



**ADDRESSING HOUSING TO
IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES**



“IN WAKE COUNTY’S LAST FEW HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT CYCLES, THE COMMUNITY HAS RECOGNIZED THAT AFFORDABLE, SAFE HOUSING CAN HAVE AN IMPACT ON AND SHOULD BE PRIORITIZED TO IMPROVE HEALTH OUTCOMES.”

— **Kimberly Scott**, Program Manager for Live Well Wake, Wake County, N.C.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

BY ALIGNING GOALS AND FORMING PARTNERSHIPS, COUNTY HEALTH AND HOUSING LEADERS AND STAKEHOLDERS ARE JOINING FORCES TO IMPROVE HOUSING OUTCOMES. COUNTIES ARE:

*addressing a lack of **HOUSING AFFORDABILITY** by integrating affordable housing assessments into overall housing plans and incentivizing local developers to diversify housing offerings;

*supporting residents facing **EVICTIONS** by offering equitable housing stability solutions, such as legal aid, landlord incentive programs and promoting available resources among residents;

*helping ensure **SAFE AND HEALTHY LIVING ENVIRONMENTS** by creating programs to screen for air quality and incentivizing landlords to meet quality standards; and

*working with local planning and development boards to promote **NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY AND PROXIMITY TO AMENITIES** for all county residents through implementing health impact assessments or reviewing transportation plans for safety and accessibility.

INTRODUCTION

Counties play an important role in ensuring equitable access to housing and health services for all residents.¹ Counties promote public health through 1,943 local health departments and annually invest \$83 billion in community health and hospitals, as well as nearly \$11 billion in housing and community development.² As the social safety net for many residents, counties often serve people who are facing housing challenges that result in poor health outcomes; with the COVID-19 outbreak and pandemic, this role has become even more pronounced.

In recognizing housing as a social determinant of health, county leaders can align housing goals with health goals and focus on improving housing affordability, stability, quality and neighborhoods.³ This report outlines key strategies counties are using to address housing equity and improve health outcomes for all residents.



HOUSING AND HEALTH ALIGNMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS

County health and housing actors that align their goals and form partnerships are likely to have better success at molding policy and action. To achieve even greater capacity, counties can form networks that include non-county entities such as state agencies, local housing authorities and non-governmental organizations that work directly with community members. These networks can then develop a joint framework for identifying and addressing housing needs through collaboration and innovation. This framework may be part of a county's health improvement plan or be a standalone document.

Once a framework is in place, county leaders can collaborate with networks on messaging, education and sharing resources. County networks can help adapt messaging to specific audiences to gain community buy-in. For example, counties may communicate that programs that support healthy, affordable homes do not just benefit households experiencing homelessness or poverty; but by investing in these services, the long-

term savings on public health expenditures will benefit the entire community. Finally, counties can leverage partnerships with community-based organizations that tend to have strong relationships and credibility with the target audience to amplify the message.

***Walton County, Fla.** adapted its [Community Health Improvement Partnership \(CHIP\)](#) to include the current state of housing stability, quality, affordability and environment; how the housing situation is impacting the health of affordable housing residents; a plan to address housing issues and clear goals with benchmarks to measure progress.⁴

***Johnson County, Iowa** included affordable housing as a key goal in its [Health Improvement Plan \(HIP\)](#).⁵ As part of this goal, the county's health department adapted its public outreach to more effectively reach lower-income households and communities of color in order to educate on the negative health impacts of substandard housing and opportunities to correct it.⁶

*The [Columbus Housing Authority \(CHA\)](#) in **Boone County, Mo.** received little community resistance when requesting to use its Children's Services Fund to support the [Healthy Home Connections Program](#), which improves community health by using Family Support Specialists who work with households receiving housing assistance.⁷

*[Healthy Paducah](#) in **McCracken County, Ky.** is a county coalition that encourages organizations with an interest in community health to work together.⁸ It created an [online tool](#) that helps connect both service seekers and providers to resources such as the [Midtown Alliance of Neighbors](#) homebuyer program, which provides affordable, quality housing for low- and moderate-income families.⁹



