DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Vision

Safe and stable housing in healthy communities is an essential foundation for childhood, and, as such, housing policies have a remarkable potential to impact the health and well-being of children. Since over one-third of rental assistance recipients are children, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a significant responsibility to play an important role in supporting child health among children in assisted families. In addition, HUD programs could be expanded to address pressing unmet needs among families with children who struggle to keep a roof over their heads but receive no housing assistance. Child health and housing security are closely intertwined, and children without homes are more likely to suffer from chronic disease, hunger, and malnutrition than children with homes. Homeless children and youth often have significant psychosocial development issues, and their education is frequently interrupted as a result of their housing situation. Exposure to environmental contaminants and toxins in the home (such as lead and tobacco smoke) has a disproportionately greater impact on children, and must be eradicated. The next administration should work to end family homelessness, reduce housing instability, expand efforts to prevent families from becoming homeless, and increase the access of low-income families to high-opportunity neighborhoods.

Recommended Administrative Actions

End family homelessness and reduce housing instability. The next administration should support initiatives to end family homelessness; reduce housing instability; help families that are struggling to afford housing; and make improvements to community infrastructure, including affordable housing and public spaces. To help achieve this goal, families need greater access to short- and long-term rental assistance, rapid re-housing, and Housing Choice Vouchers. Particular focus should be given to ensuring that all children have safe outdoor play areas as well as healthy, safe, and affordable housing.

Implement smoke-free housing. Secondhand smoke exacerbates asthma and causes other serious health problems for children. Children in multiunit housing are disproportionately exposed to dangerous secondhand smoke because smoke from other units seeps through the building’s vents and cracks. The only way to protect children in multiunit housing from secondhand smoke is to implement building-wide smoke-free policies. HUD has proposed a nationwide policy to prohibit all smoking in public housing. It should be quickly finalized and expanded to include privately owned, subsidized housing as well as e-cigarettes.

Eliminate lead from children’s home environments. The HUD rules that trigger lead mitigation action in public housing have been tied to a lead level that is four times higher than the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) reference level for elevated blood lead levels. House dust, which can be contaminated by small particles of lead-based paint or tracked-in lead-contaminated soil, is a major pathway of lead exposure for children who live in older, poorly maintained housing. HUD has proposed an update to the Lead Safe Housing Rule to harmonize it with the lower CDC lead reference level. The administration should finalize and implement this rule as quickly as possible.

Help low-income families with children move to low-poverty neighborhoods. In 2013, nearly three million renter households with children and incomes below half the local median income had what HUD terms “worst-case housing needs,” meaning that they received no housing assistance and either paid more than half their income for housing or lived in severely substandard housing. This was a 53 percent increase since 2003 in the number of renter families with children with worst-case housing needs. HUD should take administrative measures to help more low-income families with children use housing vouchers to move to low-poverty neighborhoods, including strengthening incentives for state and local housing agencies to support such moves and modifying program policies that discourage families from moving to low-poverty areas. Federal rental assistance programs like Housing Choice Vouchers are effective at easing rent burdens and reducing homelessness and housing instability but, because of funding limitations, they assist only one-quarter of eligible low-income families with children.

Safer and healthier built environments. The “built environment” refers to spaces such as buildings, streets, homes, and outdoor spaces—like parks—that are altered in some way by human activity. The built environment can have a significant impact on how much physical activity a child can engage in. Children need everyday opportunities in their built environment to walk, play, or run. The federal government, including HUD, should work to make neighborhoods safer and healthier through improved built environments for children, such as building sidewalks in new and existing neighborhoods to create safe corridors to schools and neighborhood parks. Such environments can both reduce crime and increase physical activity by children, ultimately improving child well-being.
Encourage community development. Strong communities help families provide a solid foundation for their children. Federal efforts to boost economic activity, provide additional educational opportunities, and reduce crime in specific communities, should be continued and prioritized, such as through programs such as HUD’s Promise Zones.

Funding Priorities

End family homelessness and reduce housing instability. Congress should make major new mandatory and discretionary investments in housing assistance that will end family homelessness and help families struggling to afford housing, including through short- and long-term rental assistance, rapid re-housing, and Housing Choice vouchers.

Support HUD Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes. This office provides funds to state and local governments to help reduce lead-based paint hazards, provides technical assistance, and enforces HUD’s lead-based paint regulations. The federal government should expand the resources currently offered by this HUD office to local and state governments for lead hazard and tobacco control work.

References

