

# **Healthy Housing for Renters: Project Overview**

*A collaborative project of the American Lung Association of Oregon and the  
Community Alliance of Tenants*

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## **I. Introduction**

Most low-income individuals and families live in rental apartments or homes. These low-income renters are too often forced to live in unsafe, unhealthy dwellings. They face illness inducing agents like mold and mildew, dangerous exposure to lead, problems such as rats, roaches and other pests, and deteriorating conditions that pose injury and health risks, especially for children.

In some instances there are legal protections from these problems. However, tenants' efforts to get landlords to fix or change health or safety hazards often leads to problems for tenants. It is common for low-income tenants face retaliation, threats and evictions when asking for repairs.

The American Lung Association of Oregon (ALAO) and the Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT) have joined together to assist low-income renters by helping them to:

- Identify health or safety related problems in their rental units,
- Understand how these problems can affect their families,
- Understand their rights, protections and effective strategies for seeking repairs, and
- Organize, together with allies, to change existing housing laws and codes that do not provide enough health and safety protections, and ensure that existing laws and codes are enforced.

## **II. Need**

The vast majority of low-income individuals and families rent their dwellings. The 2002 American Housing Survey found that 28% of all occupied rental housing units in Portland had problems with external building conditions, 11% reported water leakage into unit from the outside, 12% reported water leakage from an interior source, 6% reported problems with rats, mice or other rodents, and 29% reported being dissatisfied or only partially satisfied with the quality of building maintenance. Substandard housing is the number one reason tenants call CAT's Renters' Rights Hotline, and a recent analysis of City of Portland multi-family housing inspections from 2003-2004, found that over 55% of units cited for code-violations included violations related to indoor air quality. The vast majority of these problem rental units are occupied by low or lower middle income tenants.

Many renters do not understand all the ways in which their homes can pose a threat to their health and safety. Dangers such as lead paint dust, diseases born by pests, and asthma triggers, such as mold, mildew, roaches and second hand smoke, often go un-recognized. This lack of information results in many people being chronically exposed to health hazards on a daily basis.

Unfortunately, when low-income tenants are aware of health and safety problems in their homes, there is often little that they can do. Many tenants face significant barriers when trying to address problems with their housing conditions. The affordable housing shortage in the Portland area leaves low-income tenants with few options and limits the decisions that

tenants can make when searching for housing. Once in housing, most tenants can be evicted from residences without cause and only 30 days notice. These “no –cause” evictions create an avenue for landlords to practice illegal retaliation and discrimination with relative ease. The affordable housing shortage coupled with “no-cause” evictions creates a tremendous power imbalance that leaves low-income tenants with little safe recourse to address substandard and unhealthy housing conditions.

Oregon law (ORS 90.320) requires landlords to keep their rental units in good condition, but the state does nothing to enforce the requirements of the law. Effective enforcement of the state law requires tenants to have access to legal representation and the time and resources for court action. Portland’s City Code includes additional requirements for housing maintenance, but enforcement is complaint driven and often inadequate to result in full compliance. The complaint driven system requires tenants know about it, which most do not, and it exposes tenants to illegal retaliation. Further, the penalties for failure to comply with the code are sometimes insufficient to force repairs, and many problem property owners are chronic violators, responding to violations with shoddy repairs that meet only the minimum required to pass code inspections. Tenants are then forced to call the inspections program repeatedly as repairs break down.

Neither the state law nor Portland’s code effectively address responsibility for fixing common environmental health hazards tied to housing conditions, especially mold and lead. For example, state law doesn’t even mention mold. Portland’s code requires "Every dwelling, including basements, and crawl space shall be maintained reasonably free from dampness to prevent conditions conducive to decay, mold growth, or deterioration of the structure." However, often landlords may respond to citations for mold by cleaning or painting without ever addressing the conditions that lead to the mold. As a result, the problem returns within weeks.

Inadequate housing maintenance standards, insufficient tools for enforcement of existing standards and the lack of tenant eviction protections create enormous barriers for tenants trying to secure improvements in housing conditions. Low-income people are often in a position of choosing between no housing and unsafe/unhealthy housing. They cannot just “shop around” for living conditions that are up to standard, and application fees, deposits, and moving costs mean they cannot afford to “just move” if a landlord does not maintain their housing.

### **III. Goals**

- Educate Low-income Tenants on Home Health and Safety hazards
- Assess and Provide Health/Safety Hazard Reductions
- Develop Leadership of Low-Income Tenants
- Organize Low-Income Tenants to Take Collective Action to Improve Slum Housing Conditions
- Develop Community Support for Efforts to Address Health/Safety Hazards Tied to Substandard Housing Conditions
- Develop and Secure Adoption of Policy Changes Designed to Improve Housing Conditions and Home Indoor Environmental Health for Renters

## **IV. Methods**

### **A- Master Home Environmentalist Program**

ALAO's Master Home Environmentalist (MHE) Program has a common vision of the home as a safe, healthy environment for all family members, with a mission to promote health by reducing pollutants in the home through volunteer-based education and action. The MHE program provides 30 hours of training to community volunteers on indoor pollutants, their health impacts, and how residents can reduce their exposure to these pollutants. Trained volunteers perform home assessments with residents which focus on free and inexpensive solutions to problems uncovered, and provide a unique opportunity for one-on-one education and advocacy. For those home assessments which require tenant advocacy expertise, CAT volunteers will be sent with MHE volunteers to share valuable renter's rights information during the environmental assessment process.

### **B- Safe Housing Project:**

CAT's Safe Housing Project combines education, leadership development and community organizing to address the problem of substandard housing in our community. Through targeted outreach and training at apartment complexes with chronic problems with housing conditions, we will provide tenants with the training and support necessary to organize for immediate improvements in housing conditions and safety. Tenants will take collective action to secure needed repairs. Activities may include building canvasses, tenants rights workshops, joint repair requests, and coordinated housing inspections.

### **C- Safe Housing Task Force:**

Tenant leaders from the Safe Housing Project, together with other impacted tenants recruited through the MHE program and CAT's Renters' Rights Hotline will join in the Safe Housing Task Force (SHTF). The SHTF will provide a venue for impacted tenants to 1) provide peer support for addressing common challenges, 2) receive training and skills development, and 3) coordinate policy research and advocacy efforts.

### **D- Healthy Homes Working Group**

CAT and ALAO will develop a Healthy Homes Working Group to identify appropriate public policies to address barriers to tenants obtaining and maintaining housing free from significant indoor environmental health hazards. The working group will include participation from a broad array of stakeholders including impacted tenants, public health agencies and community groups, local government, legal service attorneys, landlords, and anti-poverty organizations.

### **E- Community Support**

In addition to organizing impacted tenants through the Safe Housing Project and Safe Housing Task Force, we will use a volunteer Speakers Bureau, action alert network and formal Declaration of Support to organize a larger base of support in the community in order to create the political will necessary for adoption and implementation of our policy recommendations.