

The 2021 American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) is a once in a generation opportunity to make improvements to the Massachusetts housing stock to prevent unnecessary disease and injuries and reduce to racial health disparities. We respectfully request that the legislature invest \$100 million in ARPA funding to create the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Initiative (MHHI) to remove lead paint and rehabilitate older housing stock.

Massachusetts housing stock is among the oldest in the country and must be rehabilitated to protect the health of Massachusetts residents.

The presence of lead, poor indoor air quality, and other substandard housing conditions lead to developmental delays in children, respiratory disease, accidents, and injuries, and spread of infectious disease, among other serious, preventable health consequences. While current programs, including the Get the Lead Out Program and the CDBG-funded Housing Rehabilitation Programs, address these conditions, funding for them is woefully inadequate and the program terms often discourage high levels of participation.

As Massachusetts struggles to defeat COVID-19 and recover from the devastating impacts of the pandemic, we urge you to act now to protect vulnerable residents by investing \$100 million, split between making homes lead-safe and making other essential home improvements, in the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Initiative (MHHI). MHHI will improve the quality and safety of thousands of homes across the Commonwealth, and thereby improve the health of families currently living in these homes and the generations of families who will live in the homes in the future.

This initiative will also help position the Commonwealth to advance our state's Climate Action Plan which calls for reducing energy use in our residential housing stock by renovating one million homes by 2030. We cannot equitably achieve this objective if housing does not first meet basic health and safety standards. A [recent report](#) by the Green and Healthy Homes Initiative, stated that "the most crucial starting-line disparities in the residential building electrification movement involved deferred maintenance in old buildings, which are more likely to be occupied by Black, Brown, and limited income individuals."

Fortunately, the infrastructure for delivering the assistance necessary to improve homes are already in place, through existing programs. With additional funding for these essential programs, along with funding to ramp up the delivery system, the Commonwealth is well-placed to deliver this additional assistance within the time periods required by the Federal Government.

The Critical Need for Lead Paint Removal

Over 70% of homes in Massachusetts were constructed before lead paint was banned in 1978. All homes built before 1978 are likely to contain some lead-based paint which can be inhaled or ingested unless steps have already been taken to make them lead-safe or remove that lead paint. In fact, a 2019 study by the MA Department of Public Health determined that only 10% of all pre-1978 housing had undergone lead inspections or de-leading activity.

Any amount of lead in a child's body can hurt their brain, kidneys, and nervous system, slow down growth and development, make it hard to learn, damage hearing and speech, and cause behavior problems. Between 2013 and 2017, 16,961 children in Massachusetts were estimated to have blood levels above 5 micrograms per deciliter – the level at which the Center for Disease Control and Prevention says the source of lead exposure should be investigated.

Further, lead exposure is a racial equity issue. According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Black children are nearly 2.5 times more likely to have lead poisoning than white children. Additionally, children living in low-income communities are over 3 times more likely to have elevated lead levels than children living in high income communities.

In 2017, the Department of Public Health recognized the dangers of lead poisoning by lowering the [threshold](#) at which a child is deemed to be poisoned and in need of services and intervention. Yet, the state's primary lead abatement program, the Get the Lead Out (GTLO) Program, was able to make just 49 loans in FY 2021 and has \$7.3 million left for future homes. While this has been an important and well-run program, funding limitations require MassHousing to structure the program as a loan program. We know many homeowners are unwilling or unable to take on this extra debt and a grant program funded by ARPA dollars would allow us to rapidly scale up. We estimate that \$50 million in ARPA funding will be sufficient to make approximately 2,000 additional homes lead-safe: this is forty times the number of homes made lead-safe in FY 2021 by the GTLO Program.

The Critical Need for Healthy Homes Housing Rehabilitation Programs

Poor indoor air quality – caused by mold, dust, second-hand smoke, poor ventilation, and leaky pipes and faucets – can cause respiratory and allergy symptoms and difficulty breathing. Exposure to air pollution can also cause asthma or make asthma symptoms worse. Asthma is particularly pervasive in Massachusetts affecting 10.2% of adults and 12.9% of children. Almost half of children with current asthma missed at least one day of school or day care because of their asthma symptoms.

Like many other health outcomes associated with housing quality, asthma is unevenly distributed across the Commonwealth. Emergency Department visits for asthma were 2.5 and 3.5 times higher for Hispanic and Black non-Hispanic children as compared with white children in 2012. Further, 17.1% of children living in a household with income of less than \$25,000 suffer from asthma as compared with 8.1% of children living in households with an income of \$75,000 or greater.

Properties that are in unsafe conditions – because of issues such as pest infestations, lack of adequate temperature control, and lack of needed accessibility features – can cause accidents and falls and the spread of infectious disease. Fires, whether stemming from unsafe (and often hidden) electrical problems or other causes, can have deadly consequences.

The same populations that are particularly impacted by unsafe housing also face the reality of having fewer housing choices when they determine that their current homes are unsuitable. Many elders and persons with disabilities encounter a dearth of homes with the accessible or adaptable features they require. For low-income and low-wealth households, the high cost of renting or buying limits their options. For these households, and households encountering discrimination, finding other safe, suitable and affordable housing may not be an option at all. Further, if a family can relocate to safer housing, the unsafe conditions that they left persist for the next family.

We respectfully request that the legislature invest \$100 million in ARPA funding to create the Massachusetts Healthy Homes Initiative (MHHI) to remove lead paint and rehabilitate older housing stock. By improving the safety of thousands of homes across the Commonwealth, we will improve the health of families currently living in these homes and the generations of families who will live in the homes in the future.

Sincerely,

Allston Brighton Health Collaborative
Asian Community Development Corporation
Boston Children's Hospital
Boston Public Health Commission
Children's HealthWatch
Citizens' Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA)
Coalition for a Public Conversation on Lead
Community Development Partnership
Community Economic Development Center
Conservation Law Foundation
Disability Policy Consortium
Domus Incorporated
Health Resources in Action
Hilltown CDC
Lawrence CommunityWorks
Local Enterprise Assistance Fund (LEAF)
Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) Boston
LivableStreets Alliance
Metro Housing|Boston
Massachusetts Affordable Housing Alliance
Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC)
Massachusetts Association of Community Development Corporations (MACDC)
Massachusetts Association of Public Health Nurses
Massachusetts Fair Housing Center, Inc.
Massachusetts Public Health Association (MPHA)
Neighborhood of Affordable Housing, Incorporated (NOAH)
NeighborWorks Housing Solutions
North Shore CDC
Public Health Institute of Western MA
Revitalize Community Development Corporation
South Eastern Economic Development (SEED) Corporation
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Rita Longe, Registered Dietitian
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