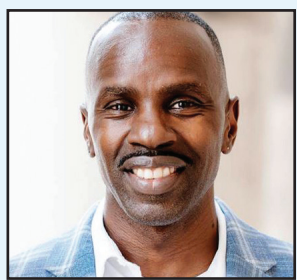


Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



CARLOS T. CARTER

Housing Shortages

This month's health page focuses on housing shortages and the ways research and data can help address this problem.

How is housing stability connected to our physical and mental health?

When you look at the framework for social determinants of health — which considers all factors impacting a person's mental and physical well-being — housing is a big part of the equation. If you're unsure about where you're going to live daily, how can you be well?

The same is true if you're living in a home that's infested with mold, for example, or unfit for human habitation in some other way, or even crowded with other people. There have been many studies that explore the impact of these types of stressful living conditions on physical and mental health. These conditions negatively impact your ability to concentrate, think, and fully be who you are.

Personally, I've worked with people who are facing housing insecurity and have seen this stress firsthand. All people need to have consistency in their lives, including a safe and stable place to live at the bare minimum.

What are some examples of how the Urban League might be able to use the HouseCat database?

The Urban League could use HouseCat to examine housing trends and advocate for low/moderate income people who will be impacted by new developments and a reduction in affordable units.

ULPGH could also join coalitions to help folks take advantage of new housing opportunities, clean up credit, obtain security deposits, and ensure current renters aren't pushed out.

It's also important to make sure housing isn't segregated and that lenders aren't permitted to engage in unofficial redlining or offer predatory loan products to low/moderate new home buyers.

What are ways community members can advocate for stable housing for everyone?

Get involved. Let your voice be heard. Engage with people in your community about affordable housing. Support local initiatives, groups, and organizations that are leading these conversations by volunteering your time and/or talent or by making donations. Vote — but before you do, make sure you understand your candidate's agenda and viewpoint on stable housing.

Carlos T. Carter is President and CEO of Greater Pittsburgh Urban League.

HouseCat helps watchdog groups address housing insecurity — proactively

Pittsburgh — like other cities around the world — is having an affordable housing crisis that can be harmful to people's health and wellbeing. According to the Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation (PAHRC), the state would need to add more than half-a-million affordable rental homes to meet demand. The crisis falls especially hard on people with low and extremely low incomes (ELI), making them more likely to experience housing insecurity, including eviction and the threat of eviction.

Not surprisingly, the housing shortage among low-income clients affects racial or ethnic minorities unequally. In the U.S., out of the four million low-income families, 30% are Hispanic, 22% are Black, and 6% identify as nonwhites (SOURCE: The Urban Institute).

Without safe, stable, affordable housing, residents suffer worse health and health outcomes.

Research in urban Illinois, for example, found that eviction rates and eviction filing rates match up with five health-related behaviors: Binge drinking, higher rates of smoking, lack of leisure time or physical activity, obesity, and less sleep. What's more, Black households had the highest instances of these health-related behaviors except for binge drinking. (SOURCE: Urban Institute)

To tackle this inequity, Pittsburgh's Affordable Housing Task Force created a plan. In it, they called for a centralized database. The database would contain all the information the city needed to oversee its low-income housing units, which now number almost 11,000 (SOURCE: Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh).

The group wanted a dependable online site where they could get a snapshot of the city's subsidized housing at that moment. With this source, they would have a better understanding about and more time to deal with housing problems that jeopardize a fundamental human right: a safe, affordable home.

In April 2022, despite a global pandemic (and with little fanfare) the database went live.

Created by the Western Pennsylvania Regional Data Center at the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research — in partnership with the Carnegie Mellon CREATE Lab — "HouseCat," as the database is named, is a game changer.

"HouseCat is especially important for low-income and extremely low-income

individuals and families," explains Bob Gradeck, Program Director of the data center.

"It allows organizations like ACTION Housing, Neighborhood Allies, the Urban League, and others to be proactive versus reactive in their goal to safeguard affordable housing in Pittsburgh."

HouseCat is a tool people can use to protect low-income and ELI clients from sudden eviction. This includes displacement that happens due to contracts that are about to run out, for example, or dangerous conditions in a property



BOB GRADECK

office space.

In these two examples, HouseCat could have allowed the city's watchdog groups to monitor building conditions and expiring subsidies, so they could step in to advocate proactively.

anyone can access, it can be hard to stay on top of all the details. Often the information on each site is hard to find or incomplete or outdated or just difficult for the average person to understand.

