COVID-19 has had a huge financial impact on me. My tenants are behind in rent and I can't even afford to pay for basic repairs.

RESPONSE:

Landlords may benefit from COVID-19 relief programs available under the CARES Act. Once their incomes are more stable, landlords may be better able to consider healthy housing improvements.

It is also important not to underestimate the total cost for evicting a tenant, which can include repairs and trash removal, cleaning costs, locksmith fees, potential legal fees and three months of unpaid rent. Holding onto tenants—and providing healthy housing that enables them to continue working and paying rent as cities reopen—creates stability. As vaccines become more widely available and cities start to reopen, rent income will start to flow again.



OUR CITIES, OUR STORIES

Thanks to the cities in NLC's Healthy Housing City Leaders' Forum for providing input on messages that have been effective in their needs assessment, stakeholder engagement and policy work. For context, brief summaries of each city's current healthy housing strategy follow.

BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

Baton Rouge is committed to closing the housing affordability gap and working with community partners to provide healthy, accessible housing to all residents. Strategies include establishing formalized collaborations and a comprehensive plan to leverage existing funding streams, strategic planning initiatives and stakeholder coalitions to holistically address housing quality and affordability through deeper partnerships.

BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS

Bloomington is working to identify and prioritize top housing health issues by understanding the quality of existing housing stock. The city hopes to create and implement a targeted, healthy housing strategy—in cooperation with community partners—that preserves the community's existing affordable housing. The city's long-term goals for healthy

housing are to further cooperate and coordinate with local anchor institutions, and to learn and employ best practices for engaging developers to improve affordable housing options for residents.

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA

With recent growth and economic expansion, Charlotte is prioritizing equitable housing opportunities. The city offers numerous robust programs for both housing modification and new housing, as well as established external partnerships that address targeted aspects of health and housing. The city is focusing on the health impacts of existing affordable housing programs and approaches through better data-driven interventions and accountability, health and housing partnerships, and sustaining program staff capacity to promote the health of residents.

Detroit, Michigan

Detroit is committed to “One City for All of Us,” with equitable access to healthy, safe and stable housing, so that all residents can fully take part in the city’s ongoing revitalization and achieve the quality of life they deserve. The city has numerous housing initiatives underway, as well as strong stakeholder coalitions that draw in local expertise on lead hazard remediation and community support for aligned housing and health outcomes.

Durham, North Carolina

Durham has a wide array of housing and health partnerships, with a longstanding body of work in reducing childhood lead poisoning. The city is working to deepen its relationships with community partners and build the infrastructure to bring its lead remediation work to scale. With the passage of the Affordable Housing Bond, the city has an opportunity to create a more comprehensive approach

to reducing health hazards, including but not limited to lead remediation, as well as expand affordable housing access, through community partnerships.

Jersey City, New Jersey

Jersey City is committed to providing affordable and healthy housing, including through new developments in its growing downtown and proactive repairs of its existing housing stock. The city boasts several robust networks of health stakeholders and lead poisoning prevention coalitions, with a strong body of work on childhood lead poisoning prevention across sectors. With this issue top of mind, there is a window of opportunity to more intentionally embed equitable health improvement into comprehensive affordable housing efforts and potentially larger community efforts for equity.

Advisors To This Work

Thank you to the many individuals who provided insight and input to this work. -

DIANE ADAMS

Housing Services
Supervisor, Housing &
Neighborhood Services
City of Charlotte, NC

ABIGAIL BARTLETT

Community Organizer
Healthy Homes Coalition
of West Michigan
Grand Rapids, MI

MICHAEL COLLINS

Commissioner
Neighborhood and
Business Development
City of Syracuse, NY

ALFREDO CRUZ

Vice President of
Programs and Special
Initiatives
Foundation for Louisiana
Baton Rouge, LA

AYONNA DONALD

Director of Building and
Housing
City of Cleveland, OH

ZACH FABOS

Stevenson Center Fellow
City of Bloomington, IL

STACEY FLANAGAN

Director
Department of Health &
Human Services
City of Jersey City, N J

TAMI FOLEY

Acting Executive Director
Mid Central Community
Action Inc.
Bloomington, IL

SALLY GAMBACORTA

Community Health
Director, Carle BroMenn
Medical Center
Carle Eureka Hospital
Bloomington, IL

FAITH GARDNER

Assistant Director
/ Housing Code
Administrator
Code Enforcement
Division
Neighborhood
Improvement Services
City of Durham, NC

CHRIS HAZEL

Housing Inspector
City of Bloomington, IL

JARED HYMOWITZ

Director of the Mayor’s
Healthy City Initiative
City of Baton Rouge, LA

REGINALD JOHNSON

Director
Community Development
Department
City of Durham, NC

HANNA KIRLIN

LeadSafe Program
Manager
Housing & Neighborhood
Services
City of Charlotte, NC

ADAM KOKENAKES

Program Analyst IV
Policy Development and
Implementation Division
Housing and
Revitalization
Department
City of Detroit, MI

KATRINA
KORFMACHER

Director, Community
Engagement Core
Environmental Health
Sciences Center
Associate Professor
Department of
Environmental Medicine
University of Rochester
Medical Center
Rochester, NY

CHARLES MAYS JR.

Bureau Chief
Bureau of Healthy Homes
Department of Health
and Human Services
City of Jersey City, NJ

JENNIFER ORBAN

Senior Director of
Strategic Initiatives
Mid Central Community
Action, Inc.
Bloomington, IL

STEPHANIE
PASQUALE

Director of Neighborhood
Advancement
Allyn Family Foundation
Syracuse, NY

MICHAEL PULLUM

Senior Project Manager
Community Development
Department
City of Durham, NC

SAMUEL SANDERS

Executive Director
Mid City Redevelopment
Alliance
Baton Rouge, LA

LORISA SEIBEL

Director of Healthy
Homes
Reinvestment Partners
Durham, NC

JENNIFER SELLERS

Director of Environmental
Sustainability
Atrium Health
Charlotte, NC

KATIE SIMPSON

City Planner
Community Development
Department, Planning
Division
City of Bloomington, IL

LISA SMESTAD

Manager of
Environmental Services
City of Minneapolis, MN

LENORA SMITH

Executive Director
Partnership Effort
for the Advancement
of Children’s Health
(PEACH) Durham, NC

TSCHAINA TAYLOR

Project Manager
Partnership Effort
for the Advancement
of Children’s Health
(PEACH) Durham, NC

JENNIFER TONEY

Grants Coordinator
City of Bloomington, IL

CHRISTOPHER
TYSON

CEO
Build Baton Rouge
Baton Rouge,
Louisiana

SCOTT WAGNER

Director
Northeast Alliance
Together (NEAT)
Kansas City, Missouri

THAIS WEISS

Community Development
Coordinator
Community Development
Department
City of Durham, North
Carolina

WARREN WOOTEN

Operations Manager
Housing &
Neighborhood
Services
City of Charlotte,
North Carolina

Endnotes

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