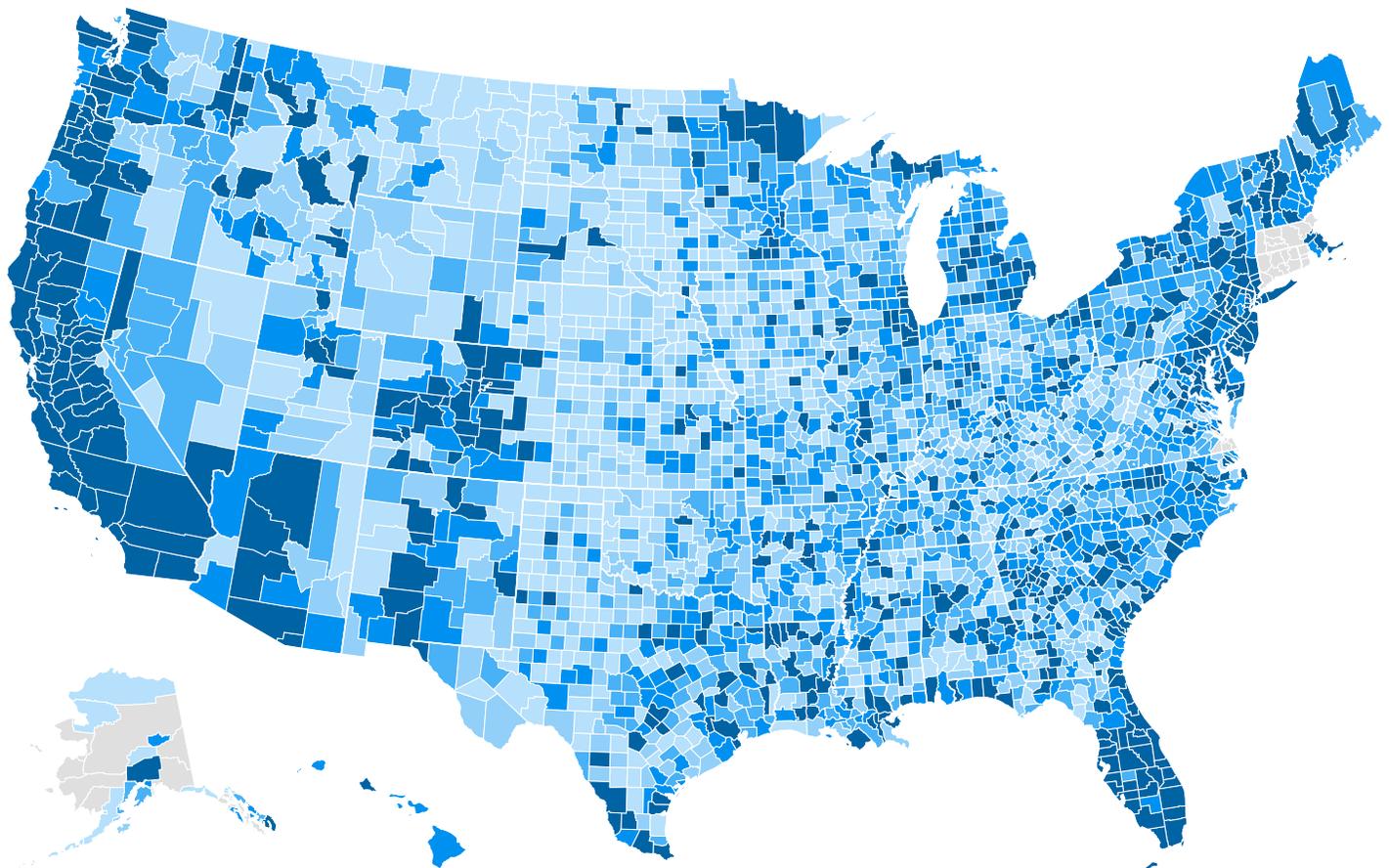
CREATING SYSTEMIC HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

For many individuals and families, finding an affordable home means settling for an unsafe home in an undesirable location. Renters and homeowners who spend more than 30 percent of their income on rent or mortgage payments are considered “cost-burdened,” as it reduces the amount of money that can be spent on other necessities like food, transportation and health care.¹⁰ As housing affordability is often misconstrued as an issue

only for people experiencing poverty, many moderate-income households may not realize that they are technically “cost-burdened,” and improving housing affordability can benefit them, too. About 42.7 percent of white households who were renting in 2016 were cost-burdened, compared with 54.7 percent of Black households and 53.7 percent of Hispanic households.¹¹

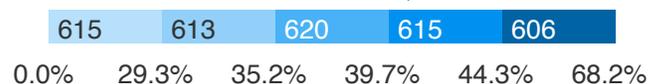
Counties have found innovative ways to improve housing affordability for residents. Some counties have integrated affordable housing assessments into overall housing plans and partnered with local developers to provide incentives for diversifying housing offerings. Counties may find that supporting medium-income housing developments can indirectly increase availability for affordable housing. They may also find that helping

2019 TOTAL PERCENT COST BURDENED RENTERS



Numbers within each color box represent the distribution of counties.

Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau - American Community Survey (ACS) 5 year estimates. <https://ce.naco.org/>



ensure landlords with voucher tenants always receive their rent on time may demonstrate the benefit of working with the county to provide this level of housing. In addition, some counties have used funding and messaging campaigns to leverage community land trusts (CLTs) to create affordable homeownership opportunities.¹² CLTs can also be partnered with inclusionary zoning ordinances, which may incentivize or even require the development of affordable housing units alongside market-rate units.¹³

*In **Walton County, Fla.**, the [Affordable Housing Advisory Committee](#) makes policy recommendations on housing development regulations and promotes affordable and workforce housing opportunities for developers, renters and prospective homeowners.¹⁴ The committee reviews all proposed changes to county regulations to identify impacts to affordable housing development.¹⁵ In addition, the county's land development code provides density bonuses for commitments to develop affordable and workforce housing units for either rent and homeownership.

***Rice County, Minn.**, a participant in the [Rural Impact County Challenge](#), uses a [state-level program](#) in which developers

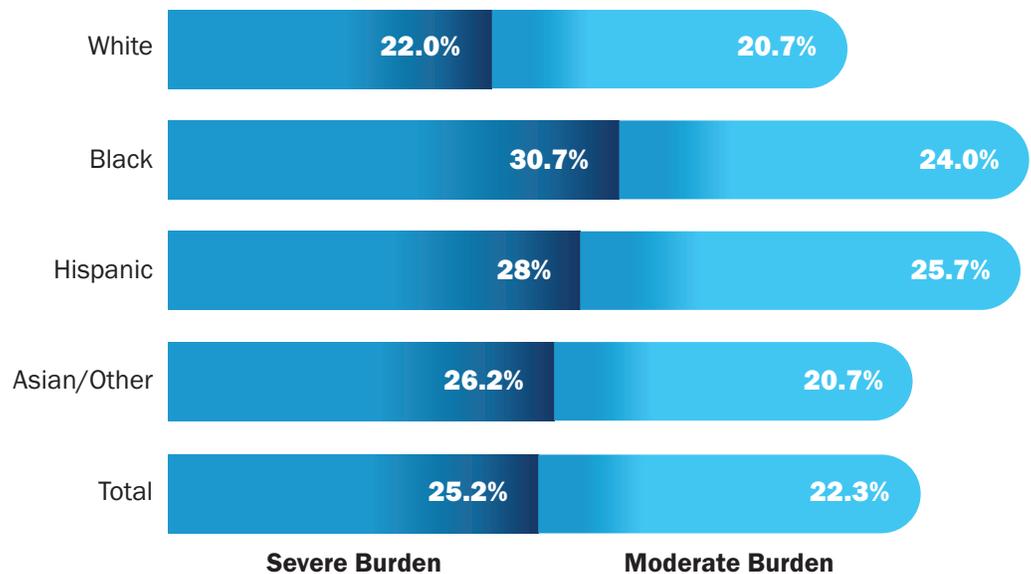


receive tax credits for establishing project-based voucher units.¹⁶ While these vouchers are less flexible than housing choice vouchers, they allow the county to address some key challenges of housing affordability, such as availability and variety. The county's housing department discovered that what was most beneficial to affordable housing seekers was also most beneficial to developers and property owners.

*The Community Development Agency of

Carver County, Minn. instituted CLTs to ensure long-term housing affordability.¹⁷ The CLTs provide low- and moderate-income households with the opportunity to build equity through homeownership and ensure that they are not displaced due to land speculation or gentrification.

RENTER COST BURDENS BY RACE AND ETHNICITY



SOURCE: Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, "Renter Cost Burdens by Race and Ethnicity," (2021). Available at https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/ARH_2017_cost_burdens_by_race.

PREVENTING EVICTIONS

People facing evictions can experience adverse health outcomes and may have less access to health care and basic necessities such as clean water and shelter, which could also result in increased spread of COVID-19. Frequent movers and those on the verge of eviction are also at risk for health concerns such as drug abuse, stress and depression.¹⁸

Black and Hispanic women, especially those with children, are at the highest risk for eviction.¹⁹ Although only 20 percent of renters are Black, almost 33 percent of evictions are filed against Black renters.

