

what funders need to know

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HEALTH

Better Housing Means Better Health

“When we think of improving the health outcomes of Americans, we often think of better medicine, lower health care costs, and smarter prevention strategies. But in many ways, safe, decent affordable housing is just as important.”

— U.S. HUD Secretary Shaun Donovan and former U.S. HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius

Affordable housing is fundamental to improving health outcomes for low-income people. The cost and quality of your home has a dramatic impact on your ability to pay for and access good food, pay for medical care, stay safe, and take care of yourself when you are sick. Because newer housing tends to be more expensive, low-income households live in older housing that is often run down, made with poorer quality – sometimes hazardous – materials, and have fewer resources to improve the quality of their homes.

Housing Affordability Impacts Health

FOOD: Households that pay more than they can afford for housing usually do not spend money on nutritious food, which typically is more expensive than fast food. Research indicates that children in low-income families, without housing assistance, are less likely to have access to nutritious food in their neighborhoods, are less likely to have access to a sufficient amount of food, and are less likely to meet well-child criteria than children in low-income families that receive housing subsidies.

MEDICAL CARE: Unaffordable housing payments can both create unhealthy stress from financial concerns and leave people without enough money to pay for needed doctor visits. A survey of residents in a neighborhood hard hit by foreclosures found that 3 in 10 residents experiencing foreclosure reported that they were not getting necessary medical care. A study by the American Journal of Public Health found a link between depressive symptoms in older Americans and their inability to keep up with their mortgage payments.

INFECTIONS: Unstable, unaffordable housing contributes to the spread of infectious diseases. People without stable housing are significantly more likely to engage in risky behavior that makes them sicker and transmits diseases. Research indicates that patients living with HIV, who do not have stable housing, are less likely to follow treatment protocols, more likely to be exposed to potentially fatal opportunistic infections, and more likely to engage in unsafe behavior that helps spread the disease.

Housing Can Make You Sick

TOXINS: Over time, we have learned that certain building materials can make you sick. Many of these materials still exist in older buildings, which tend to be the most affordable. For example, lead paint was banned from residential buildings in 1978. Older buildings, particularly those with chipping paint that contains lead, continue to expose children to the hazards associated with ingesting lead paint dust or chips, which can cause hyperactivity, delayed growth, hearing loss, and, in the most severe cases, death. A child who swallows large amounts of lead may develop anemia, kidney damage, colic, muscle weakness, and brain damage.

ANIMAL INFESTATIONS: Infestations of rodents and cockroaches have been directly linked to increased asthma rates for residents. HUD has consistently ranked asthma as a key residential health hazard. Cockroach allergen is one of the most prominent allergens in inner-city homes. Exposure to cockroach allergens has been reported to be among the most important risk factors in asthma for children from low-income families living in inner-cities.

Pilot Projects Show Results

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING: The National Alliance to End Homelessness cites studies from three cities that have found that “the net public cost of providing permanent supportive housing for homeless people with mental illness and/or addictions is about the same or less than the cost of allowing them to remain homeless.” This is due to the fact that homelessness causes illnesses and exacerbates existing physical and mental illnesses that lead to expensive medical services, such as inpatient mental health care or emergency room visits, that are paid for by the public. These costs are reduced when homeless people are placed in permanent supportive housing.

Businesses are Making the Connection

Business leaders in health care fields are beginning to partner with government and nonprofits to invest in housing because they understand the payoff in improved health outcomes and reduced health care costs. UnitedHealth Group, in partnership with Enterprise Community Investment, Inc., is making a significant investment in Low Income Housing Tax Credits – **\$150 million** – to help build low-income homes in 12 states. (These states do not include Maryland, Virginia, or the District of Columbia.) What is particularly noteworthy about these investments is the company's preference for housing that includes supportive services for the homeless and/or those with mental and physical disabilities, populations whose health has been shown to improve significantly when provided stable affordable housing. These populations are over-represented in costly emergency room visits. UnitedHealth Group hopes that stabilizing the housing of and delivering services to these special needs populations in their homes will help make them healthier and reduce the company's health care costs.

“Studies show that without stable homes people are sick more often. There's more undiagnosed illness and people are more likely to seek care in emergency rooms.”

– Kate Rubin, vice president of social responsibility for UnitedHealth Group

Guided by the belief that helping chronic emergency room visitors with their housing instability will lower health care costs, Medica, a Minnesota-based, for-profit health care company, is paying **\$3 million** to a housing group to find the people who consistently rack up expensive emergency room visits and determine what kind of housing they need. By providing stable housing and supportive services, the population can receive the medical care they need, ultimately reducing the number of visits to the emergency room.

What Funders Can Do

- Align their local giving with new federal initiatives that link housing and health, including aspects of the Affordable Care Act.
- Provide grants and program-related investments to help organizations develop or renovate affordable housing for low-income people so they can afford the food and medical care they need to stay healthy.
- Support innovative ways to connect housing to health, such as:
 - Encouraging housing providers to help residents participate in health insurance enrollment efforts
 - Creating a place for doctors and nurses to report housing conditions causing health problems for their patients
 - Providing mechanisms for medical professionals to connect low-income patients with housing and financial counselors as unexpected medical costs can often lead to foreclosure or eviction
- Encourage business leaders to invest in affordable housing.

Sources

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