Executive Summary

The Problem | Oakland is a majority-renter city with a large number of low-income households who face major problems securing decent housing. In 2011-12, almost one-third of tenants who sought help at four organizations providing tenant services faced habitability problems in their housing conditions. These habitability problems—most notably mold—pose harmful and costly hazards to public health.

According to data available for 2010, Alameda County has the third highest asthma hospitalization rate among all 58 California counties. Between 2006 and 2008, African American asthma hospitalization rates were three to seven times the rates among other racial/ethnic groups. For Oakland, the rate of asthma hospitalization among residents is 55 percent higher than the county rate and nearly two and a half times the California rate. Oakland children under age 15 bear an exceedingly high burden of asthma morbidity, with a hospitalization rate over five times that of the California rate. When considering the healthcare costs of asthma, it is important to note that asthma is the single largest contributor to preventable hospital admission among children.

The Response | Since 2012, the City of Oakland and Alameda County’s Public Health Department and Lead Poisoning Prevention program have partnered with the East Bay Community Law Center, Centro Legal de la Raza, and Causa Justa::Just Cause to pilot a referral pipeline from community organizations and medical providers to a team of Code Enforcement inspectors and County case managers for focused response to tenants with children at health risk from housing conditions. In addition to ongoing support for efforts such as the Healthy Housing Pilot Program, we recommend:

1. Fully funding the Code Enforcement department to be able to:
   - Add multi-lingual language capacity, especially Spanish.
   - Respond to calls that come in with mold as a major complaint.
   - Find a revenue source for Oakland’s code enforcement relocation ordinance.
   - Streamline the process for tenants’ to access relocation support and assistance from the City of Oakland

2. Developing and adopting a system of proactive rental inspections in order to encourage preventative maintenance of properties and address housing conditions before they become hazardous to residents.

3. Expanding Measure EE (Just Cause Eviction) to include units built after 1983, which are currently not covered in the ordinance.

Who We Are | The Place Matters Housing Workgroup seeks to improve access to healthy and affordable housing in our community. We are a collaboration of Alameda County Public Health Department, Alameda County Environmental Health, Causa Justa::Just Cause, Centro Legal de la Raza, Regional Asthma Management and Prevention, East Bay Community Law Center, and Oakland Tenants Union.
Healthy housing is essential for maintaining individual and community health. Housing conditions affect health through exposure to environmental hazards and from the risk of injuries. Healthy housing can also promote mental health by reducing sources of stress, anxiety, and depression. By contrast, inadequate housing contributes to acute and chronic health problems, particularly for people of color, low-income people, and children and seniors who are more vulnerable to housing-related health problems.

Access to proven health protective resources like decent housing, clean air, healthy food, and opportunities for good employment and education is highly dependent on the neighborhood in which one lives. These inequities cluster and accumulate over people’s lives and over time conspire to diminish the quality and length of life in these neighborhoods—as well as leading to higher chronic disease rates that are the number one factor driving healthcare costs today.

Since the 1970s, the federal government has, on average, decreased funding for low-income family housing. While more U.S. families than ever live beneath the poverty line, federal spending to house the very low-income population is about a quarter of the total federal housing budget.\(^1\) Compounded by decades of disinvestment in housing, the impact of the recent foreclosure crisis and stalled economic recovery leaves cities like Oakland struggling with a shortage of available and affordable housing, unhealthy and substandard housing conditions, and displacement of low-income residents.

In 2009, Alameda County Public Health Department’s Place Matters program launched its local housing policy agenda developed in collaboration with community partners. Our long-term goal is to ensure an adequate supply of safe, habitable housing that is constructed and preserved in proportion to demand, supports good health, and maintains cultural, racial, and class diversity.

Through our work with community-based organizations, policy advocates, and legal services providers, we seek to spotlight the issues facing low-income tenants and advance solutions to improve habitability and affordability in Oakland’s rental housing.

**Habitability in Oakland**

Place Matters reviewed data collected for 2011-12 from four organizations that provide the bulk of tenant services to low-income renters in Oakland—East Bay Community Law Center, Centro Legal de la Raza, Causa Justa::Just Cause, and ACPHD’s Asthma Start program.

We found that almost **one-third** of tenants (29 percent) who seek services from these four organizations are currently facing habitability problems in rental housing in Oakland.\(^2\) As these organizations serve primarily

\(^1\) The total amount of tenant cases among all four organizations was 1,955.
low-income residents, their data suggests that potentially one-third of low-income Oakland renters are living in housing with habitability problems.

