



## **Advancing Healthy Homes & Healthy Communities A City and Countywide Summit<sup>1</sup>**

**June 19, 2014**

### **Encouraging decision makers to address healthy housing issues**

#### **THE PROBLEM**

Millions of homes in the United States have moderate to severe physical housing problems. Often these include environmental hazards - lead, mold, dust, radon, carbon monoxide, among others. Environmental threats to children and families in the home and community are often silent, and many people are simply unaware that their housing or neighborhood may be making them sick. Informing them is necessary, but not sufficient, to solve the problem. We need those who have the power and responsibility to make housing healthy to become aware of the impact of indoor environmental hazards and commit to eradicating them.

There is a need to educate decision-makers in both public and private sectors, including legislators, government leaders, philanthropists, bankers, real estate agents, and insurers, about the importance of making housing safe. They need to know:

- Indoor environmental hazards cause real damage to children, their families and their communities.
- The costs to the community of environmental toxins are significant.
- Because of sizable low-income populations, Chicago and suburban Cook County have a large number of children being harmed by indoor environmental hazards.
- There are significant and tangible benefits to making homes healthy (improving chances of school success, reducing crime and delinquency, cutting healthcare expenditures).
- This problem is solvable.

#### **WORKING GROUP OBJECTIVE**

The task of this working group is to identify short- and long-term objectives to meet the goal of encouraging decision makers to address healthy housing issues in Chicago and Cook County. If appropriate, there should be at least one objective related to research. For each objective, list critical actions required to achieve it. For each action, identify the necessary partners and their roles, and time permitting, benchmarks and a timeline for completion.

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<sup>1</sup> Convened by Loyola University Chicago in partnership with the City of Chicago Department of Public Health, the Cook County Department of Public Health and the University of Illinois Chicago.

## **BARRIERS**

The following are some of the identified barriers to encouraging decision-makers to take action on healthy housing issues:

- There is a lack of a unified and simple message about the effects of residential environmental hazards and the benefits of remediating them. Such a message would help the public and decision makers better understand the problem.
- There is no regulatory definition of what a healthy home is.
- Many people believe that the problem is so daunting and costly it cannot be solved.
- Proactively making housing safe may be expensive.
- Policies and funding are geared toward responding only after a child's health has been affected, rather than toward proactively making housing safe.
- There is the incorrect perception that only poor-quality housing can be unhealthy.
- There is not one umbrella program that can tackle this issue as a whole.

## **SOME POSSIBLE ACTIONS**

*Developing a public, shared database and healthy housing registry.* Recurring problems could be identified, prior interventions could be evaluated, and chronic violators' records would be open for all to see. This would also provide important information to potential buyers, and help renters or buyers evaluate their prospective residences.

*Using data for research and to build political will.* Data from a registry could be incorporated with GIS data and satellite imaging to help social scientists, advocates, and policymakers identify social and geographic patterns and trends. Information about those patterns and trends can be used to influence policy, program and resource decisions. For example, mapping could be used to show legislators and government officials where problems are most common, and whose constituents are hurt most.

*Publicly listing environmental toxin violations.* Whether from the registry or from other data sources, this data would get the attention of property owners, property managers, real estate agents, insurers, philanthropists and consumers.

*Using photography.* Several projects have been centered on neighborhood photo collections. Participants have taken photos of peeling paint and used them to paint a vivid picture for legislators and decision makers.

*Increasing consumer demand.* A campaign might be directed at homebuyers to educate them about questions to ask, and what to inspect before purchasing a home. A campaign might also be directed toward insurance companies or toward banks to convince them to require testing for indoor environmental toxins before insuring a property or approving a mortgage.

*Improving accountability.* City council or state legislative hearings might serve the dual purpose of holding governmental agencies accountable and publicizing the dangers of environmental toxins.