

Moving Toward a Healthy Housing Ordinance **DALLAS, TX**



People spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors, with an estimated 69 percent in the home.^{i,ii} Environmental factors, such as lead and asthma triggers, originating in the home, can result in poor health.ⁱⁱⁱ Housing quality can impact people’s health: according to the National Healthy Housing Standard, “20 to 30 percent of asthma cases are linked to home environmental conditions.”^{iv} Housing is a social determinant of health and an additional leading health indicator of Healthy People 2020, a science-based 10-year agenda for improving the nation’s health.

Everyone deserves the right to a healthy home, regardless of income level, geography and lack of affordable and safe housing options. Unfortunately, thanks to substandard housing, the health of vulnerable populations, such as low-income communities, children and people of color, is disproportionately negatively affected.^v

Low-income individuals tend to rent units and may not have sufficient means to relocate from substandard housing. Sixty-one percent of families in Dallas, Texas, live in rental properties and rely on landlords to provide and maintain healthy home environments.^{vi} Recognizing the intersection of health and housing, the Health and Wellness Alliance for Children led efforts with city agencies and nonprofit partners to incorporate healthy housing standards in the Dallas City Housing Code.

The [Health and Wellness Alliance for Children](#) is a coalition of community-based organizations that works collaboratively to improve children’s health and well-being in Dallas and Collin counties. The Alliance, formed

by Children’s Health pediatrics hospital, applies evidence-based approaches using working groups to accomplish its goal. In 2014, the Alliance’s Physical Environments Working Group was moving toward an overarching goal of creating healthy indoor, outdoor and school environments. From partners and the community, the Working Group gained understanding of housing conditions and contributing factors, such as structural racism, and the need to address substandard housing.^{vii}

To create healthy environments, the Working Group launched a brainstorming and exploratory phase of the planning process. Through this, it discovered the [National Healthy Housing Standard](#), which “bridges the health

and building code communities by putting modern public health information into housing code parlance.”^{viii} It began working with the [National Center for Healthy Housing](#), a national nonprofit committed to healthy homes and a co-author of NHHS. As part of its collaboration, NCHH provided a healthy housing training to Alliance members.

NCHH also provided training to city staff from various agencies interested in learning more about healthy housing. Much of the training focused on the multiple ways that housing is related to a person’s health and provided participants with a new lens through which to view issues they worked on in the past. During this training, city staff discussed the



The Health and Wellness Alliance for Children’s Physical Environments Working Group recommended updates via a proposed ordinance to amend Chapter 27 “Minimum Urban Rehabilitation Standards” of the Dallas City Code Housing Ordinance, which stipulates the applicable to residential and nonresidential structures.^{xiii} The proposed amendments include:

- Addresses healthy housing standards
- Clarifies and strengthens maintenance and repair standards
- Revamps the registration and inspection program for single-family rental properties
- Reassesses the maximum indoor air temperature when air conditioning is provided
- Authorizes the director of code compliance to create a risk-based inspection program for multi-tenant properties
- Creates incentives for landlords to maintain their properties^{xiv}

Neighborhood Plus- Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for Dallas.

The Neighborhood Plus Plan focused on revitalizing and investing in the community with an aim of creating affordable housing through a collective impact approach.^{ix} As part of the planning

process, the city hosted such events as Fair Housing Symposiums, community workshops and partner symposiums. Due to this planning process and the shift toward a holistic approach to improving quality-of-life in Dallas, the city was assessing its 30-year-old housing ordinance. The timing of the workshop aligned nicely with the Neighborhood Plus Plan, since the city was already focusing on other housing issues — such as blight¹ and vacancy. This highlighted opportunities to incorporate healthy homes standards into the ordinance.

Alliance members were interested in a city ordinance known as Chapter 27, “Minimum Urban Rehabilitation Standards,” of the Dallas City Code, which stipulates the standards all property owners in Dallas must follow with respect to their residential properties.^x The Alliance asked NCHH to compare Dallas’ City Housing Code with the NHHS. After comparing the code, NCHH shared the results with the Alliance Working Group and interested city staff members.

