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Healthy Communities: *Housing & Health Connections*

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Housing is at the core of a healthy community. The way in which a community responds to the need for housing will have lasting impacts for generations to come. The connection between housing and health has been long discussed since the 1970's. Both medical and urban planning professionals recognized the connection between the environment and health issues in the population¹. In the late 1990's and



earlier 2000's, researchers began to look at the relationships between housing and health status in communities². Kreiger and Higgins in 2003, recognized housing as a determinate of health, and called for public health officials to create healthier homes by addressing substandard housing conditions in their communities³. Yet, there continues to be a health literacy gap between the healthcare, public health, social services, and urban planning/design professionals. The process for addressing these health issues and building affordable housing while efficient is often segmented, with the stakeholders, professionals and community having little collaboration.

We know poor housing conditions are linked to a wide range of health conditions including; asthma, lead poisoning, respiratory infections and mental health². There is a growing body of evidence about the health inequities in communities influenced by social, income, education and life course factors, all of which can be linked back to the quality of housing^{2,4}. Armed with this growing body of knowledge, how do we overcome the barriers to improve housing, health and the quality of life in our communities?

There are number of projects around the United States worth noting that are tackling these problems with mixed results. Recently, the Enterprise Community Partners (ECP) initiated a pilot program, to incorporate health planning into the affordable housing and design process⁵. Five CDC organizations worked with ECP and public health professionals to develop and implement “Health Actions Plans” for affordable housing projects in the following cities; Los Angeles, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta and New York⁵. The purpose of the project was to introduce health outcomes as a design criterion in the development process. The results of the project broadened developers understanding of the connections between health and housing, that community participation is essential, working with public health professionals early in the process is needed, health data can add to the design process, and there is a high need for quality monitoring through the program to measure results⁵. Improving health outcomes for residents through the built environment is a relatively new priority for the affordable housing industry⁵. However, it is going to take greater collaboration among stakeholders and community partners, earlier in the process for improved results.

What are your thoughts and observations?

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