

**National Center for Healthy Housing  
-National Healthy Homes Training Center and Network**

**CASE STUDY: Tenants for Healthy Housing - A collaborative project between Environmental Health Watch and the Cleveland Tenants Organization, Cleveland, Ohio.**

**Purpose of this exercise:**

1. To provide information about a successful collaborative that addresses healthy homes issues.
2. To illustrate different strategies that can be used to address the issue of healthy homes.
3. To facilitate discussion about working in a collaborative.

**Description of the Collaborative**

Background

Developed by the Alliance for Healthy Housing, the Community Environmental Health Resource Center (CEHRC) is funded by HUD to assist community-based organizations in developing their capacity to address environmental health hazards. The Environmental Health Watch (EHW) and Cleveland Tenant's Organization (CTO) worked together to submit a CEHRC proposal focused on working in collaboration to make housing environments in Cleveland safer for tenants. Prior to submitting the proposal, these two groups had a long history of working together on various housing issues.

Goals of the Project

The overall goals for the project included:

1. To train people who work with the CTO to take samples (e.g. dust and soil samples for lead) and make observations to identify potential hazards within the home.
2. To educate and assist occupants on how to take self-protective actions to reduce exposure to hazards.
3. To assist occupants to notify their landlords of the hazards and to secure repairs under the state landlord/tenant law.
4. To complete inspections on 200 homes within the first year.
5. To secure enforcement actions for remediation of identified hazards if landlords failed to take action

Project Plan

In order to achieve these goals, EHW and CTO developed a plan that built upon each of their expertise. Neighborhoods were targeted based on the prevalence of lead poisoned children, other data from the Health Department and the presence of a community organization infrastructure that could provide assistance in recruitment (e.g. presence of a Community Development Corporation).

The initial plan included door-to-door recruiting of tenants who were living in large multi-family buildings in the selected neighborhoods. Once tenants agreed to participate, hazard assessors trained by EHW on hazard identification and exposure reduction and by CTO on landlord-tenant law made a home visit, completed a visual assessment of the dwelling with the family present

and collected environmental samples. (Training included classroom instruction and field observation.)

On the second follow-up visit, the hazard assessors discussed the assessment results. When hazards were identified, the hazard assessor 1) recommended things that the occupants could do themselves to reduce exposures (e.g., take shoes off at the door, use contact paper to cover deteriorated paint, use bait stations instead of sprays for roach control) and 2) suggested how they could use the landlord-tenant law to secure hazard control repairs from the landlord (e.g. give the landlord a 30-day written notice of the repairs that are needed and stating that if repairs are not made the rent will be deposited with the housing court). A follow-up phone call was placed to the families to see if changes were made and to offer further assistance.

CTO and EHW also worked with the Housing and Health Departments to secure training, policy and procedure changes to improve compliance and enforcement policies related to home health hazards. For example:

- The Health Department will provide housing inspectors with lead-safe renovator training so that they could give advice to landlords on how to make lead-safe repairs and renovations.
- The Housing Court added information on lead hazard disclosure and control to education it provides for landlords.
- The Water Department included information on lead disclosure requirements in water bills sent to every Cleveland building owner.
- Addresses where multiple children were poisoned have been targeted for enforcement.

In the second year of the project, CTO and EHW focused efforts on a local lead hazard control ordinance drafted by the Health Department. CTO and EHW:

- Reviewed the draft and their key suggestions were incorporated in to the revised draft submitted to City Council.
- Testified at a City Council hearing on the ordinance and organized tenants to testify.
- Held community information meetings about the ordinance and organized support for it.
- Wrote an analysis of the ordinance to counter serious misunderstandings evidenced in hearing testimony.
- Participated in stakeholders meeting organized by the Chair of the Council Health Committee.

Key provisions of the ordinance:

- Establish lead hazards as a “nuisance”.
- Incorporate requirements of the federal lead hazard disclosure law, allowing local enforcement.
- Incorporate lead hazard control requirements of the state lead law, allowing local enforcement.
- Require a permit and set safety standards for exterior paint removal.
- Establish a voluntary Certificate of Lead-Safe Maintenance for properties that follow lead-safe practices and pass an annual dust clearance.

### Roles and Background of Each Organization

CTO has twenty-seven years of experience in community organizing and has provided the Cleveland community with many programs and services focused on tenant rights. They have a strong relationship with the local Housing Authority. They agreed to serve as the lead agency for the project. Their main responsibilities in the project included recruiting families, educating the families, and conducting follow-up with the families.

EHW has twenty years of experience in educating and advocacy in helping people prevent and protect themselves from environmental threats. They have a strong relationship with the Cleveland Health Department. In this project, EHW provided technical assistance and training for CTO staff and hazard assessors recruited by CTO, primarily from their membership. They also assisted in providing feedback to the occupants and educating occupants about ways to reduce potential hazards, through the training of the hazard assessors, sometimes going with them on feedback visits, providing additional information and clarification through telephone contacts, through participation in tenant meetings and through educational material. There were also telephone contacts with landlords to clarify hazards identified and to provide compliance assistance.

