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Housing = Health Working Group

Dear Legislators,

I'm Terrance Mensah, a current student at Harvard Medical School and the Vice-President of the Harvard Chapter of the Student National Medical Association. As a person who has directly faced the devastating effects of housing insecurity; it is clear to me that housing insecurity and displacement are clear and immediate public health issues. During the recession of the late 2000s my father lost his job as a factory worker, and my family faced imminent foreclosure of our home. The stress my parents went through in having to uproot our lives and move to a more affordable apartment was clear as day. During that time, my father was diagnosed with both hypertension and high cholesterol. His physician noted that the stress he was facing at home most likely played a major role in the development of his chronic conditions.

Research shows that the stress that impacted my family did not just stop there, it affected everyone who cared about my family, from our neighbors, to our friends, and to our entire social network and beyond so our entire community was also subject to this devastation.

The scientific literature also supports the tragic link between stress and poor health outcomes that my family directly experienced. Research demonstrates that housing insecurity leads to a wide array of poor health outcomes. For example, a study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine demonstrated that housing insecurity and displacement are associated with, increased blood pressure, arthritis, and a reduced ability to adhere to prescription regimens. Furthermore, a study conducted in the journal of Social Science and Medicine shows that these adverse health outcomes are associated with increased healthcare costs demonstrating the negative financial impact that housing insecurity places on the healthcare system.

The plethora of adverse health outcomes that affect displaced individuals is alone enough to warrant the creation of serious policy measures that prevent displacement and housing insecurity. However, the negative effects of housing insecurity do not only affect the individuals who are displaced but the entire community that is at risk of being displaced, in addition to their families and loved ones. A report in the Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness showed that the stresses of just being at risk for displacement (whether or not you were actually displaced) led to significant increases in social and psychological stress. These findings in combination with the studies I have previously described demonstrate that just the threat alone of being displaced is enough to negatively affect the mental, social, and physical health of entire communities. The literature I have described above is only a snapshot of the massive and widespread devastation that housing insecurity can wreak on communities, particularly lower-income communities and communities of color. Gentrification is defined as the process

of changing the character of a neighborhood with the influx of more affluent residents and businesses; it is no secret that it's negative effects primarily targets Black and Brown communities.

Currently, the community's right to decide for itself in the face of the displacement crisis has been taken away. Forcing the community to stand by and watch as their health deteriorates, and social bonds are destroyed. The current bill on the floor would allow municipalities the necessary freedom and flexibility to take actions in their own hands. Communities facing displacement and its devastating effects would have the freedom to enact policies, such as rent control, that can prevent the destruction of their health, families and social bonds. All we ask is that at-risk communities are given the same freedom as other communities to take their health in their own hands and address the issue of displacement as they see best.

I would like to thank the legislators for their time and am happy to answer questions.

Works Cited

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