The most frequent habitability problems among tenants seeking assistance, according to service providers, are:

1. Mold
2. Cockroaches
3. Lead-based paint
4. Disrepair
5. Lack of heat
6. Bed bugs

Service providers described the cases they see most often:

“Mold is rampant in the East Bay. We have a lot of clients with asthma and allergies. Disrepair is also a huge problem—landlords who won’t repair anything. This is particularly true for landlords who are renting under the table.”

“Moldy bathrooms due to lack of ventilation. Moldy windows due to windows being old, or the windows being covered by blinds and, curtains or blankets. Very old carpets (10+ years old) that smell moldy or very dusty.”

“Mold in the bathrooms and caving of ceilings due to wet rot.”

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3 Focus group survey of nine tenant service providers from East Bay Community Legal Center, Centro Legal de la Raza, Asthma Start, Alameda County Public Health, Public Health Clearinghouse, Housing Consortium of the East Bay, and East Bay Agency for Children.
“Severe mold problem and landlord is not doing anything that is effective to stop it. Often there are other problems which have been unaddressed.”

59% of Oaklanders are Renters

Oakland is a majority-renter city with a large number of low-income households who face significant problems securing decent housing. According to a city analysis of local impediments to fair housing, a significant amount of rental housing in Oakland that is affordable to lower-income households is substandard. For renters, cost burdens are being replaced by higher rates of substandard conditions and overcrowding—suggesting that many renters, and particularly large families, resolve their affordability problems by living in inadequate housing.

A sample survey of housing conditions in 2002 found that as much as 30 percent of the city’s housing stock (nearly 47,000 units) may need various levels of repair, from deferred maintenance to substantial rehabilitation. Unfortunately, more current, comprehensive data of citywide housing conditions is not available. However, based on indicators of health hazards, such as the presence of asbestos or lead-based paint, along with the age of housing stock, there are likely to be significant habitability problems in Oakland’s rental housing conditions for lower-income residents. Ninety percent of Oakland’s housing stock was built before 1980, and 65 percent built before 1960. The City estimates up to two-thirds of the housing units in Oakland could contain lead-based paint.

The National Center for Healthy Housing’s State of Healthy Housing report ranked the city of Oakland among the central cities with the least healthy housing in the country (39th out of 44). The study noted that nearly 60 percent of Oakland’s housing units showed one or more health-related problems. However, the data used for this report came from the Census American Housing Survey, which last sampled Oakland in 1998, suggesting a historic problem with housing in Oakland, but shedding little light on conditions in Oakland today.

Health Impacts of Housing Conditions

It is estimated that most Americans spend nearly 90 percent of their time indoors, with two-thirds of that time spent inside their home. Given its importance to our lives, it is not surprising that housing conditions hold the potential to significantly impact our physical and mental health.

Unaffordable and substandard housing has serious health consequences. The stress due to housing cost burdens is associated with a greater likelihood of developing hypertension and lower levels of psychological well-being. Cost-burdened households have less income for the prerequisites of good health—healthcare access, nutritious food, transportation, and childcare. Living in overcrowded and substandard housing is linked to tuberculosis, respiratory infections, and increased stress. Common substandard housing conditions—such as drafts, dampness, mold, old carpeting, lead paint, and pest infestations—are linked to recurrent headaches, fever, nausea, skin disease, sore throats, and respiratory illness such as asthma.

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4 City of Oakland Housing Element Update
5 Housing Element
6 ibid
According to data available for 2010, Alameda County has the third highest asthma hospitalization rate among all 58 California counties. The asthma hospitalization rate among African Americans is particularly concerning given both the health disparities and health inequities in Alameda County—there is a 15-year life expectancy gap between an African American child from West Oakland and a White person from the Oakland Hills. Between 2006 and 2008, African American asthma hospitalization rates were three to seven times the rates among other racial/ethnic groups. For Oakland, the rate of asthma hospitalization among residents is 55 percent higher than the county rate and nearly two and a half times the California rate. Asthma hospitalization is highest among groups with the most vulnerable respiratory systems – seniors, children, and those with depressed immune systems. Oakland children under age 15 bear an exceedingly high burden of asthma morbidity, with a hospitalization rate over five times that of the California rate. When considering the health care costs of asthma, it is important to note that asthma is the single largest contributor to preventable hospital admission among children.

