

April 21, 2006

The Honorable Alphonso Jackson  
Secretary  
US Department of Housing and Urban Development  
451 Seventh Street SW  
Washington DC 20410

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Alliance for Healthy Homes, the American Public Health Association, and the National Low Income Housing Coalition applaud HUD's interest in spreading the word about the critical connection between the places people live and their health through the recently announced campaign, "Healthy Homes for Healthy Kids." With its mission to increase homeownership, support community development and increase access to affordable housing free from discrimination, and as the only federal agency dedicated to providing decent, safe, and sanitary housing, HUD has a critical role in raising standards and practices for affordable, safe, and healthy housing in this country.

In the April 19 press release, Mr. Secretary, you are quoted as saying "if we can educate young mothers before their child ends up in an emergency room, then we've done our job." While parent education is a key element of winning the fight against home-based health hazards, HUD's responsibility is far broader. HUD's role is to deliver a wide array of housing programs that ensure the availability of decent affordable housing.

- 1) On a policy level, HUD can fulfill its mission to provide quality housing by:
  - ensuring compliance with housing quality standards, minimum property standards, and HUD's lead-safe housing regulation in millions of homes for which the Department provides some type of housing assistance;
  - aggressively identifying, pursuing and prosecuting violations of the federal lead disclosure rule in real estate transactions;
  - promoting the use of Integrated Pest Management in federally assisted housing to reduce asthma and other illnesses;
  - ensuring that federally-assisted housing does not expose residents to cancer risks from radon; and
  - providing meaningful leadership in incorporating health-based standards into housing and building codes.
  
- 2) HUD can further ameliorate housing conditions by requesting sufficient resources for its core housing programs that offer families access to quality housing:
  - expanding the reach of the Housing Choice Voucher program to meet the needs of the millions of households who are paying more than 50% of their income for housing and living in properties with severe physical problems;
  - ensuring that public housing authorities have sufficient operating and capital improvement budgets;

- fully funding CDBG and HOME so that local housing agencies can rehabilitate more substandard homes, thereby reducing blight and expanding the housing options for low-income families; and
- reversing the trend of funding decreases for its Office of Healthy Homes and Lead Hazard Control to enable the nation to meet the 2010 goal of eliminating childhood lead poisoning from lead paint hazards, a goal adopted by both of the previous administrations with broad bipartisan support. This preventable disease should not be permitted to continue for decades more.

The April 19 press release also states: “The advertising campaign will instruct parents in 30 cities to contact their local health departments for more information about how they can take some simple steps to keep their children safe.” There are several problems with taking this particular message to 29 more cities. First, funding for lead and healthy homes grants, the only federal funding stream that enables local agencies to provide the kinds of services that HUD is encouraging consumers to demand via the campaign, has been consistently cut below the prior year adopted budget level in the President’s budget proposals since 2003. City health departments, with or (mostly) without HUD’s lead and healthy homes grants, do not have the capacity to meet the information needs of everyone living in substandard housing. Moreover, health departments do not control the resources that can fix a home or provide replacement housing.

Second, although there are some protective steps that families can take, physical defects and environmental hazards in housing are frequently beyond the control of consumers, particularly renters. It is the limited supply of healthy affordable housing that accounts for the majority of housing-related disease and injury. We respectfully urge you to associate yourself with an effective healthy homes campaign that delivers a complete message informing parents of their rights and options for assistance from health departments, housing authorities, code agencies, and as well as actions within their control to actually improve the condition of the place where they are raising their children.

Most importantly, we urge you to ensure that HUD’s policies and budget reflect its mandate to ensure healthy, affordable housing for all.

Sincerely,

Robert O. Zdenek, MPA  
Executive Director, Alliance for Healthy Homes

Brian Williams  
Director of Government Relations, American Public Health Association

Sheila Crowley  
Executive Director, National Low Income Housing Coalition