

# **TAKING ACTION FOR HEALTHY HOMES IN ALEXANDRIA**

**PRIORITIES FOR 2023**

**PREPARED BY THE ALEXANDRIA  
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

**NOVEMBER 2022**

## Introduction

Every Alexandrian deserves access to healthy and hazard-free housing. Unfortunately, not everyone in our community can count on that reality, particularly our lower-income residents, those with disabilities, seniors, and communities of color.

This is a **solvable problem** that aligns with existing initiatives in the city and longstanding advocacy campaigns. Changes in policies, programs, and practices are urgently needed to ensure that all children, seniors, and families live in a healthy home.

No one entity can create the conditions for healthy housing overnight. But together, we can make meaningful changes that improve resident quality of life in just a few years.

Since there are already a number of related resources and programs in the community, our first actions will develop the infrastructure to amplify what's working, modify what isn't, and coordinate work to reduce duplication.

Learn about existing healthy homes resources in Alexandria in a [report](#) developed by the National Center for Healthy Housing.

# YEAR ONE OF A HEALTHY HOME INITIATIVE

This is a roadmap for how the City of Alexandria and its partners will work with residents to lay the foundation for improved home conditions in our community.

If we want to make a real impact, we must give this issue the necessary resources, effort, and focus.

## 2023 Focus Area At-a-Glance:

1. Convene a formal Healthy Homes Network of partner organizations to coordinate service delivery and implement strategies with measurable goals.
2. Work with impacted residents, property managers, and other stakeholders to identify pain points and opportunities within the current healthy homes ecosystem.
3. Implement then evaluate solutions that have been co-designed with residents and partners, then build a detailed flow and system map of resources for internal and external use.
4. Institutionalize and/or expand healthy home programs and data sources to best serve residents.

## THE LONG-TERM GOAL

Every Alexandrian lives in a safe, healthy home where they can thrive.



# BACKGROUND:











## The Issues and the Objectives



Image credit

# WHAT IS A HEALTHY HOME?

Simply put, a healthy home is a place that is designed, built, and maintained to support our health. The National Center for Healthy Housing has described what constitutes a healthy home:

<b>DRY</b>		Damp houses provide a nurturing environment for mites, roaches, rodents, and molds, all of which are associated with asthma.
<b>CLEAN</b>		Clean homes help reduce pest infestations and exposure to contaminants.
<b>PEST-FREE</b>		Exposure to mice and cockroaches increase asthma episodes in children. Inappropriate treatment for pest infestations can exacerbate health problems as pesticide residues pose risks for neurological damage and cancer.
<b>VENTILATED</b>		Increasing the fresh air supply improves respiratory health.
<b>SAFE</b>		Falls are the most frequent cause of residential injuries to older adults and children, followed by injuries from objects in the home, burns, and poisonings.
<b>CONTAMINANT-FREE</b>		Chemical exposures include lead, radon, pesticides, volatile organic compounds, PFAS, and environmental tobacco smoke. Many of these exposures are far higher indoors than outside.
<b>MAINTAINED</b>		Poorly maintained homes are at risk for moisture and pest problems. Deteriorated lead-based paint in older housing is the primary cause of lead poisoning.
<b>THERMALLY CONTROLLED</b>		Prolonged exposure to excessive heat or cold when homes do not maintain adequate temperatures put residents at risk for various health problems.
<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>		Increased accessibility in and outside the home can help reduce trips, falls, and isolation, and improve mental health and physical activity.
<b>AFFORDABLE</b>		High housing cost burdens can lead to housing instability, with frequent moves, overcrowding, and homelessness. High housing costs can force families into substandard housing, and contribute to damaged credit, job loss, lack of nutritious food and adequate healthcare, and poor mental health.

Learn more at [http://bit.ly/HH\\_principles](http://bit.ly/HH_principles), June 2022.





## WHAT IS A STABLE HOME?

During a recent facilitated discussion, community and local government partners highlighted characteristics of a stable home from the perspective of a tenant as well as a landlord. From the tenant perspective, a stable home is one where a tenant does not feel at risk of displacement, and is comfortable/empowered in communicating their rights, with meaningful options for landlord accountability.

A stable home is also free of mold, infestations, and trash, and has access to parks and security. Additionally, the group identified safe levels of occupancy (a lack of crowding) as a characteristic of stable homes from the landlord perspective. From the landlord perspective, a stable home would include financial stability of their tenants (i.e., ability to pay rent).

