



Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative

Alameda County | City of Berkeley | Contra Costa County | Marin County | Napa County | City and County of San Francisco | San Mateo County | Santa Clara County | Santa Cruz County | Solano County | Sonoma County

Model Language (Prepared for the City of Hayward's 3/24/20 COVID-19 housing policy discussions.)

A CALL TO ACTION: COVID-19, HOUSING INSTABILITY, AND HEALTH

March 23, 2020

COVID-19 – A Public Health Emergency

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness caused by a novel virus that is spreading rapidly across the globe. Currently, there are over 33,000 cases in the United Statesⁱ. Globally, over 12,000 deaths have been attributed to the illness since it emerged three months agoⁱⁱ.

In the Bay Area, efforts to respond to the virus are increasing rapidly. On March 17, six Bay Area counties announced “shelter in place” orders for all residents, directing approximately 6.7 million people to stay in their homes to curb the spread of the virus. Governor Newsom subsequently expanded “shelter-in-place” rules statewide and has issued executive orders calling for, among other things, maintaining “social distancing” of six feet per person during essential travel outside the home.

Housing Instability and Health under COVID-19

Ensuring housing stability is essential to protect the health of Bay Area residents as the region responds to and recovers from the COVID-19 crisis. Loss of stable housing—through eviction, foreclosure, natural disaster, or other causes—poses numerous significant health risks, both for the individuals directly affected and for the larger population.

Loss of housing disrupts a family’s ability to “shelter in place” and practice “social distancing,” which increases the likelihood of disease transmission. For example, renters who lose their housing must travel to seek out alternative housing arrangements or may stay with friends and family in overcrowded conditions. Similarly, those facing eviction may need to attend an eviction court to participate in proceedings. These actions increase potential for exposure and conflict with recommended “social distancing” practices.

Loss of housing is also a leading contributor to homelessness. People experiencing homelessness face increased barriers to staying healthy during this pandemicⁱⁱⁱ. For example, many people experiencing homelessness live in environments that are conducive to a disease epidemic, including lack of regular access to basic hygiene supplies and showering facilities, all of which could facilitate virus transmission. They also face serious health issues due to their inability to isolate, quarantine, and recover. The homeless population is also disproportionately older—in California, roughly half are 50 years and older—and live with chronic underlying health conditions, which are critical risk factors for contracting COVID-19 and suffering more severe outcomes.^{iv} Governor Newsom has estimated that 60,000 homeless Californians could contract COVID-19 over the next eight weeks.^v

As research from BARHII shows, housing insecurity can impact health in many other ways. This includes:

- Families forced to make unhealthy trade-offs between paying for housing and investing in medical care, nutrition, and other basic needs.
- Unsafe housing conditions, including exposure to lead-based paint, mold, pests, lack of heating, and other conditions that lead to chronic illness.
- Mental health impacts including higher rates of depression.

- Impacts on children, including behavioral problems, educational delays, low birth weights, and other ongoing health conditions such as asthma.
- Health effects of long commutes to job centers, including lower rates of physical activity, lower cardio-respiratory fitness, and higher Body Mass Index, stress, and blood pressure^{vi}.

The Bay Area's Housing Crisis and COVID-19

The Bay Area is experiencing a severe housing affordability crisis that has impacted the health and well-being of our residents. Housing costs here are the highest in the nation^{vii}. In Alameda County, a family of three must earn on average \$111,600 to afford a two-bedroom apartment^{viii}. Across the region, 34,000 people are estimated to be homeless^{ix}. High housing costs effectively double the real poverty rate in the Bay Area^x. The region needs over 235,000 new affordable rental homes to house its current population^{xi}.

These impacts are particularly acute for people of color. Past policies, such as redlining, along with more recent policies, such as discriminatory lending practices, have pushed people of color disproportionately into high housing cost burdens and unhealthy housing conditions. For example, research from BARHII found that African American families in the Bay Area are nearly five times more likely to pay half their income on housing than whites^{xii}. Additionally, undocumented immigrants, seniors, people with disabilities, and people with a conviction history face few options for housing that meets their needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicates this crisis, raising the stakes for those facing housing instability, and exacerbating systemic inequities in housing and health. The pandemic has led to a loss of income for many Bay Area residents, disproportionately impacting low-income residents struggling with high housing costs. A recent national poll found 18% of the adults surveyed had already been laid off or had their work hours reduced^{xiii}. On March 18, Governor Newsom reported that California received 80,000 unemployment applications in one day alone, up from roughly 2,000 a day prior to the outbreak^{xiv}. Many residents, including independent contractors and sole proprietors, do not qualify for the temporary partial wage replacement provided by California's unemployment program. The recent shuttering of businesses across the state also impacts those who had been seeking employment or looking to increase their work prior to the pandemic. Faced with these compounding factors, many low-income workers will not be able to pay for housing and other expenses required to maintain their health. Likewise, the pressure to work while sick and to work in unsafe circumstances to preserve income will be considerable, increasing the potential for virus transmission.

Emergency Action Needed to Increase Housing Stability and Preserve Health

To protect public health, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic should include robust emergency measures to ensure housing stability for low-income individuals and people experiencing or in danger of homelessness. This should include measures to suspend evictions, support the ability of low-income individuals to afford housing, and establish safe housing for the homeless. Together, through immediate action at the local, regional, state, and national level, we can ensure stable housing to provide a foundation of health of all residents in this time of crisis.

For more information, contact BARHII's Matt Vander Sluis at mvaardersluis@barhii.org or (707) 628-3324.

ⁱ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2468-2667%2820%2930053-0>

^{iv} <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/coronavirus-poses-unique-threat-to-u-s-homeless-population1/>

^v <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/19/coronavirus-could-infect-more-than-60000-homeless-in-california-governor-says/>

^{vi} <http://barhii.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/BARHII-displacement-brief.pdf>

^{vii} https://reports.nihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/OOR_2019.pdf

^{viii} <https://1p08d91kd0c03rlxhmtydpr-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/WhoCanAffordRent2019.pdf>

^{ix} <https://www.kqed.org/news/11764548/10-answers-to-your-questions-about-homelessness-in-san-francisco>

^x https://1p08d91kd0c03rlxhmtydpr-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CHPC_HNR_2019_Bay-Area.pdf

^{xi} https://1p08d91kd0c03rlxhmtydpr-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CHPC_HNR_2019_Bay-Area.pdf

^{xii} http://barhii.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Housing_Stability_and_Family_Health.pdf

^{xiii} <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-03-19/coronavirus-layoffs-california>

^{xiv} <https://www.ocregister.com/2020/03/19/coronavirus-pushes-california-unemployment-claims-to-80000-in-a-day/>