### Challenges Encountered during Implementation of the Plan

The groups encountered several challenges throughout the implementation phase.

The initial strategy was to focus on large multi-family buildings in the targeted high-risk neighborhoods, particularly where existing tenant organizations established by CTO were located. It turned out, however, that there were surprisingly few lead hazards in these old, poorly maintained buildings (although numerous other hazards, such as mold and roaches were identified). The lack of lead hazards was discussed with the Health Department and the Health Department confirmed that it matched their experience. (It was speculated that even though the buildings were in generally poor shape, apartment units were pretty frequently repainted at turnover and this reduced lead hazards.)

Recruitment strategy was then shifted to detached, one- and two-family, low-income rental housing in the high-risk neighborhoods. The plan was to work with Community Development Corporations and make use of their block clubs and other networks. The CDC's did not prove to be particularly helpful in outreach to low-income tenants, who move frequently and don't necessarily have strong ties to particular neighborhoods. The CDC's outreach efforts focus primarily on homeowners and large landlords, who are assumed to have more of a stake in the neighborhood. Presentations were made at some CDC-sponsored meetings and activities that attracted tenants.

The collaborative had to use a variety of additional recruitment strategies to enroll tenants in one- and two-family, low-income rental housing:

1. CTO has a long-established rental complaint telephone hotline that people call with all types of tenant concerns. Tenants from the target neighborhoods who called the hotline were asked if they wanted a hazards assessment.

2. In some areas, door knocking and flyer distribution was utilized.
3. The Health Department provided the collaborative with the addresses of several hundred homes where more than two children had been found to be lead-poisoned over a several year period. The collaborative sent letters to the addresses in the target areas saying that the address had been found to have lead hazards in the past and could be tested for current hazards.
4. A list of addresses in the target neighborhoods used for home-based childcare was obtained and an offer was made to conduct hazard assessments.

Combined, all of these approaches allowed the goal of 250 assessments (200 the first year and 50 in the second year) to be reached and plenty of lead and other hazards were identified in detached housing.

Some difficulties encountered:

- There is a very high turnover rate among low-income tenants, so not infrequently the family had moved at the time of follow-up contact.
- There was often some initial confusion about who the recruiters were, since members of the collaborative were offering to do something that sounded like a housing inspection. Tenants often asked if the members were from the housing or health department, were sent by the landlord, or were from child welfare. In some cases this confusion resulted in immediate refusal.
- Under the landlord-tenant law protection against eviction or other retaliation is only available if the tenant is current in their rent. Since tenants were often not current, remedies under the law were limited.
- Cleveland rents are relatively low and the rental market is pretty soft. So often sufficient cash flow for hazard remediation repairs was lacking. In addition, many landlords for one- and two-family houses are themselves very low income. In this case, landlords were provided with information on lower cost strategies for remediation and on grant and loan programs.

To help address these challenges, EHW and CTO scheduled frequent face-to-face meetings to discuss concerns and keep the lines of communication open. Decisions might be made to seek assistance from other agencies, such as the Health and Housing Departments or the Housing Court. These meetings also included case reviews.

#### Success of the Project

- 10 people were trained as housing hazards assessors
- 200 housing units were assessed in the first year and 50 in the second year
- tenants were assisted in securing remediation in many of the homes
- helped influence improvements in training, policies and procedures in the Health and Housing Departments
- helped with drafting and passage of a local lead hazard control ordinance

## Questions for Discussion

Based on the information provided:

1. What do you think are some of the strengths of this collaborative?

Possible answers:

- a. There was a long-standing working relationship with the various partners.
  - b. Each group has a long standing history within the community
  - c. Partners worked together to develop a plan from the start.
  - d. Partners built on each of their strengths and areas of expertise.
  - e. Roles were defined.
  - f. They were able to help bridge the gap between the Housing and Health
  - g. Partners had frequent face to face meetings
  - h. They defined a geographic community, focusing on high-risk area
2. Are there other potential partners you would have brought in from the beginning? Why? (Health Department, landlords, other community groups, contractors?)
3. Would you have the same goals?  
Was the goal of completing an inspection of 200 houses the first year too ambitious given the extra time working in a collaborative often requires? Remember they spent a great deal of time explaining who they were and what their role was in the community to tenants.
4. What else could the team have done to help gain community support before trying to recruit tenants?
5. Would you have involved the media? If so, how and when?
6. What approaches with landlords might have been helpful?
7. How might this effort be sustained?
8. Are there any other issues you would want to consider?
- a. Was a sustainability plan developed?
  - b. Since many of the landlords were low-income was anything done to help them find resources for following through with remediation or prevention efforts?
9. What were some of the overall lessons learned??
- c. Flexibility is key
  - d. Open communication is essential
  - e. Make sure key players are involved
  - f. Build in extra time for working collaboratively.
  - g. Building upon each partner's strength and areas of expertise can lead to success!

For more information:

Environmental Health Watch, please contact..... [I have note in to Stu regarding this...)  
Cleveland Tenants Organization  
CEHRC