Notably, answers from both perspectives identified predictability, safety, ability to make timely payments, a healthy relationship (between landlord and tenant), timeliness in responding to needs, and meeting responsibilities as key to a stable home.



## WHY DOES ALEXANDRIA NEED A HEALTHY HOMES PLAN?

Residents across Alexandria recognize the impact of housing on health. Advocacy groups, residents, and City agencies have been working to improve housing conditions for decades. Yet, there is still a significant need both for direct services and coordination among the various stakeholders in this arena. Additionally, progress on healthy and stable homes is hard to measure. A dedicated plan and strategy give the community metrics to determine impact in this area and provide a clear pathway for inclusive collaboration.

## HOW WAS THE PLAN DEVELOPED?

During the development of the city's Community Health Improvement Plan, community members selected housing as one of the top three priority areas. They also decided that a new healthy homes program would be a key strategy within that topic area. The Alexandria Health Department (AHD) volunteered to lead this strategy and facilitate the next steps.

Although AHD was focused on pandemic response in 2020–2022, COVID-19 increased the urgency for healthy homes work. Mold and pest issues can make respiratory conditions such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) worse. This is particularly important now, as someone with these conditions could have a more serious case of COVID-19 if they get sick. Additionally, people have been spending more time at home throughout the pandemic, potentially exposing them to housing-related hazards for a greater length of time.



# PLAN DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE:

June 2021:  
Community Health Improvement Plan is released

March 2022:  
AHD launches six-month home-based asthma pilot, Alexandria Air Cleaning Evaluation for Healthier Homes

June 2022:  
Stakeholders convene for healthy homes workshop to gather insights on the issues



October 2022:  
Subcommittees meet to assess strategies to address existing challenges

November 2021:  
Healthy Homes Asset and Gap Analysis completed to catalog relevant existing policies, data, and resources in the community

April 2022:  
City Council adopts 2022 priorities, including strategies around healthy homes

September 2022:  
Office of Housing launches West End Know Your Rights tenant trainings





## HOW DO WE APPROACH THIS DAUNTING CHALLENGE?

First, we recognize **who** can solve this issue. The current systems and policies are not sufficient to create the conditions for healthy housing. If we want to develop tools and resources that best serve our most marginalized residents, we must work alongside those residents to co-create those tools and resources.

### **Just soliciting feedback is not enough.**

This human-centered design approach starts by clearly defining the issue and its root causes. Throughout the development of this initiative, the Alexandria Health Department utilized that approach to convene partners to discuss the problems around healthy homes and identified several themes:

- Residents do not trust that the City will provide them the services they need;
- Landlords and tenants have very different perceptions of housing condition issues;
- Tenants often don't know their rights and how to act on them;
- City staff and nonprofits don't have a systematic way to refer people for support.



Keeping those themes in mind, the following objectives frame the future outcomes for this work:

**Empowered Residents**

Residents know their rights and are empowered and safe to advocate for their needs.

**Accountable Programs**

Residents trust that they will receive timely, appropriate services and support through a clear pathway to address concerns.

**Inclusive Policies**

Residents have stable, safe housing options regardless of ability, age, or income.

**Engaged Housing Providers**

Landlords/ Property Managers have the tools, ability, and drive to adequately address property conditions and limit evictions.

**Comprehensive Data and Efficient Systems**

City staff are equipped with the resources to proactively identify and resolve healthy home challenges.



[Image credit](#)

**The year one priorities for healthy homes are based on these objectives and feedback from key stakeholders.**

# ACTIONS:

## Strategies and Steps for 2023

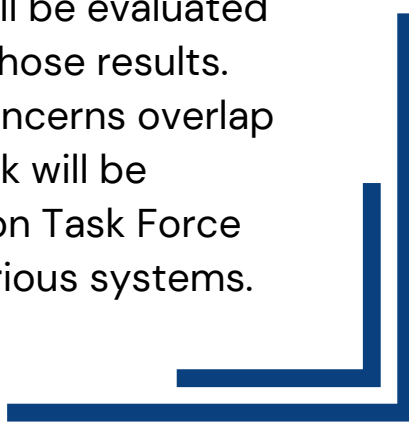




# STRATEGY DETAILS FOR 2023

Creating healthy homes requires coordination and partnership with residents, property managers, and partner organizations. Fortunately, the City already has excellent working relationships with local nonprofits, businesses, and other key stakeholders. There have also been a number of innovative outreach and engagement efforts to reach residents who are most impacted by unhealthy housing conditions.

