

Health and stable housing: Taking preventative medicine to the next level



An evicted tenant speaks at a community meeting held by City Life/Vida Urbana in East Boston. (Katherine Taylor for The Boston Globe)

Facing skyrocketing rents, the phrase “worried sick” is taking on a literal meaning for low-income families who struggle month to month to keep a roof over their head.

That’s why [the announcement last week](#) that three big Boston hospitals — Boston Medical Center, Brigham and Women’s, and Boston Children’s — are partnering to spend \$3 million to help poor families stay in their homes makes so much sense. By zeroing in on the close link between health and stable housing, the initiative is a model for taking a multidimensional approach to public policy.

It’s also a recognition of the continued lack of housing that’s affordable for low-income families, particularly outside Boston. In Massachusetts, for every 100 families with extremely low incomes, “there are only 46 available units of

housing they would be able to afford without spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent,” [according to a recent study funded by The Boston Foundation](#).

Other reports have shown [a link between housing struggles and health problems](#). A national study by Children’s HealthWatch, a policy research network based at BMC, looked at three forms of unstable housing in low-income families — such as being chronically late on rent payments — and found that they were each correlated with adverse health outcomes in those children and their parents.

Enter the three hospitals, who together launched the Innovative Stable Housing Initiative. It’s a pilot project funded by a combined \$3 million investment over three years. By acting together, they were able to amplify the impact beyond what a single institution would have funded, demonstrating the power of collaboration. The idea is to fund programs directed at helping families find and maintain stable housing, including those at risk of eviction.

One of those programs receiving funds from the three-way partnership is City Life/Vida Urbana, a housing advocacy nonprofit in Boston. The group’s executive director told the Globe the funds will be used to provide legal assistance to families facing immediate risk of eviction and other urgent housing needs. The money will go toward helping 75 families secure stable housing.

The three institutions had been required to set aside funds for community mitigation purposes to win state approval for recent construction projects. Still, they could have directed those funds to any community project or health cause. That the three decided to come together to focus on housing insecurity is notable.

The measure also follows a national trend. Kaiser Permanente, the health conglomerate based in Oakland, Calif., [has also focused on housing](#) as a health prescription, pledging \$200 million for an impact-investing fund to buy affordable housing in the Bay Area. Kaiser is also funding [several pilot programs](#) to tackle homelessness.

Increasing the supply of housing in Massachusetts, including affordable units, will take sustained effort and policy reforms, especially in suburbs scared of new housing. It won’t happen overnight. But the links between housing and health provide yet another reminder of why building more housing, up and down the income ladder, must remain a priority.