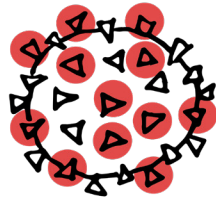


HOUSING POLICY FOR A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

COVID-19 HOUSING POLICY SOLUTIONS FOR NYC



April 2020
Citizens Housing &
Planning Council



In this policy brief, Citizens Housing & Planning Council (CHPC) recommends twelve housing policy strategies that can help reorient the affordable housing sector to a post-pandemic world. Even after COVID-19 has subsided, its effects will be felt for years to come. Affordable housing is critical to New York City's infrastructure and must be a core pillar of our recovery from this pandemic.

STOP COUNTING UNITS.

In recent years, our housing policy has depended on creating new supply, spending billions of dollars in new construction of affordable housing. This is an important tool, but one we may not be able to rely on in the aftermath of this virus. We need to put that metric aside for now in favor of less expensive, more targeted approaches. Housing supply will always be at the core of our work, but in order to contribute solutions to the current crisis, we need to find better measures of our impact.

NYCHA.

Broken elevators. Intermittent heat and hot water. Insufficient property management and insufficient federal funding. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the substandard nature of public housing has created untold health hazards, putting residents and staff at further risk. A shelter in place order has made the plight of NYCHA tenants even more pressing. NYCHA should be a centerpiece of any future housing plan, and preserving NYCHA's affordability and physical plant should be prioritized over other housing initiatives.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS:

Economic Stability

Affordable housing provides economic stability in a turbulent time when so many New Yorkers have lost their livelihood. Having an affordable apartment or a voucher makes economic shocks much easier to bear.

Economic Development

In the wake of the 1970s financial crisis, the need for a post-9/11 rebirth, and the devastating impacts of Hurricane Sandy, housing investment has served to stabilize and improve local markets. It can serve the same purpose in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Healthcare

Housing is healthcare for individuals who lack a stable, safe place to live, helping to prevent chronic illnesses such as asthma and lead poisoning for at-risk individuals. Today, sheltering in place is the best tool we have to stay healthy.

Public Health

As this pandemic has shown, housing is also public health, proving again and again that we are only as healthy as the most vulnerable among us.

HOMELESSNESS.

More than 70,000 New Yorkers experiencing homelessness lack the option of staying home to protect their health and safety. 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.

Department of Homeless Services (DHS)

DHS is fundamentally a housing agency, and it must be treated as such. DHS spends billions of dollars each year providing shelter for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness, and this must be coordinated with the City's other housing strategies. Real estate and social services are very different enterprises, and the new structure envisions a Deputy Mayor who can assign these functions among the agencies responsible. City government must not be allowed

to claim victory for affordable housing successes while seeing homelessness at record highs. All of the housing agencies, including DHS, must be overseen in a single chain of command in City Hall.

Supportive Housing

Supportive housing has long been the gold standard for creating homes for disabled and chronically homeless New Yorkers. The economic crisis resulting from this pandemic will make the need for supportive housing greater than ever, but the resources will inevitably contract. Now is the time to recommit ourselves to coordinating between the City and State and collaborate on a NYNY4 agreement, similar to what existed in the past. Such an agreement will enable the City and State to allocate resources & determine priorities collaboratively.

LISTEN TO THE DISABILITY COMMUNITY.

The disability community has experience navigating the world in ways most people would never realize is possible, adapting despite the barriers they encounter, and using accessible technology to improve their quality of life. While most of us are unfamiliar with this experience, disability activists have a long history of succeeding in a world which is not designed with them in mind. We ignore this expertise at our peril, and must harness it moving forward to create a New York that meets everyone's needs.

HEALTH-ORIENTED MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT.

To help build more housing, promote economic development, and decentralize healthcare delivery in New York City, integrated large-scale developments that are mixed-income, mixed-use, and created in partnership with hospitals could help serve numerous public policy goals. Vulnerable populations could be housed closer to the facilities that meet their healthcare needs, essential workers could be freed from their long commutes, and all New York City's neighborhoods could become hubs for the healthcare and housing they need.

OVERHAUL THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING LOTTERY SYSTEM.

