

MACDC Housing Quality and Health Equity Initiative: Overview

On September 30, 2024, MACDC will complete the second year of a 5-year grant awarded by the Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds for our Housing Quality and Health (HQH) Equity Initiative: Addressing Racial Health Inequities Caused by Poor Quality Housing (hereafter the HQH Equity Initiative).

The HQH Equity Initiative is guided by our previously established HQH Task Force, whose goal is to increase the quality of the State's existing housing stock and thereby significantly contribute to the elimination of racial disparities in health outcomes. The HQH Equity Initiative focuses on addressing lead paint and poor indoor air quality, to improve housing quality, housing stability, and resident health in Gateway Cities, particularly for households of color – and in the process create a template that can be scaled up.

Why the HQH Equity Initiative is Necessary:

The age and condition of the Massachusetts housing stock contribute to negative health impacts and corresponding health inequities:

- 70% of the homes in MA were built before lead paint was banned in 1978, and most still contain lead paint. Lead-based paint damages the brain and other organs and has particularly harmful effects on children. According to the MA Department of Public Health, Black children are nearly 2.5 times more likely to have lead poisoning than white children.
- Many MA homes expose residents to poor indoor air quality, caused by mold, dust, second-hand smoke, poor ventilation, and leaky pipes. Poor indoor air quality causes respiratory issues and allergy symptoms, and can cause asthma. Asthma rates are also unevenly distributed in the Commonwealth, with a 2012 report revealing that Emergency Department visits for asthma were 2.5 and 3.5 times more frequent for Hispanic and Black children respectively than for white children.

Substandard housing is inherently unstable, yet many occupants of such housing do not have the option of moving – due to high housing costs, limited options for some seniors and persons with disabilities, and discrimination faced by families with children and people of color. The health manifestations of poor housing quality can both cause housing instability (by forcing households to move) and be the result of housing instability (when households living in unhealthy homes have no other housing choices).

By focusing on cities where households of color are largely represented, we will target our efforts toward those who disproportionately bear the burden of poor housing quality.

Overall Goals of the HQH Equity Initiative:

Our goals set forth for the 5-year grant period are:

- Secure new resources for addressing housing quality problems that impact health, with a focus on addressing the disproportionate impacts on households of color and low-income households; and
- Substantially improve housing quality in Massachusetts, with a focus on Gateway Cities, with the specific number of homes and types of improvements achieved tied to local needs, as defined by local residents as well as available resources; and
- Significantly improve resident health and housing stability in these Gateway Cities, creating metrics for evaluating success.

Measures of Success:

We will consider the HQH Equity Initiative a success, if at the end of five years we have achieved the following outcomes, in each Gateway City we select:

- Engaged and empowered Community Partners* (including representatives from CDCs and other community-based organizations, municipal officials, and other community residents)
- Developed plans, secured resources, and improved homes, with the specific plans and number of homes defined with our Community Partners.
- Created the local infrastructure – including municipal and nonprofit staffing, technical assistance, systems for creating inventories of substandard properties – so that when additional rehab funding is obtained, property improvement can be scaled up rapidly.
- By virtue of the housing quality improvement, improved resident health and housing stability in the targeted Gateway Cities.
- Achieved policy success, including securing additional funding to address health-related housing quality issues among the MA housing stock.
- Initiated systems change, by demonstrating how a community-driven and data-driven process can drive policy change, and by creating the local infrastructure noted above.

How We Are Working to and Plan to Achieve the Desired Outcomes:

- *Local Engagement and Research:* We are working intensively with an initial cohort of 3 Gateway Cities which were selected based upon need, the presence of strong local partners, and the anticipated ability to engage a broad spectrum of community residents in identifying local problems and developing solutions that will work on the local level. In Year 3, we plan to select an additional cohort of 3 Gateway Cities, which we will engage with in Years 3 and 4.
- *The Report:* In October 2023, we published a [Report](#) on the extent of housing quality problems linked to lead paint and poor indoor air quality statewide; an identification of current programs to address these problems; and an analysis of gaps that must be remedied to address the problems, and their disproportionate impacts on households of color. We are currently strategizing about how to best implement the Report's recommendations.
- *Public Events:* In October 2023 we held a highly successful Housing Quality and Health Equity Initiative Statewide Kickoff, attended by close to 100 people. The conversations we had at this event allowed us to coalesce around the work previously done, identify strategies, and refine our workplan for Years 2-5. In Year 5, we will hold a Symposium focusing on lessons learned throughout the HQH Equity Initiative, and discussion and dissemination of a Statewide Plan.
- *Policy Advocacy:* We have and will continue to advocate for programs, resources, and policies to improve housing quality and the resultant health outcomes of community residents. In August, 2024 the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Program (MHHP), the focus of our advocacy for the past two years, was enacted into law as part of the Affordable Homes Act. The legislation calls for EOHLC to promulgate guidance or regulations necessary to carry out the program. MACDC will provide any assistance requested by EOHLC as it develops guidelines or regulations and will advocate for funding to be tied to this important legislation.

* To ensure robust engagement with Community Partners (CPs) in each city, we offer stipends to CPs and funding for other professional development opportunities for these CPs.

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