In its database, the HouseCat team wanted to centralize all this information.

They also wanted to include neighborhood-specific items like Census data, sales and property assessment records, data reported by mail carriers and court system filings, mortgage records, and more.

The team also decided to

ly searchable by things like ZIP Codes and neighborhoods.

They wanted filters that would allow users to zero in on things like a subsidized building's recent inspection scores.

"There's no point in doing all the work to gather the data in one spot — if it's too complicated to use," Bob says.

Most importantly, HouseCat creators wanted the data to be current.

"That was especially challenging," Bob explains. "The places we pull data from update on their own schedules. It could be



THE PENN PLAZA APARTMENT COMPLEX in East Liberty before it was demolished in 2017. The Penn Plaza displacement of more than 200 residents has come to symbolize gentrification in Pittsburgh and captured the public's attention unlike any in recent memory. (Photo by J.L.Martello)

HouseCat is especially important for low-income and extremely low-income individuals and families. It allows organizations like ACTION Housing, Neighborhood Allies, the Urban League, and others to be proactive versus reactive in their goal to safeguard affordable housing in Pittsburgh.

-Bob Gradeck

that threatens residents' safety.

These types of traumatic evictions have happened in the recent past.

At the Bethesda-Home-wood complex, federal housing regulators determined the apartments were unsafe and would no longer qualify for a federal rent subsidy. Without the subsidy, residents couldn't afford to live there. They had to scramble to find new subsidized housing. Many of them were elders. Some had physical and mental challenges.

The same displacement happened to Penn Plaza residents. They received eviction notices because their apartments' subsidies expired. After that happened, they were demolished to make way for up-scale retail businesses and

add health indicators and neighborhood conditions, which are tied to housing, such as a community's walkability and lead level percentages.

To identify and get the mountain of information from all the sources into what would become HouseCat, the project team looked at existing affordable housing databases in Washington, D.C. and New York City.

They read the work of pioneering housing researchers.

They sought input and help from the city's affordable housing organizations many of which became HouseCat partners.

"If I can emphasize one thing about HouseCat, is that it's the result of many different people and groups coming together," Bob notes. "We all had different roles, but our goal was the same: Design a database that will help the city deal more effectively with the affordable housing situation."

As with all data center projects, Bob and his team wanted the information to be easy to understand through short, simple copy and graphics.

They wanted it to be high-

monthly, quarterly, annually or something more random. The solution was to create HouseCat in a way that allows those updates to flow into our pipeline as they happen."

In addition to fulfilling the Affordable House Task Force's initial 2016 request, HouseCat is also designed so that organizations working on housing issues can request an account, and learn more about housing in their community, including using it to find a home.

Housing and community developers can access the site, too, and get a better idea of the area where they're developing and overseeing programs or designing policies.

"It's a pretty good tool for a lot of different users," says Bob. "But it's especially good at providing people with an early warning system that impacts housing security. "Has this building's use restrictions changed? Did this other building get an unsafe inspection rating that's cause for concern? HouseCat will know."

Hopefully, HouseCat will also remind everyone who uses it that a "subsidized unit" is someone's home.

Neighborhood Allies builds pathways to prosperity – for all communities

For more than 35 years, Neighborhood Allies has been dedicated to its core mission of creating vibrant Pittsburgh communities, socially and physically — especially in areas that are under-resourced and under-served.

The organization's vision focuses on providing tools of engagement that transform neighborhoods into thriving

communities that are resilient and equitable.

In the middle of its 3-Year Roadmap plan, Neighborhood Allies is bringing together people, knowledge, and financial resources to implement a bold, ambitious project to end systemic racism that's the result of historic red-lining practices.

Preservation Working Group

In 2021, Neighborhood Allies began serving as the group that brings together the members of the affordable housing Preservation Working Group (PWG).

PWG is made up of policymakers, community stakeholders, and nonprofit and for-profit owners and developers who are interested in preserving existing affordable housing that's

privately owned — for the long term.

The PWG identifies at-risk, existing affordable housing through databases, such as HouseCat, and via its members' deep knowledge and experience.

With this information and understanding, PWG members advocate at the locale, state, and federal levels to increase affordable hous-

ing preservation in our region.

They also position properties so they're attractive to buyers, work to find reliable buyers, and connect developers to financial and other resources.

Learn more about this organization that works on our behalf. Visit neighborhoodallies.org.