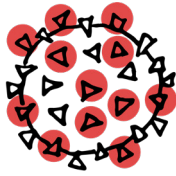


HOUSING POLICY FOR A GLOBAL PANDEMIC



COVID-19 HOUSING POLICY ISSUES IN NYC

By Jessica Katz, Executive Director
Citizens Housing & Planning Council April 2020

Introduction

CHPC has been working to develop a clear understanding of the pandemic's housing impacts so far and their implications for recovery. This month has been disorienting and scary. Our institutions have been tested and our usual coping mechanisms are out the window. The city is being stretched beyond our wildest imagination. The communities we rely upon are being forced to find new ways to provide support. It will be a difficult road ahead, and the worst may not yet be behind us. Yet here are some initial thoughts, written during wartime, about a way forward for the housing community.

New York City is famous for surviving disasters. Among our many attributes is a sense of defiance in the face of disaster. We stay. We survive. We pitch in to help. We rebuild. For those of us lucky enough to be at home safe and sound, it's been an adjustment to consider staying home as a community service. So, as we already know, this disaster is different. It is different because we are doing planning, emergency response, and recovery all at the same time rather than sequentially.

After 9/11, after Superstorm Sandy, after the 2008 Financial Crisis, we knew certain things about the disaster that had occurred and about the framework for recovery. We knew which buildings had collapsed, which neighborhoods were flooded, and which homeowners were in foreclosure. We knew the storm was over, but the power was still out. We had far more information about the metes and bounds of the crisis and recovery than what is knowable today about the COVID-19 pandemic facing New York City. We knew when the disaster began, and when it was over and time to start the recovery process. The extent of the

COVID-19 disaster, its impacts, and the pathway to recovery all depend on unknowns: our ability to slow the spread of the virus, implement a robust testing regime, and find a cure and/or vaccine. Moreover, these unknowns are global rather than local. The capacity of other cities, states, and nations to fight the pandemic is linked to New York City's ability to recover.

With this uncertainty, and lacking a roadmap for what lies ahead, recovery from this disaster will be more fluid and require a more flexible and innovative approach. Federal resources are critical, but federal programs for disaster recovery are not fundamentally designed for rapid response to an ongoing, fluctuating crisis. New York City will need, at the local level, more innovative management of resources, immediate responses coupled with a plan for long term recovery, and agile policy solutions that can flexibly target and address the greatest needs.

While it is too soon to know what all of the housing policy implications of COVID-19 will be, the crisis has, in a few short weeks, underscored the inextricable link between our health and our housing, and demonstrated that our future as New Yorkers depends on how we treat the most vulnerable among us. Specifically:

Addressing homelessness must be top priority.

Staying home is not a feasible option to protect the health and safety of more than 70,000 New Yorkers experiencing homelessness. Thousands of New Yorkers living in shelters and on the street are at heightened risk of contracting and transmitting the virus. The tragedy of homelessness puts all New Yorkers at risk.

Housing is Healthcare.

Looking at housing policy through a health lens is no longer merely a cliché: it's a matter of life and death. New York City's housing crisis has revealed itself in no uncertain terms to be a public health crisis. Homeless and incarcerated New Yorkers are at greatest risk. In the absence of a vaccine or medical treatment, the ability to stay home in habitable, affordable housing is the greatest prevention tool. Both housing quality and housing affordability can help fight the battle against the economic and health impacts of COVID-19. Housing is part of the essential infrastructure of care for this pandemic.

NYC'S HOUSING PLAN

A NEW LENS FOR

CHPC is leading a research initiative to explore how New York City's next housing plan could look beyond creating and preserving a certain number of affordable housing units, to advance broader public policy goals around issues such as immigration, public health, and race and gender equity. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, CHPC is exploring the role of housing policy in the crisis and the lessons that New York City policymakers can draw from it.

Read more about the initiative at:
chcny.org/newlens.

The challenges of sheltering in place hit hardest for New Yorkers in substandard housing.

New Yorkers who live in poor housing conditions (such as pest infestations, mold, unreliable utilities, unresponsive property management, and uncertain legal standing, among other issues) will suffer most from a requirement to stay at home. The health and safety of the city's public housing residents – whose plight has only worsened in recent weeks - must be a top priority.

The economic impacts of COVID-19 will be crippling for New Yorkers already lacking housing security.

Too many renters in New York City were rent-burdened even before this pandemic struck. Thousands of homeowners were struggling to keep up with mortgage payments and other housing costs. These metrics don't even take into account other basic needs. The economic impacts of this crisis threaten to push housing insecure New Yorkers over the edge, creating impossible tradeoffs between health, safety, maintaining housing, and financial ruin.

The virus is not an equalizer: its most devastating impacts are borne by the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

The pandemic highlights that the livelihood and futures of all the city's residents are interdependent, and that New Yorkers are only as safe and healthy as their most vulnerable neighbors. New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, poor housing conditions, and housing insecurity are overwhelmingly low-income households, immigrants, people of color, and women. These same residents account for the majority of workers in service and other industries

seeing the highest rates of job loss and unemployment due to COVID-19. They also represent a disproportionate share of frontline workers who are continuing to deliver food, stock supermarket shelves, and care for sick patients on a daily basis. Viruses may not discriminate, but when people and institutions do, it costs us all dearly. We hope that recovery from this pandemic will catalyze solutions to structural problems that can help house everyone.

The Density Question

New Yorkers, not to mention the rest of the world, are looking for who or what to blame for this pandemic. Our city's density is under scrutiny as a possible cause. "Density" is a catchall term that means different things to different people, as was recently brought to life by a fantastically useful exhibition at the Skyscraper Museum (Remember museums? Sigh.). Which aspects of density help New York City contain and respond to the pandemic and which may be making it more difficult? Additional housing supply (one definition of density) may reduce overcrowding in housing (another definition). Overcrowding and the lack of housing that leads to doubled-up families certainly make social distancing more difficult. Big, tall buildings is another common definition of "density," but these can make room for more accessible open space, which many communities are feeling the need for.

Population density creates crowded spaces, which we must currently avoid, but it also creates a better capacity for mutual aid, which is many New Yorkers' only lifeline during this crisis. Some definitions of density are hurting, but others could help us combat COVID-19 and the aspects of staying at home that New Yorkers are struggling with. As we seek a new normal, one task will be to examine the facts and shape our beloved city so that the best aspects of density can help mitigate its potential harms.

Our households are more diverse than our housing policies.

What is a household? For the most part, our regulatory and policy framework assumes that a "household" consists of a nuclear family living together. This pandemic has taught us, again, that such homogeneity does not exist, and that our households are much more diverse. Shared housing, doubled-up families, single parents, and intergenerational families are among the many households that will find it difficult to comply with a blanket edict to stay home, and are poorly served by housing policies that treat them as invisible.

Conclusion

CHPC has worked to create practical solutions to housing policy issues for more than 80 years, and we hope to do so for the next 80 years to come. Despite our long history and long view towards the future, this crisis feels unique. The issues raised indicate the vital role of housing policy in our disaster recovery efforts, and speak to necessary changes in New York City's approach to housing policy in the long term. There is one thing the COVID-19 pandemic does have in common with other disasters that New Yorkers have previously faced. In the wake of each crisis, we struggle to envision a future that looks anything like the past we are aching for. Yet each time, through careful planning and thoughtful strategy, through the force of will and the comfort of community, we find our way to a new city. CHPC hopes that this pandemic can make New York City more just, more generous, and more resilient, and that the fissures in our city that this disaster has laid bare can be healed in the recovery process.