The random lottery system is one fair way to allocate scarce affordable housing, but it is not the only way. It's time to try something new. The lottery process is administered with a focus on regulatory compliance rather than on placing New Yorkers in housing as quickly as possible. The lottery system should be redesigned, to make housing placement quicker and target affordable housing to meet our policy goals. Lottery preferences could be changed to focus on essential workers who want to live closer to where they work, which is in everyone's interest, or to help meet other policy goals.



REGULATORY REFORM.

Regulatory reform should be explored as an alternative or complement to a capital-heavy housing strategy. Processes for land use decisions, housing development, housing placement, code enforcement, and public benefits all have an impact on New York City's ability to create, preserve, and rent up affordable housing. In an economic downturn, New Yorkers will need public benefits and affordable housing more than ever and a streamlined process will be critical. For low-income New Yorkers, the logistics of obtaining and maintaining public benefits such as public assistance or rental subsidy vouchers can be a major deterrent. COVID-19 has proven that many of these procedures are unnecessary, are not serving us well, or can be done in new, more streamlined ways. We must update our regulatory systems to make sure that we can build housing and place people in housing faster than before.

CAPITAL PLAN FOR FEDERAL STIMULUS FUNDING.

As we know from past disasters, affordable housing can play a major role in our economic recovery, so New York City needs a robust plan to advocate for and spend federal stimulus funding.

DENSITY.

If the health and the economy of our city are to recover, we will need to have a frank conversation about density. "Density" is a catchall term that means different things to different people. Which aspects of density help New York City contain and respond to the pandemic and which may be making it more difficult? This question of how our households, housing stock, neighborhoods, and urban planning did or did not contribute to this pandemic will be critical in addressing the immediate crisis, and even more important for New York City's long-term recovery. Seoul and other large, dense places have proven that the right prevention and response measures can help cities better

mitigate and control pandemics. Meanwhile, COVID-19 has not exclusively affected dense places, with many hotspots of the virus also emerging in rural areas. We need to learn as much as we can about which aspects of New York City's built environment contributed to COVID-19, develop policy changes for the factors that do increase the risk of future pandemics, and combat myths around those that don't. With this balance, we can help New York recover as quickly as possible and allow our city to continue to thrive off of the best aspects of density, as it has always done, while ensuring that our communities can stay safe and healthy throughout future public health crises.

AIR CONDITIONERS.

New Yorkers respond to our hot summers by spending more time outside our apartments, at the beach or pool, and in air-conditioned spaces such as movie theaters and libraries. In the evenings, New Yorkers spend more time congregating outside to avoid the heat inside our apartments. Even in a typical summer, New York City creates cooling centers during heat waves to help elderly and vulnerable neighbors get access to a safe, cool space.

In Summer 2020, these options are likely to be severely limited. New York needs a robust plan to distribute air conditioners to anyone without one, and the utilities need to ensure there is sufficient capacity to manage the need. The ability of New Yorkers to effectively social distance, and to not create a doubly dangerous situation for our seniors, depends on it.



HOUSING DESIGN.

While it is too soon to make any assumptions about how we will have to reshape our spaces in the aftermath of COVID-19, it seems likely that housing design may need to change to accommodate new needs and preferences. CHPC visited London recently to study their public housing policies, where we learned that their new construction codes require all apartments to have private outdoor space (a patio or balcony).

Through 2019 eyes, such a requirement sounded luxurious and unnecessary. Today? Less so. Touchless technology for elevators and door entry? It seems like just yesterday that such amenities sounded like silly bells and whistles. Now, ominously, they sound like the difference between life and death. New York City will need a new way of looking at private vs. public spaces, and to evaluate new design solutions that may help prevent future pandemics.

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT.

With 70% of the city's rental apartments in multifamily buildings, property management has an elevated role in ensuring the health and safety of New Yorkers. The housing industry, policymakers, and public health officials will need to collaborate in new ways to prepare for and mitigate the impacts of future public health crises. Property managers and policymakers should work together to develop best practices in building sanitation, communal space management, and other aspects of their work that can help New Yorkers stay safe and healthy during a pandemic.

NYC'S A NEW LENS FOR HOUSING PLAN

A New Lens for NYC's Housing Plan is a CHPC 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:
chcpny.org/newlens.