



**ALAMEDA COUNTY HEALTH CARE SERVICES AGENCY
PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

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September 30th, 2015

City Council President Lynette Gibson McElhaney
Oakland City Hall
1 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza
Oakland, CA 94612

Re: Special Hearing on Oakland Housing Crisis and the Oakland Housing Equity Roadmap

Dear City Council President and City Council Members:

I am writing to share my comments and recommendations regarding the public health implications of the housing crisis in Oakland and the need to pursue policy solutions to address it. As the County Health Officer responsible for monitoring the health status of our communities and advising on the development of policies and practices that protect and promote health and well-being within our county, I recommend the Council pursue policy proposals to address the scale of Oakland's housing crisis with a focus on 1) preserving and building affordable housing, 2) ensuring safe and habitable housing and 3) preventing the displacement of current residents in light of economic market forces. The Oakland Housing Equity Roadmap provides a useful framework to address the housing crisis through a comprehensive policy approach.

Today, residents across the City face vastly different housing and neighborhood conditions based on their race, income, and place of residence, which contribute to the preventable health disparities we see in our data. West and East Oakland residents have a life expectancy 12 and 14 years less than affluent neighborhoods in the Oakland hills. Oakland's housing issues, including the foreclosure crisis, have resulted in a 24% decline in our African American population between 2000 and 2010. Income disparities continue to exist with median incomes of White residents at \$81,959 compared to \$35,050 for African Americans, \$44,455 for Latinos, and \$45,238 for Asians¹. Low-income families struggle disproportionately in the current housing market, and many families have already been displaced due to this increased pressure.

Housing is considered affordable when a family's housing costs account for less than 30% of their household income. Unprecedented numbers of Oakland residents are paying over 50% of their income for housing. As of 2014, 53.2% of Oakland residents pay more than 30% of their household income on rent, and 27.1% pay more than 50% of their income². Oakland housing costs have escalated beyond the reach of many residents—median rents are \$2,200 and

¹ "A Roadmap Toward Equity: Housing Solutions for Oakland California". (2015). Policy Link and City of Oakland.

² American Community Survey 1-year files. (2014).

median home sale prices are \$438,900 compared to median renter income of \$34,195³. Between 2014-2015, the average rent in Oakland skyrocketed by 12.1%, the second highest increase in the country⁴.

Research has highlighted that as rent burden increases, low-income families have to choose between housing costs and essential needs like healthful food, healthcare, and other fundamental necessities. In addition, studies have shown that housing affordability and residential instability can lead to stress and related adverse health outcomes⁵. Children who experience homelessness have higher risks of mental health problems, developmental delays and depression⁶. With the costs of housing continuing to rise, we can expect disparities in health outcomes to grow, unless we take proactive steps to address the housing crisis and focus on those most impacted it.

Oakland's Housing Equity Roadmap highlights three overarching strategy priorities to comprehensively address the housing crisis, and I encourage the Council to adopt the framework and begin pursuing the policies included. The three priorities and their related health impacts are:

Build New Affordable Housing, including for families earning low and extremely low incomes: The loss of state redevelopment funds has reduced the City's annual affordable housing budget from \$20-25 million down to \$5-7 million. Residents living at the lowest Area Median Income (AMI) continue struggling to access affordable housing. Across our Departments' programs and services, providers have reported an increased scarcity in access to affordable housing, which drives family members into living overcrowded living conditions, making difficult choices between paying for housing costs over other health-promoting necessities like healthful food or medications, and, at worst, losing their housing all together.

Improve Housing Habitability and Health While Maintaining Affordability: It is estimated that Americans spend almost 90% of their time indoors, and two-thirds of this time is spent at home⁷ - making housing conditions particularly critical for physical and mental health. Poor housing conditions – including drafts, dampness, mold, old carpeting, lead paint, and pest infections – can contribute to a range of health conditions, including asthma, headaches, fever, skin disease, respiratory infections, lead poisoning, stress, and negative mental health issues. Mold in particular is estimated to contribute to approximately 21% of current asthma cases in the U.S., at an annual cost of \$3.5 billion⁸. Asthma is the most common chronic disease among children⁹. Untreated asthma has other impacts in terms of lost school days (absences) that contributes to children getting behind, decreasing their likelihood of successful school completion and its associated long-term economic benefits, as well as an economic burden on the family related to lost work days and hospital bills.

³ "A Roadmap Toward Equity: Housing Solutions for Oakland California". (2015). Policy Link and City of Oakland.

⁴ Romburg, Marlice. "Oakland rents are second fastest-rising in the U.S." San Francisco Business Times. (Feb 2015) <http://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/blog/real-estate/2015/02/oakland-rents-home-prices-increase-trulia.html>

⁵ Cohen, Rebecca. "The positive impacts of affordable housing on health: a research summary." *Center for Housing Policy and Enterprise Community Partners* (2007).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Where We Live Matters for Our Health: The Links Between Housing and Health". (2008). Commission to Build a Healthier America. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

⁸ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2010). *A Brief Guide to Mold, Moisture, and Your Home*. Available at: www.epa.gov/mold/pdfs/moldguide.pdf.

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Healthy People 2020. Washington, DC. Available at: www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topicsobjectives2020/overview.aspx?topicid=36

Prevent Displacement of Long-Time Residents: Gentrification and displacement have significant, negative health impacts on individuals and families who are displaced, including increased a) likelihood of exposure to overcrowded and substandard housing conditions; b) loss of community services and institutions; c) financial distress and relocation costs; d) disruptions to health care and prescription medications; e) fragmentation of community support networks; f) loss of social support and cohesion; and g) direct impacts on mental and physiological wellbeing¹⁰. Displacement also increases the likelihood that residents who are forced into more affordable areas of the County will need to drive to reach job centers, social activities, and essential services, contributing to worsening air-quality for everyone in the region.

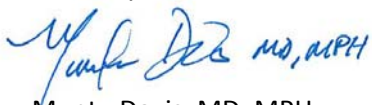
As policies are pursued, I encourage the use of an equity analysis to be sure that those overburdened by the housing crisis, in particular, communities-of-color and low-income residents, benefit from new housing policies and actions. I also encourage having a fully staffed administrative body to support tenants and fully implement the Tenant Protection Ordinance.

When housing is affordable, stable, and in good condition, both individuals and communities are healthier. Solutions put forward in the Roadmap are critical to ensure that all Oakland residents have access to housing conditions that support health and high quality of life.

In closing, I applaud the City's commitment to community engagement around the housing crisis, as this hearing demonstrates, and encourage ongoing engagement and accountability to the community as policies are pursued and pilot projects are designed. It should be clear that we need to advance comprehensive and pro-active efforts to meet the housing needs of our most vulnerable communities, and we must do so in partnership with residents and community-based organizations who feel the impacts of the housing crisis first hand.

I remain committed to partnering with the City of Oakland to ensure healthy, affordable, and stable housing and to prevent avoidable risks in neighborhoods in order to improve the health and wellbeing of Oaklanders and the rest of the Alameda County residents. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



Muntu Davis, MD, MPH
County Health Officer
Alameda County

cc: City of Oakland Councilmembers
City Clerk

¹⁰ Causa Justa::Just Cause. 2014. Development Without Displacement: Resisting Gentrification in the Bay Area. Available at: <http://www.acphd.org/media/343952/cjic2014.pdf>