

IMPROVING HOMES, LIVES, AND COMMUNITIES:

A Report on Housing Habitability and a Case for
Code Enforcement Reforms in Long Beach



FOR SAFE & HEALTHY HOMES



HOUSING
LONG BEACH

Housing is a basic building block of community health; our homes are one of the most important parts of our lives. It is the place where we rejuvenate after a long day of work, where we raise our family, and ultimately, find a sense of dignity. “Home is where the heart is,” is not just a causal phrase, but a true representation of the critical role that our homes play in shaping our lives.

For low-income families in Long Beach, finding quality housing that they can afford is a constant struggle. With few affordable options, the housing that is within their price range is often older, dilapidated and substandard. We have heard hundreds of stories of children’s bodies covered in bites from unaddressed infestation, families sick from mold, and raw sewage coming through the pipes. Yet with no anti-retaliation protections in place for renters, fear and intimidation keep many residents silent from reporting.

Sixty percent of Long Beach residents are renters, and yet no additional protections exist in Long Beach for this majority to receive repairs without retaliation. The Neighbors United for Safe and Healthy Homes campaign is a coalition of grassroots residents, community organizations, local hospitals, businesses, property owners and renters working to improve the health and safety of the housing stock in Long Beach. Thereby improving the health and safety of our whole community.

Housing Long Beach set out to understand the issue better by collecting over 600 surveys from low-income renters. We visited laundromats, community meetings and health fairs and spoke with renters about their experience of trying to ensure a safe and healthy home for their families. The findings here reveal that there are many unaddressed health and safety hazards in homes across Long Beach, but that without critical anti-retaliation measures in place, residents will continue to live in fear of reporting these hazards.

The existing Code Enforcement program can help residents resolve certain issues, yet thousands of Long Beach renters are still living in the dark, fearful to utilize City programs without additional protections. Building on the existing program, neighbors, landlords and city leaders should work together to ensure an accountable code enforcement system that is accessible to all residents.

Many cities in California utilize a rent escrow account program to facilitate this process. This program would allow tenants living in substandard units, with unresponsive landlords, to pay a reduced rent to the City until conditions are fixed. This model creates real accountability for slumlords and results in health and safety improvements in the housing stock while protecting renters from unfair retaliation.

Housing Long Beach urges the Long Beach City Council to pass this program and improve housing and health for all Long Beach residents.

TESTIMONIALS

Yolanda RESIDENT



Yolanda lives with her four children and 2 year-old granddaughter in West Long Beach. **For the past 8 months, the family has been dealing with infestations, a clogged kitchen sink, and a broken restroom vent which has caused excess humidity to accumulate and severe mold to develop.** Water began to drip from the ceiling and through the electrical outlets, placing the family in great danger of fire. Concerned about her children's and granddaughter's health, Yolanda asked the property owner to fix the issues. Two months have gone by and everything remains the same. She has attempted hold off on paying rent until the problems are fixed; however, the landlord demanded that she pay rent or be served with a three-day notice to leave. Today, she does not know what else to do to ensure a healthy home for her family. She is afraid to report to the City, and moving out seems impossible, since she fears the landlord will blame her for the issues and take her deposit money.

Lauren NURSE



"As a registered nurse, I am keenly aware of the relationship between health and housing. Every day I fight the environmentally-induced health complications of my clients who live in housing that does not support their health goals. I have seen countless clients face preventable illness and injury due to health hazards in their homes. One woman's hip injury from broken floorboards eventually led to her overall health decline and ultimately, death. I cannot stand by as a health professional and watch these preventable issues persist for Long Beach families! I stand for safe, affordable housing because I believe in a system that promotes healing not just in the hospital, but in homes and communities as well."

Kate PROPERTY OWNER



My partner and I own several properties in Long Beach and are proud of the care we give our properties and our tenants. We have seen neighboring absentee landlords keeping their units in disrepair; this can turn a building into a danger and negatively affect the entire neighborhood. We belong to the Apartment Association of Southern California and have appreciated their seminars, but we've also heard members complain about laws enacted to protect the safety and health of their tenants. To us, personal safety and livability shouldn't have a price tag attached. When our tenants have a problem in their residence, we fix it. This usually means they stay for a long time, and become a part of the community. There are many property owners just like us, who care about their property and their tenants. We do not support the slumlords in Long Beach and would love to see a program like REAP that would go after these bad landlords. This law is not for us—it's for the landlords who don't care about their tenants, and don't care about Long Beach. I hope REAP becomes enacted.