Data is limited about the connection between asthma rates in Alameda County and housing conditions overall, nevertheless existing evidence suggests a link. Alameda County’s Asthma Start program, which provides in-home case management services to families of children who have asthma, reported that for a recent 12-month period, of 370 in-home consultations, over 40 percent of homes visited contained some signs of the presence of mold.

‘I Can’t Have My Kids in This’

Twanana Richards’ apartment on Chetwood Street in West Oakland began leaking over the winter in 2012. The carpet became soaked in her two children’s bedroom, and soon they began suffering from allergies and rashes. After repeated calls to the landlord, the building’s property manager finally came to fix the leak. But they didn’t want to replace the carpet, only pulling back the carpet to dry the padding (and leaving it that way until Twanna called to complain again). Meanwhile, she bought a mold kit herself and did a test, which confirmed that there was mold in the air. The bedroom is so infected that the family can no longer use it, with the two children sleeping on the floor of their parents’ room.

“I can’t have my kids in this. My eyes were watering, my nose stinging and burning. My son says his eyes itch, and he’ll be coughing for no reason,” Twanna said. “I’m just hoping they will do something. If not, we might just call it quits and move in with my mom for a bit. Financially, we’d be paying more rent if we have to move—not many places are available in Oakland right now, and it would affect our work and school commutes. This is like the third place I’ve lived in with housing issues, and me calling the city and nothing being done.”

Lack of Affordability
Exposure to substandard housing conditions is linked to lack of access to affordable housing. When housing costs are unaffordable, tenants are left with few options and often face living with health-threatening conditions, such as exposure to indoor dampness, mold, or lead.

This is exacerbated by rising trends in residential segregation, where lower-income households increasingly live in majority low-income neighborhoods—thus amplifying the lack of resources for health and opportunity. In the San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont metropolitan area, 32 percent of lower-income households live in majority low-income Census tracts, according to a 2012 Pew study.

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition’s 2013 Out of Reach Report, there is not one city in the U.S. where a family can afford a two-bedroom apartment at the current market rate with the income from a single full-time, minimum wage job. In Oakland, a household would have to work three full-time minimum wage jobs to afford fair-market rent on a two-bedroom apartment. In many parts of East Oakland, this is complicated by the fact that there is rampant unemployment and under-employment. According to the American Community Survey, 34.1 percent of East Oakland residents are unemployed. Fifty-two percent of the Oakland’s households are considered to be very low or low income, substantially higher than the countywide average of approximately 38 percent.7

Among renters with incomes less than $35,000, approximately 70 percent pay more than 30 percent of their income for rent.

In the first quarter of 2013, average rent in Alameda County went up 8.8 percent, according to the apartment data collection company RealFacts. Though rent increases have slowed compared to the 15-20 percent jumps in 2011 and 2012, the Bay Area remains one of the most expensive housing markets in the country.

Rents continue to go up, but the conditions continue to worsen, especially in Oakland’s flatland neighborhoods. Landlords and banks that own tenant occupied properties have not been held accountable for maintaining the city’s aging housing stock. Since the burst of the housing bubble, the City of Oakland has cut back public services in the budget, meaning less money for code enforcement inspectors and de-prioritization of the health of Oakland’s low-income tenants. As the City of Oakland is scraping to find funds to secure affordable housing in the aftermath of the loss of the redevelopment agency, we need to ensure that the housing stock is protected and that healthy housing for Oakland residents is a priority.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenge of stabilizing Oakland’s neighborhoods and preserving a healthy housing stock, like many urban neighborhoods today, relies on the capacity of city and community leaders to leverage the resources of public agencies such as Public Health and Code Enforcement, in partnership with community and neighborhood organizations. Since 2012, the City of Oakland and Alameda County’s Public Health Department and Lead Poisoning Prevention program have partnered with the East Bay Community Law Center, Centro Legal de la Raza, and Causa Justa::Just Cause to pilot a referral pipeline from community organizations and medical providers to a team of Code Enforcement inspectors and County case managers for focused response to tenants with children at health risk from housing conditions. In addition to ongoing support for efforts such as the Healthy Housing Pilot Program, we recommend:

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7 Housing Element
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Healthy, stable housing for Oakland families has to be a top priority for decision makers in our city. Implementing the policy recommendations above will demonstrate a commitment to stabilize our neighborhoods and the health of all Oaklanders.