

Recommendations for Strengthening Code Enforcement for Public Health

Findings from a Health Impact Assessment in Memphis, Tennessee

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RECOMMENDATIONS

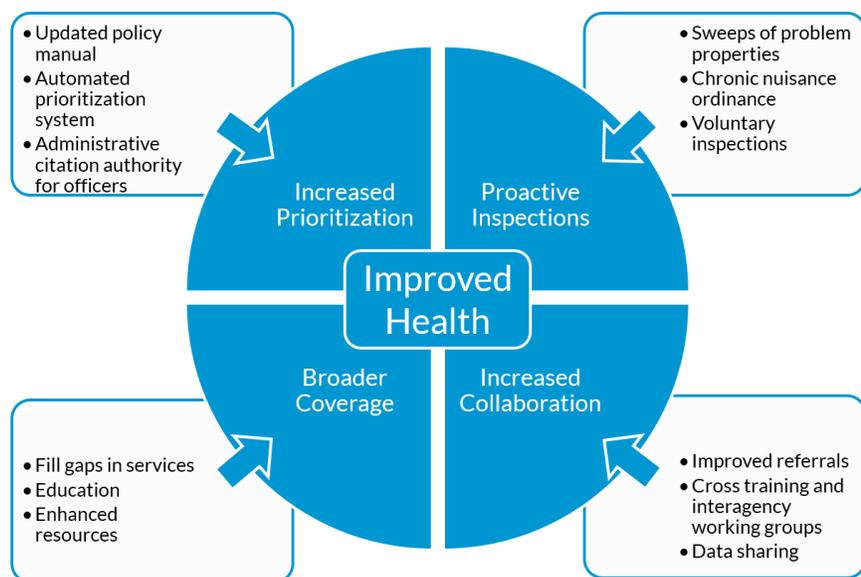
Housing code enforcement agencies should

- **create prioritization systems** that **put heavier weight on health-related violations** and interior and structural health and safety concerns;
- **proactively inspect** properties along with responding to complaints;
- **develop a neighborhood strategy** that will expand **strategic code enforcement coverage for substandard housing**; and
- **increase collaboration** with the **health department, health care providers, and housing financing groups** to reduce duplication, fill gaps in services, and secure adequate funding and resources for owners to address code violations.

Housing code enforcement is one of the primary strategies used by local governments to improve housing quality and population health. However, code enforcement is often structured to alleviate immediate safety concerns or easily visible problems rather than address and improve the longer-term health of residents. Code enforcement inspectors often work in separate agencies and departments from public health professionals, making it difficult to coordinate and collaborate across sectors to solve interrelated problems.

To find solutions to these problems, we undertook a health impact assessment in Memphis, Tennessee, to determine ways in which housing code enforcement can more strategically prioritize public health as a key outcome and better coordinate with public health agencies, community health nonprofits, and the broader system of health care institutions.

FIGURE 1
Recommendations for Better Targeting Health through Code Enforcement



INCREASE PRIORITIZATION

Code enforcement agencies should prioritize violations that are more likely to cause serious health concerns, such as mold (which leads to asthma) and lead (which leads to developmental delays in children).

- Work with public health experts to update policy manuals and prioritization systems to place emphasis on health-related violations.
- Consider providing code officers with administrative citation authority to impose fines and penalties on routine nonstructural violations like parking on the grass. This would free up time to focus efforts on more serious violations.

INSPECT PROACTIVELY

Code enforcement agencies should undertake proactive inspections rather than rely solely on the complaint-based system that most code agencies follow.

- Conduct systematic sweeps of problem properties and strategically critical neighborhoods.
- Implement a chronic nuisance ordinance.
- Enhance tenant protections to ensure that these regulatory approaches do not lead to displacement (which may also lead to increased reporting and enhanced coverage).

BROADEN COVERAGE

Code enforcement agencies should expand their coverage to properties currently overlooked by the system and develop a neighborhood typology that will allow for enhanced strategic coverage of the city.

- Fill in gaps in services, such as inspecting for bed bugs and mold.
- Enhance education for residents and for code enforcement inspectors about healthy homes and code services.
- Enhance resources for repairs through a housing trust fund, vacant property tax, or other dedicated funding source.

INCREASED COLLABORATION

Finally, code enforcement agencies and their public, private, and nonprofit partners must develop more opportunities for cross-sector collaboration.

- Improve the referral systems between agencies, health care organizations, and nonprofits.
- Cross train inspectors from different agencies and departments.
- Improve data-sharing systems and use real-time data to prioritize properties and neighborhoods.

This fact sheet draws from the Urban Institute report *Strategic Code Enforcement and Public Health: A Health Impact Assessment in Memphis, Tennessee*, <https://urbn.is/2Cmm1CF>.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This study is part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Interdisciplinary Research Leaders Program, which brings together two researchers and one community partner to undertake applied research that advances health equity. The three fellows on this team are

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Steve Barlow is the president and founder of Neighborhood Preservation, Inc. (NPI), a Memphis nonprofit. NPI clears the path to revitalized Memphis neighborhoods by identifying and resolving systemic causes of blighted properties.