The following steps are the specific actions for 2023 that will formalize these efforts and set the foundation for improving housing conditions in the long-term by addressing systemic issues. At the end of the year, these efforts will be evaluated and a 2024 plan will be developed based on those results. Additionally, since many housing condition concerns overlap with eviction prevention work, part of this work will be coordinating with the City's Eviction Prevention Task Force and finding alignment opportunities within various systems.



Put simply, we will formalize a coalition, work with the impacted communities to find stumbling blocks within the current system, implement fixes that have been co-designed with residents and partners, and scale up initiatives that we know work.



## 1. Convene a formal Healthy Homes Network of partner organizations to coordinate service delivery and implement strategies with measurable goals.

We have excellent service providers, but they are often underutilized and don't have an easy way to refer residents to each other for support. A connected network would allow for easier information sharing and reduce duplication of efforts. This would also be the mechanism for coordinating with the Eviction Prevention Task Force and how the two groups could find alignment in the various activities.


### Steps to get it done:

- Compile searchable database of entities related to Alexandria healthy homes work, including what population they serve and what they offer.
- Convene group to establish purpose, communication tools, and goals.
- Create listserv and roster for the network.
- Host working sessions to set process and outcome metrics with their measurement timelines around healthy homes.
- Identify liaison and coordination mechanism with the Eviction Prevention Task Force.

**Outcomes:** A roster of relevant entities serving Alexandrians; defined structure to communicate between the eviction prevention task force and those working on healthy homes; metrics and timeline to evaluate healthy homes progress; a report at the end of 2023 on what was achieved and the plan for 2024.







## 2. Work with impacted residents, property managers, and other stakeholders to identify pain points and opportunities within the current healthy homes ecosystem.

We need to listen directly to the people who are most impacted by the current way of doing business: residents with housing issues, frontline staff implementing the current solutions, property managers with dissatisfied tenants, and nonprofits finding resources for their clients. Using a series of focus groups and other interactive sessions, we can figure out why people underutilize programs or might not trust other entities within this ecosystem. This includes the “intake” process for how people reach out for support as well as their experiences with the provided resources and services.

### Steps to get it done:

- Develop and implement resident, property manager, and nonprofit recruitment strategies.
- Facilitate interactive sessions to identify challenges.
- Synthesize findings into a list of tangible issues.
- Work with impacted stakeholders to co-design solutions.



### Outcomes:

Clearly defined pain points within the existing structure; qualitative or quantitative metrics associated with the issues to know when there has been an improvement; list of solutions to the identified pain points and who will be implementing them.





### **3. Implement then evaluate solutions that have been co-designed with residents and partners, then build a detailed flow and system map of resources for internal and external use.**

Developing solutions doesn't always mean creating a new program. Sometimes there can be adjustments to the front doors or access points to be more user-friendly, changes to applications and forms, or possibly a new way of describing and promoting existing services that resonates better with the target audience. The focus groups and activities with impacted individuals will drive the modifications and provide the basis for knowing whether any changes have had their intended effect. Finally, the updated system will be clearly outlined in a service map for added transparency and accountability.

#### **Steps to get it done:**

- Work with frontline staff to modify programs or processes as needed.
- Evaluate whether the changes were effective, with impacted stakeholders.
- Layout maps of the updated systems and how a resident or partner would utilize them.
- Validate the accuracy of these new flowcharts and maps using tools such as secret shoppers and discussions with frontline staff.
- Analyze the results of the changes and how they compare with baseline metrics.

#### **Outcomes:**

List of modifications or adjustments that have been made to healthy home programs and processes; detailed system map of relevant programs in the city with eligibility and process flow; assessment of modification impact on usage and effectiveness.