Counties can support residents facing eviction by developing coalitions or task forces to identify equitable housing stability solutions. These solutions may include recruiting legal aid for eviction support, creating landlord incentive programs for keeping tenants housed and promoting frameworks for mutually beneficial partnerships between landlords and their tenants. In addition, counties can use education to support housing stability. Counties may help tenants with rent management, choosing the right home and understanding available supportive resources.

*Since the COVID-19 pandemic, **Rice County, Minn.** has been coordinating with legal services to resolve rent-debt situations in a way that benefits both landlords and tenants. Legal services providers may also keep track of eviction hearings to proactively offer legal aid to at-risk tenants.

*The Department of Housing Services in **Washington County, Ore.** used CARES Act funding to create the [Safe Sleep Village](#) and [Safe Sleep RV](#) programs to maintain shelter stability for at-risk county residents during the

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COVID-19 pandemic.²⁰ The department helped transition program participants to permanent housing or to the county's Winter Shelter Network.

*The Clerk of Courts in **Orange County, Fla.** hosted a webinar to inform residents about the eviction process and to provide legal advice on other housing issues that are occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as domestic violence cases.²¹ In addition, the county's commissioners established an [Eviction Aversion program](#)



and an [Emergency Rental Assistance program](#) to help residents navigate financial hurdles and stay safely housed during the pandemic.²² The county pays two months of back rent with the agreement of future rent made on a payment plan between the landlord and tenant. Furthermore, in partnering with local shelters and agencies, the county's Housing and Community Development Division funded vouchers to house people who could not find or afford shelter during the pandemic.²³

*The local homeless coordinating board of **Johnson County, Iowa**, founded a [Rent-Wise program](#) that educates tenants on how to manage their finances and work within the system to maintain their housing.²⁴ The county also supported its residents with the [Inside Out Reentry Community](#) for residents coming out of incarceration who need assistance with rent and security deposits.²⁵

*The Department of Housing Affordability & Community Revitalization of **Wake County, N.C.**, formed the [HOUSE WAKE! Housing Navigation & Landlord Engagement program](#) to support individuals and families by addressing issues that may delay a household's access to housing, such as credit history, debt and legal matters.²⁶ It also incentivizes landlords to help those at risk of becoming or currently experiencing homelessness increase their independence by renting them safe and affordable places to live. In addition, HOUSE WAKE! includes a [COVID-19 Financial Assistance Program](#) that provides support to renters, landlords and utility companies to cover portions of rent and/or utility shortfalls due to the pandemic.²⁷



ENSURING QUALITY AND SAFETY

Housing quality and safety are critical to health as challenges like lead and mold exposure can cause poor health outcomes in adults and children.²⁸

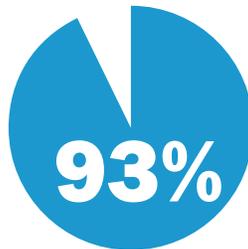
The [United Health Foundation](#) reports that low-income households, especially those without government housing assistance, have a higher prevalence of lead-based paint hazards compared to higher-income homes.²⁹ Pregnant women with high blood lead levels can be susceptible to miscarriages, low birthweight infants and preterm births. American Healthy Homes estimates that 93 percent of homes built before 1978 used lead-based paint.³⁰

County leaders can help ensure safe and healthy living environments by creating programs to screen for air quality and other pollutants, partnering with nonprofits and community-based programs and incentivizing property owners and landlords to meet quality standards. Counties may also recruit remediation specialists to train contractors and to provide rental property owners with the funding to conduct lead remediation on their properties.

***Johnson County, Iowa's** Public Health Department collaborates with its urban center, Iowa City, on home improvement initiatives such as the [Healthy Homes Program](#), which aims to improve housing conditions that lead to respiratory or chronic illness.³¹ This collaboration provides households with radon test kits at an affordable price. Johnson County Public Health also offers guidance and education for individuals with radon questions and help with reviewing test results.

***Montrose County, Colo.** supports organizations such as [Housing Resources of Western Colorado](#) and [Habitat for Humanity](#) that are working to provide services to improve housing quality and to build healthy homes for lower-income county residents.³²

American Healthy Homes estimates that **93 percent** of homes built before 1978 used **lead-based paint**.