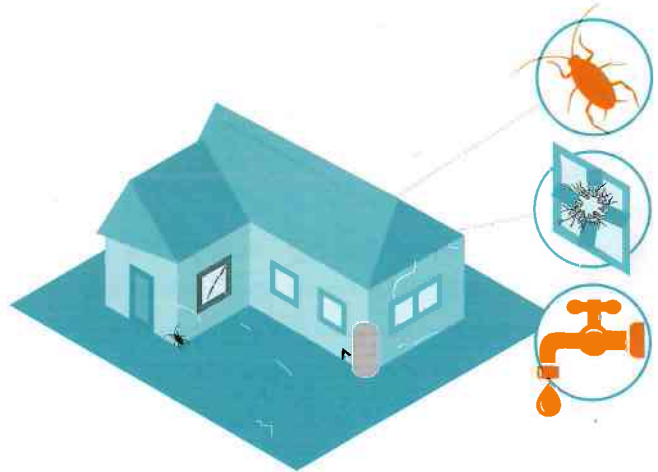
Elexcy RESIDENT



Elexcy moved into a one-bedroom apartment in February, and by June he had called the City's code enforcement department due to severe infestations. When the inspectors came out, they discovered serious infestation of roaches, mice and bedbugs, and Elexcy's legs were proof of the constant bites from the bugs. The Code Enforcement inspectors came out four times to re-inspect, and each time the landlord had made no improvements. After deciding Elexcy was a 'nuisance' by reporting these health violations, the landlady served him with an eviction notice in October. His neighbors have seen what happened and have been sent a strong message from the property owner - 'don't try and improve your conditions or you will be punished.'



of respondents have experienced at least one safety/hazard in the last year.



LACK OF REPORTING

A typical respondent said, "I'll get kicked out if I complain too much and I can't afford to move." One woman took her children to the doctor because they were ill and when the doctor determined it was lead and reported it to the City on her behalf, she was faced with an eviction notice the following day.



X

63% 33%

TOLD THEIR LANDLORD

only 33% had a high likelihood of getting the issues fixed.



61% indicated **Infestations** (Rats/Mice, Roaches, Bedbugs)

70% indicated **Building Deficiencies** (Broken Windows, Walls with Cracks, Broken Stairs, Exposed Wiring, Missing or Broken Locks, No smoke detector):

57% indicated **water and heating issues** (No or not enough heat, clogged or broken plumbing fixtures, no running water, no hot water, water damage/leaks/mold)

WHAT CAN A RENTER DO??

This is where the City's code enforcement department can come in. When an unresponsive landlord does not make repairs, residents can report it to the City for an inspection.

BUT, **65%** responded that they didn't know about it. However, when asked who had reported to the City,



5%

Only 5% had ever made a report to the City's CE department.



Sometimes the City will identify units through proactive inspection. But,

Only

12%



have ever received a proactive inspection.



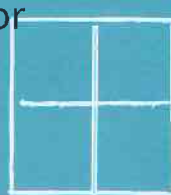
So why are so few renters using the existing code enforcement department?

89%

of respondents named **protection from eviction** as the most important factor

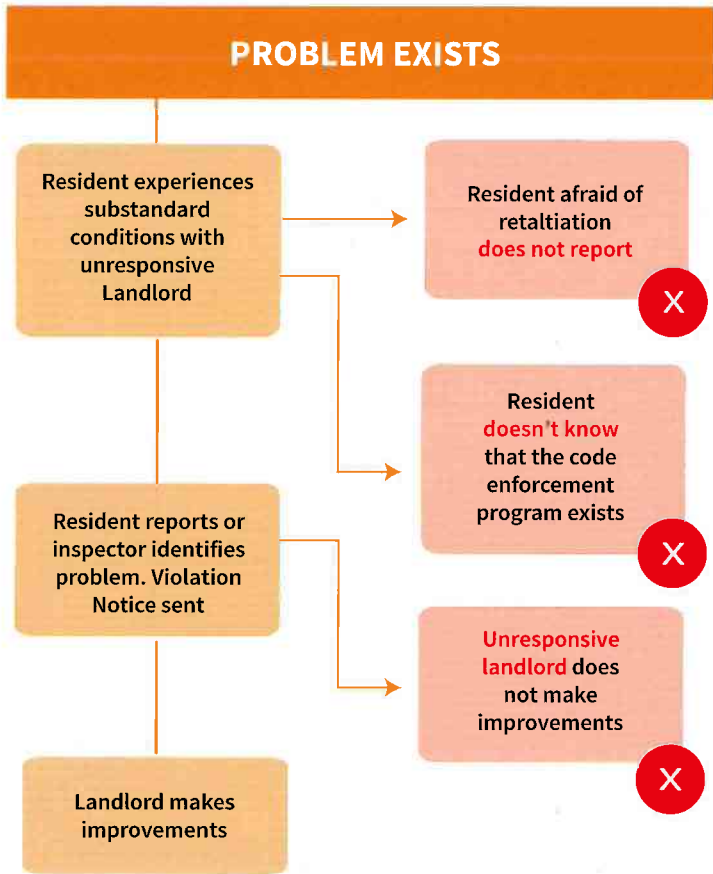
80%

of respondents named **protection from rent increase** as the most important factor