#### **4. Institutionalize and/or expand healthy home programs, policies, and data sources to best serve residents.**

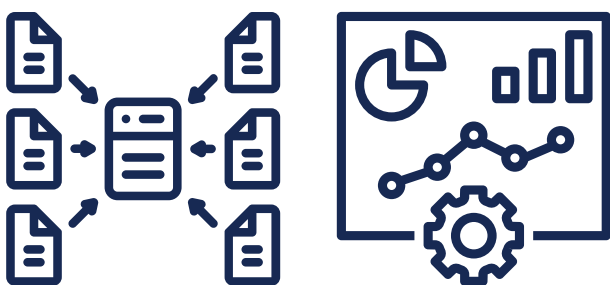
The following new and existing healthy homes initiatives are either currently in development or are expanding their reach to serve additional residents. Work in 2023 will also include identifying what additional resources are needed to sustain these efforts.

##### **Data Consolidation for Targeting Interventions**

*Alexandria Health Department, Office of Performance Analytics, Office of Housing, Code Administration, Information Technology Services, Department of Community and Human Services*

The City has a number of data sources that can be geographically mapped and used to identify areas of need for proactive healthy homes interventions. Those interventions could include enhanced rental inspections from Code Administration, outreach for enrollment in ALX Breathes, and trainings from the Office of Housing.

This data-driven approach allows the City to maximize the impact of its resources to help those in need of support. In collaboration with City agencies and external partners, there are also opportunities to consolidate existing data to quantify and assess the work being done to advance healthy housing. This data can be used to examine past achievements and areas for growth, measure present and future progress, and efficiently leverage limited resources.



