



**Habitat**  
for Humanity®

Shelter Report 2011:

**Housing and Health:**  
Partners Against Poverty

*Executive summary*



The Kibera slum near Nairobi, Kenya, has an estimated population of more than 1 million. Such areas lack adequate sanitation, contributing to the spread of deadly diseases.

A safe and secure home provides more than just shelter from nature's harshest elements. It is also a bulwark against disease—not only for the family that dwells within it, but also for the community in which they live.

Advances in the prevention of disease and disability have, for years, been linked to better housing. Public health advocates have long understood, as Florence Nightingale, founder of modern nursing, concluded more than a century ago, that “the connection between the health and the dwelling of the population is one of the most important that exists.”

“A comprehensive, coordinated approach to healthy homes will result in the greatest public health impact,” Dr. Steven K. Galston, acting surgeon general of the United States, declared in his 2009 report to the nation. “Directing resources toward a single disease or condition rather than working to improve the overall housing environment is inefficient and does not address residents’ health and safety risks holistically.”<sup>1</sup>

If improved housing has reduced the risk of disease, the reverse is also true: Substandard housing, coupled with poor public health access, tainted water supplies and inadequate sanitation, puts whole communities at risk.

Continued success at providing adequate shelter for the poor will depend heavily on integrating new housing initiatives and public health practices to secure the well-being of communities where the poor live and interact. We have entered a critical era where public policy and finance can no longer view

housing and health programs separately, each with its own missions and advocates.

That integration has become more daunting in recent years. Not only has the economic recession affected governments’ ability to dedicate resources, but the global landscape of poverty has changed. A majority of the human population now lives in urban areas, with the rate of population growth in low-income countries four times faster than in high-income countries.<sup>2</sup> The lack of housing and the extent of sanitation problems in many informal settlements have become major contributors to the spread of disease.

Improved construction standards, including hard-surface floors and roofs, screened windows or pesticide-treated netting, and adequate space, must become routine. Similarly, the home’s immediate environment, including access to clean water and a working, nonpolluting sanitation system, should now be requirements for new and renovated construction.

Government decision makers, health ministers and funding organizations whose efforts in the past have sheltered millions of people in need of help now must change their approach to build not just safe dwellings but healthier communities.

As the U.S. surgeon general has concluded, “a house does not exist in isolation ... it is part of a larger community; the place from which people depart to work, play, study and interact with others; and the place to which they return.”

Toward that end, we make the following recommendations.

<sup>1</sup>The Surgeon General’s Call to Action To Promote Healthy Homes. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Why Urban Health Matters, World Health Organization, 2010

### **Habitat for Humanity on health and housing:**

*To have long-term impact on global health, interventions that combine health and housing are essential. Addressing the issue of adequate housing and healthy communities together is key in any successful health-focused strategy.*

- Efforts to address global health must reach beyond the typical health-related expenditures to address the core issues that cause health problems to arise in the first place.
- Education efforts should be developed to help individuals and local and national governments understand the effect of unhealthy homes on a community's health. This should include more research and funding to further investigate housing costs, the health benefits of improved housing, and the effectiveness of improved housing in making neighborhoods more sustainable and stable.
- Government programs and nongovernmental organizations should be coordinated and should develop holistic approaches to housing and community health in developing countries and in those hit by natural disasters.
- Because rapid urbanization will continue around the globe, support for more research and programs to understand this phenomenon in relation to health and housing is incredibly vital.

### **Habitat for Humanity urges the U.S. government to recognize the link between health and housing around the world.**

- Congress should hold House and Senate hearings with experts from nongovernmental organizations and other groups who have worked directly on health and housing programs to raise the awareness of members of Congress and the public and to explore how Congress can address the issue.
- U.S. foreign assistance entities should commit resources to document the role played by inadequate housing in overall community health and to highlight the best solutions developed to date.
- The Millennium Challenge Corporation, which is recognized for developing holistic compacts, should encourage programs that link the issues of health and housing.
- The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief should develop standard guidelines for shelter interventions for orphaned and vulnerable children programs that meet minimum shelter standards and commit the necessary resources to address the issue.
- The United States Agency for International Development should encourage the development of health programs to look at holistic outcomes, rather than specific outputs, which would allow for innovative programming, including those that could use home improvements to improve health outcomes.
- Disaster response should include long-term planning for resilient housing.

*"A meaningful discussion about health care in the developing world and the eradication of cyclical poverty must include the right to safe and sufficient housing."*

*—Dr. Paul Farmer, chairman of Harvard Medical School's Department of Global Health and Social Medicine*

*"Housing is an anchor for communities."*

*—Dr. Rajiv Shah, USAID administrator*



*"Shelter plays a critical role not only in the health of individual families but in the well-being of communities and ultimately our larger global connection."*

*—Jonathan Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity International*

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