

Housing = Health

Housing Is Always a Public Health Issue, But Now Even More So

Lady Lawrence Carty

BEFORE YOU READ: In what ways could housing equal health? What makes something a public health issue vs. a private health issue?

Crowded Conditions

I live in Roxbury, Massachusetts, a neighborhood in Boston that is mostly people of color and working-class people. The neighborhood is densely populated. People live close together. It is easier to pass the virus to others because it's harder to quarantine.

Covid-19 is a big problem in my community because the only tool medical science currently has to slow the spread of the pandemic is to physically separate people from the virus. Social distancing is like having a forest where the trees are very far apart, so the forest fire can't rapidly jump from tree to tree and become a raging disaster. During a pandemic, if people can't keep social distance, a virus can spread quickly, just like a forest fire in a dense forest.

You Need a Home to Be Able to “Stay Home”

Another problem in our community is that we have a high rate of evictions. At [City Life/Vida Urbana](#) (CLVU) the housing justice organization where I am a volunteer, we help people fight to stay in their homes. Many people face eviction because they have a health emergency and the bills pile up. Or they need to work fewer hours so they can take care of a sick relative. Or they lose their job. Or the rents skyrocket. Or the landlord simply tells them they have to leave because he wants to sell the building to a developer. At City Life, we believe everyone deserves a safe and stable place to live. And now with Covid, we see even more clearly that it is a matter of public health. How can you follow the governor's orders to “stay home” if you don't have a home?



Renters at Fairlawn Apartments in the Mattapan neighborhood of Boston demonstrate for the Guaranteed Housing Stability bill that would protect them from eviction.

The pandemic is scary. That makes it easier to see just how crucial housing is for human health. Evicted working-class people don't always have the money to move into a new apartment. That leaves two alternatives:

- Move into a homeless shelter, where you are at a higher risk of contracting the virus, or
- Move in with friends or family, where you are again at a higher risk of being exposed.

Increasing housing density increases the risk of a surge in Covid-19 cases. The science is clear: Keep groups small, so if one person in the group is infected they can't infect too many other people.

Yet studies show that over the next four months, 17.3 million renter households are at risk of eviction nationally, and so all the people in those households may be homeless or forced to move into more crowded conditions. In Massachusetts, at least 200,000 families face eviction. According to the Census Bureau, half of the African Americans surveyed in Boston in July 2020 said they had little or not confidence they could pay the rent in August. Only 15% of white Bostonians said they would have a problem paying the rent. If we don't have a plan to stop evictions, these

tens of millions of people will have an increased risk of getting Covid. A disproportionate share of them will be people of color.

Putting a Stop to Evictions During a Pandemic

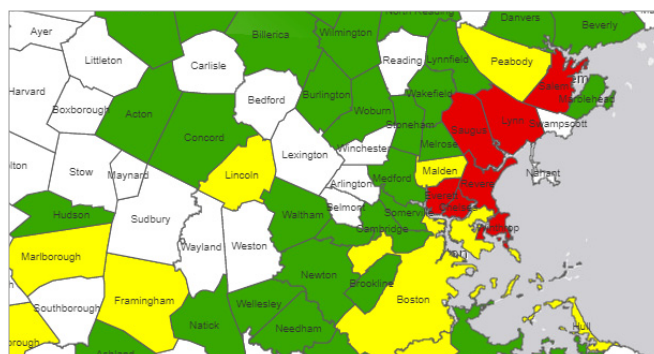
When the Covid-19 state of emergency was declared in Massachusetts, Housing Court continued hearing cases. Black, brown, and other working families were faced with a cruel choice: face eviction during a pandemic or risk catching the virus by going to court and fighting their eviction. City Life staff and members felt that no one should tolerate this choice. So we fought back. We protested on the steps of Housing Court, and we called for the judge to shut it down.

Many people thought it was impossible, but by standing together we did the impossible. The judge shut down Housing Court. However, we didn't stop there. We kept fighting, and we helped pass a new state law, which turned out to be the strongest eviction and foreclosure moratorium law in the nation.

More to Fight for!

Many of my neighbors in Roxbury have a higher risk of getting Covid because they are frontline workers. They work in hospitals, grocery stores, and construction sites, and they are exposed to the virus every day. They can't work from home, and when they are at work, there is no real enforcement of safe working conditions.

The pandemic forces us to see that the only way to uphold our rights as human beings is to make deep changes in how things work in our society. During the shutdown, people across the nation have been rising up in defense of Black lives. Here in Massachusetts, people are coming together to demand not just an end to evictions but a safe reopening of schools, and health and safety on the job. As the CLVU organizer, Judy Burnette, explained at a recent protest, these things are all connected. Without housing, people can't stay healthy, and children can't get an education. Without a safe plan for school reopening, students, teachers, and staff are not safe from the



This map shows Massachusetts communities hardest hit by the coronavirus. Red has the most cases, then green, yellow, and white. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-level-covid-19-data-reporting>.

virus. Without safe jobs, parents can't earn money to care for their children. And so on.

None of these rights – to safe housing, healthcare, education, and jobs – can be effective without the other. This is a pivotal time unlike anything we have seen in recent memory. This is what helps me face my fear of this pandemic. As great as the danger from Covid-19 is, our power to stand together and fight for a just society is even greater.

This is not a pie-in-the-sky dream! How do I know our power is real? Because we helped shut down Housing Court, and we helped win state legislation making evictions illegal during the state of emergency. And now we are fighting to extend this law even further by pushing for the Housing Stability bill in Massachusetts! We have the power to make real change. We are already doing it.

Sources: www.clvu.org/national_eviction_report_august_2020; bostonevictions.org; <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>.

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