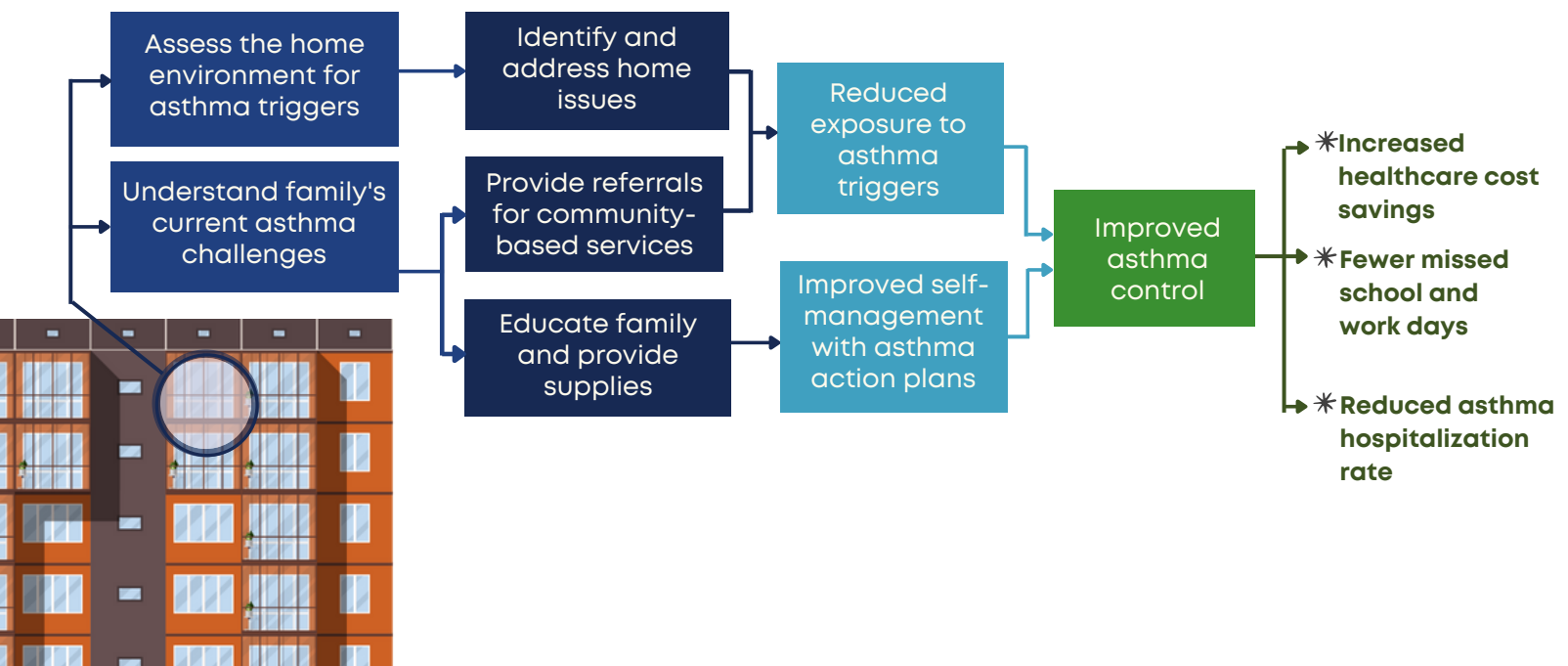
## ALX Breathes

*Alexandria Health Department*

AHD has developed a home-based program, ALX Breathes, to improve home conditions and health for low-income residents living with asthma or COPD. This program provides education, relevant supplies, and connections to critical services. ALX Breathes is based on the successful implementation of the Alexandria Air Cleaning Evaluation for Healthier Homes pilot study, and includes an environmental assessment to identify potential home hazards, tailored education to address respiratory health, and referrals to other local programs and services.

Participants in the program will learn about topics such as integrated pest management, cleaning, moisture management and mold prevention, asthma, smoking cessation, ventilation, and more. In addition, participants will receive an air cleaning device with HEPA filters to improve air quality and may receive cleaning supplies or tools to reduce asthma or COPD triggers. In the first year of operation, at least 50 households—with at least 50% of those being residents of color—will receive a tailored, home-based intervention to reduce asthma or COPD severity.

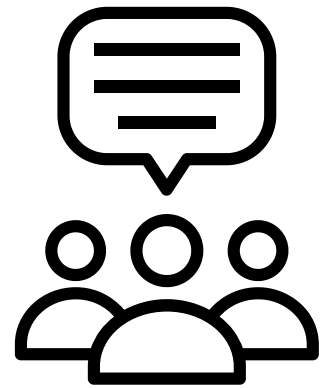
### ALX Breathes Activities and Expected Results



## Tenant Rights and Responsibilities Training

*Office of Housing/Landlord-Tenant Division, with support from Code Administration, Department of Community and Human Services, Alexandria Health Department, and Planning and Zoning*

Four tenant workshops were offered in the city's West End to provide households with information about how to report poor living conditions and get help if a landlord isn't responsive. Interpretation is provided, and the programs are intended to empower renters and encourage them to seek city services and resources when needed to resolve issues. Information has also been provided about the upcoming Alexandria West Planning process to encourage area residents to engage and participate. The program will continue in 2023 in other areas of the City.







## Home Modification Programs

*Office of Housing*

The Office of Housing offers a home rehabilitation loan program (deferred payment, 99-year, zero interest loans) to assist low- and moderate-income homeowners make repairs and improvements to address code, energy efficiency, accessibility, and livability issues. The Office of Housing also offers the Rental Accessibility Modification Program (RAMP) which provides grants of up to \$50,000 to complete modifications to accommodate the particular circumstances of a disabled household member. Housing conducts outreach and education to expand awareness of these programs.

## Energy Efficiency and Sustainability Efforts

The City's forthcoming Office of Climate Action may also address other home-based energy efficiency efforts such as leveraging state weatherization, energy assistance, and home rehabilitation programs. They may provide assistance and coordination to access federal energy efficiency and related funding and/or provide support through contractor coordination and financial incentives.



# STAKEHOLDERS IN THIS WORK

This plan was drafted by the Alexandria Health Department, in collaboration with residents and:

ACT for Alexandria

African Communities Together

Alexandria City Public Schools

Alexandria Housing Development Corporation

Alexandria Redevelopment and Housing

Authority

ALIVE!

CareFirst Blue Cross Blue Shield

Christ Church

City of Alexandria

- Code Administration
- Dept. of Community and Human Services
- Fire Department
- Office of Housing
- Office of Human Rights
- Office of Performance Analytics
- Race and Social Equity Office

Edu-Futuro

ENDependence Center of Northern Virginia

Energy Masters

Inova Health System

Legal Aid Justice Center

Legal Services of Northern Virginia

National Center for Healthy Housing

Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance

Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria

Public Health Advisory Commission

Rebuilding Together DC-Alexandria

Senior Services of Alexandria

Tenants and Workers United

Wesley Housing

## HOW TO GET INVOLVED

We need organizations and residents to be a key part of this work, whether it's part of committees, focus groups, or brainstorming solutions. Email [healthmatters@vdh.virginia.gov](mailto:healthmatters@vdh.virginia.gov) today if you want to improve housing conditions in Alexandria.