CODE ENFORCEMENT AND REAP

Current Code Enforcement Process



LESSONS:

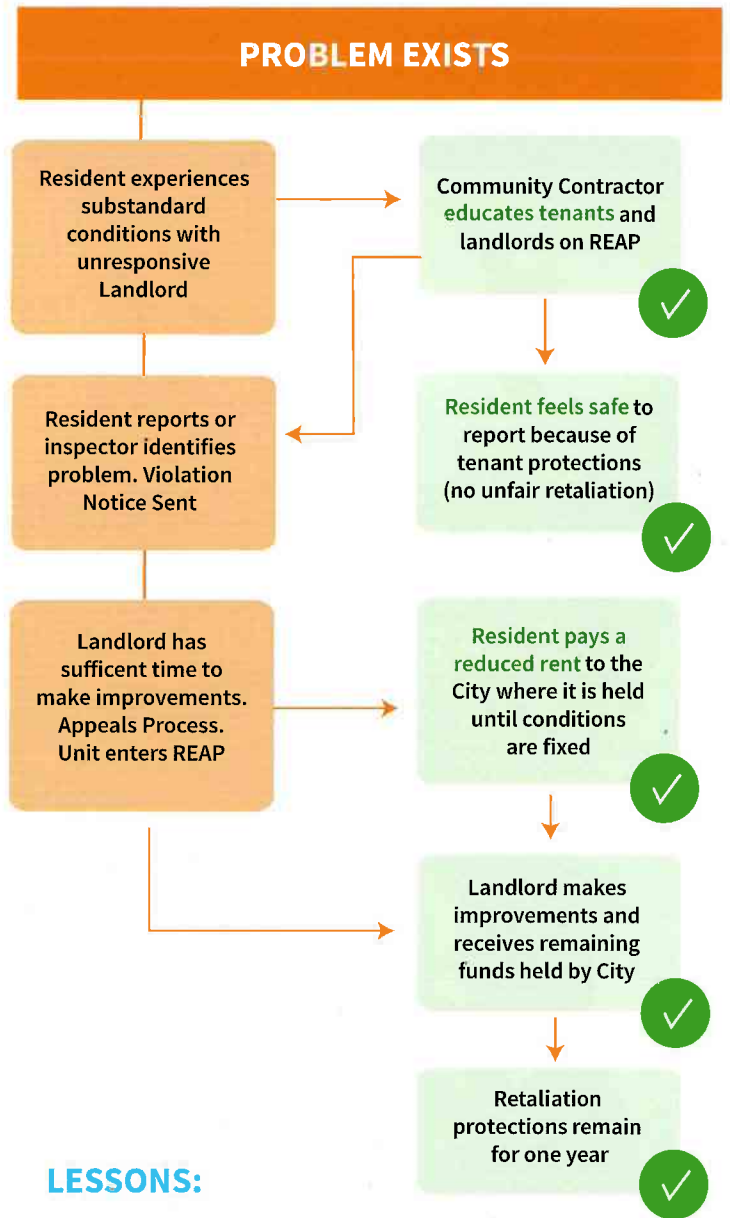
Few improvements are made compared to the number of tenants experiencing habitability issues

Tenants fear of retaliation keeps them from using the program

Residents do not know about or understand current program

No real accountability for 'bad actor' landlords

Rent Escrow Account Program (New code enforcement ordinance)



LESSONS:

More tenants use the program because of community education

Fear is removed through critical tenant protections

Rent withholding creates **real accountability** and results in improvements

Housing Long Beach urges the City Council to pass a rent escrow account policy that would allow tenants living in substandard units, with unresponsive landlords, to pay a reduced rent to the City until conditions are fixed. This model creates real accountability for slumlords and results in health and safety improvements in the housing stock while protecting renters from unfair retaliation.

The new program passed by the City Council should include:

- ✓ Routine, **proactive inspections** to identify substandard units
- ✓ **Rent reduction** to create real accountability and quicken the repairs
- ✓ City-run **escrow account** to create a safe haven so tenants can safely pay their rent while working to get improvements made
- ✓ **Anti-Retaliation Measures** to protect tenants from unfair rent increase and eviction while participating in the program
- ✓ **Self-funding administrative fee** to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the program.
- ✓ Hearings and appeals to ensure **due process** throughout the program
- ✓ **Community Contractors** to educate and inform tenants and landlords about the program

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

HLB Community Outreach Committee

HLB Steering Committee

Scott Taschner, CSULB

Andres Temblador, CSULB

Gary Hytrek, CSULB

Katelyn Leenhouts, USC

Designed by : Ryan Shea, Open Hand Media



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