***The Department of Housing Affordability & Community Revitalization of Wake County, N.C.,** formed partnerships with landlords to ensure proper housing inspections, maintenance, quality and safety. The Department holds landlords to a standard of quality and provides guidance and funding assistance for housing maintenance, so long as landlords legally bind themselves to keeping the units affordable for 30 years. Developers or landlords who are interested in developing or fixing affordable housing units can also receive tax credits and gap financing support from the county.

***In Boone County, Mo.,** landlords can post rental unit availability to the [Tools for Tenants](#) website, where renters can search for energy-efficient units in their area.³³ This program also incentivizes tenants to upgrade units to meet quality and efficiency standards.

***In Winnebago County, Wis.,** public health nurses provide lead poisoning education and conduct case management for lead-affected homes.³⁴

***Solano County, Calif.** addressed lead-based paint issues in low-income neighborhoods by retrofitting older homes through a partnership between the Solano County Environmental Health Services division and the Department of Public Health.³⁵

***The Department of Housing Services in Washington County, Ore.,** tracks and manages the quality of its housing stock through HUD's [Inventory Management System/Public and Indian Housing \(PIH\) Information Center \(IMS/PIC\)](#) and [Real Estate Assessment Center \(REAC\)](#).³⁶ If units are in an unacceptable condition, the county housing department invests funds into refurbishment efforts to meet HUD's Housing Quality Standards.³⁷

ADDRESSING NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY AND PROXIMITY TO AMENITIES

Proximity to schools, grocery stores, medical facilities, public transportation, public parks and other amenities can impact health outcomes.³⁸ Many people in the United States, especially people of color, live in neighborhoods with high rates of violence, unsafe air, bad water and other health and safety risks.



According to the United States Department of Agriculture, approximately 23.5 million people live in low-income, food desert areas. Of those households, 2.3 million people live more than a mile from a supermarket and do not have access to a vehicle.³⁹

To improve access to amenities that help support healthy lifestyles, county health departments can work with local planning and development departments to create comprehensive plans. These plans can integrate health considerations into zoning and community developments so that affordable housing is available in a variety of healthy and convenient areas. Where counties cannot legally mandate inclusionary zoning, county leaders may choose to initiate affordable housing development through other means, such as by collaborating with municipal leadership or funding new developments directly.

*In **Winnebago County, Wis.**, where community development and planning falls under the jurisdiction of local municipalities, the county health department worked with the City of Oshkosh to build in health impact assessments into its process to review development proposals.⁴⁰

*Despite lacking zoning authority, the **Walton County, Fla.** Planning and Development Services department uses its comprehensive plan and land development code to ensure that new communities are designed to promote pedestrian convenience. The county's



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[Community Traffic Safety](#) team uses motor vehicle injury data to strategize ideal sidewalk locations for the prevention of traffic accidents.⁴¹ The county also works with the Defuniak Springs planning department to assess the health impact of sidewalk availability.

In addition, the [Defuniak Springs Beautification and Trees Committee](#) is promoting the implementation of multi-generational projects to improve walkability and accessibility.⁴² Walton County imposed a [bed tax](#) to raise funds from tourism for these projects, including a novel concept for small “pocket” parks in rural areas to increase equitable park access.⁴³

***Nez Perce County, Idaho** enacted an Area of City Impact Zoning Ordinance, which uses a comprehensive plan to guide

orderly and comprehensive development, stabilizes property values and promotes the public health and safety of the community.⁴⁴

*In **Franklin County, Ohio**, county commissioners created a [Franklin County Magnet Fund program](#) to dedicate more than \$4 million to affordable housing projects.⁴⁵ More importantly, this fund prioritizes affordable housing developments along high frequency transit lines to provide for equitable job, education and health access for all residents. This initiative is part of [Smart Columbus](#), which is dedicated to advancing communities to improve the quality of life among households.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

Improving housing affordability, stability, quality and neighborhood amenities will provide county residents the opportunity to live comfortably and safely while still being able to afford food and other needs that can ensure positive health outcomes. By forming pathways for intergovernmental collaboration between influential housing and health actors, elected officials and non-governmental organizations, communities can make positive strides toward ensuring equitable access to housing and improving health outcomes that will outstretch individual agency capacities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To inform this report, NACoRF staff interviewed leaders from 20 counties of various population sizes, urban-rural classifications and regions. Interviewees included county commissioners, public health directors, housing directors and other representatives from similar fields.

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