Over the next two years, the Alliance’s Physical Environments Working Group and interested members of the city staff, such as the Code Administration staff, learned more about healthy housing. These individuals also worked with 40 different jurisdictions and the City Council to share information. The Dallas Community Prosecution played a role in updating the standards, as it recognized the difficulty in enforcing housing standards through its work in the community.

The DCP conducted outreach with neighborhood groups by hosting

approximately 30 public meetings, detailing its work and informing residents how to get involved. The DCP also drafted the updated standards, confirmed they were in compliance with state laws and vetted the standards with the Building and Inspection Division.

The many partners that were involved from the earliest stages of the process incorporated health-based provisions into the ordinance. The Alliance used a collective impact model, which encourages sectors to work together toward a shared agenda. Owing to this approach, the Alliance members — community partners, faith-based representatives and advocates — agreed to share data with one another.

Moreover, 50 percent of the collaborative is composed of residents. Due to their ties with the community, members worked on a grassroots level to garner political support for the incorporation of the healthy housing standards into the ordinance. The Alliance also worked with a variety of partners, such as the Environmental Protection Agency Region 6, City of Dallas, local school districts, financial institutions and apartment associations.

With a shared vision of incorporating health-based provisions into the ordinance, stakeholders discussed varying priorities and overcame contentious issues. For example, the ordinance included a maximum temperature allowed in homes, as Dallas can become dangerously hot. Though the partners recognized a need for the maximum temperature, not everyone agreed on the exact maximum temperature.

Some partners were concerned that, if the temperature was too low, it would result in higher bills, whereas others wanted to protect the health of residents regardless. After discussion and facilitation by city staff, partners were able to reach a maximum temperature compromise that served both partners’

1 The definition of blight varies and is multi-dimensional. For purposes of this paper, we are using the Neighborhood Revitalization Plan for Dallas definition: “Blighted neighborhoods are defined by poor and unsound property conditions, inadequate infrastructure and buildings that are abandoned or chronically vacant.” For more information about the plan, visit the website: <http://dallascityhall.com/departments/pnv/DCH%20Documents/Neighborhood-Plus-June17-small.pdf>



WHAT IS STRUCTURAL RACISM?

“Structural Racism is a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with ‘whiteness’ and disadvantages associated with ‘color’ to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.”

—The Aspen Institute.

needs. City Council members were able to communicate the temperature compromise to their constituents and agreed to move forward with the ordinance. Though the City Council passed the standards, one member did not support the ordinance due to his disagreement with the temperature listed.^{xii}

The City Council passed the ordinance with a vote of 12 to one in September 2016. This decision was celebrated among city agencies, Alliance members and partners involved in the incorporation of healthy housing standards. The majority of landlords also supported the ordinance, as they were involved with the revision and it was in compliance with the incorporated standards.

Unfortunately, within a week of the City Council passing the ordinance, an affordable housing landlord in West Dallas sent a ‘notice to vacate’ to approximately 300 residents.^{xii} Though the ordinance did not go into effect until January 2017, the landlord stated that he could not afford to implement the changes passed by the ordinance. This unforeseen unintended consequence resulted in an injunction on the landlord’s decision and required him to work with the Catholic Charities to conduct an assessment of the housing need for the displaced renters.

Even after the ordinance was updated, both the Alliance and city staff continue to support healthy home environments. City staff are educating landlords and tenants about the new ordinance and are in the process of building an Advisory Council of rental property managers to resolve any ordinance implementation difficulties.

The Alliance joined the **1,000 Communities Campaign**, a NCHH-led initiative that strives to maintain affordable housing while also reducing substandard housing. Working toward a shared vision, raising awareness of the housing and health connection and building trust among various partners resulted in an ordinance that will lead to healthy home environments for all. City partners and the Alliance will continue to work together to advance healthy housing for all Dallas residents.

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