



Home Is Where Your Health Is

Safe Dwellings Protect Against Illness, Injury and Stress

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Imagine that you live in an apartment with poor ventilation or mold on the walls, or in a home with exposed wires and lead-tainted paint. Perhaps you have no home at all.

Now think about how your housing situation impacts your health.

More than a decade ago, an article in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* declared that “housing is perhaps the ultimate nexus between the built environment and health disparities.” The connection between where we live and how well we feel is widely accepted. Safe, clean homes can contribute to better health outcomes. On the flip side, people who live in rundown housing or lack a permanent residence are at greater risk of illness, injury and stress.

As a result, governments, nonprofits and other organizations in Colorado and across the nation are supporting programs to promote healthier homes and neighborhoods.

Housing and Health

Perhaps the greatest health disparities are faced by people without permanent housing. The U.S.

Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that there are about 10,000 homeless people in Colorado — a figure many homeless advocates believe is too low.

Whatever the number, it is clear that a lack of housing threatens physical and mental well-being. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that the homeless have higher rates of medical problems, mental health issues and premature death. Homeless women face especially high health risks.

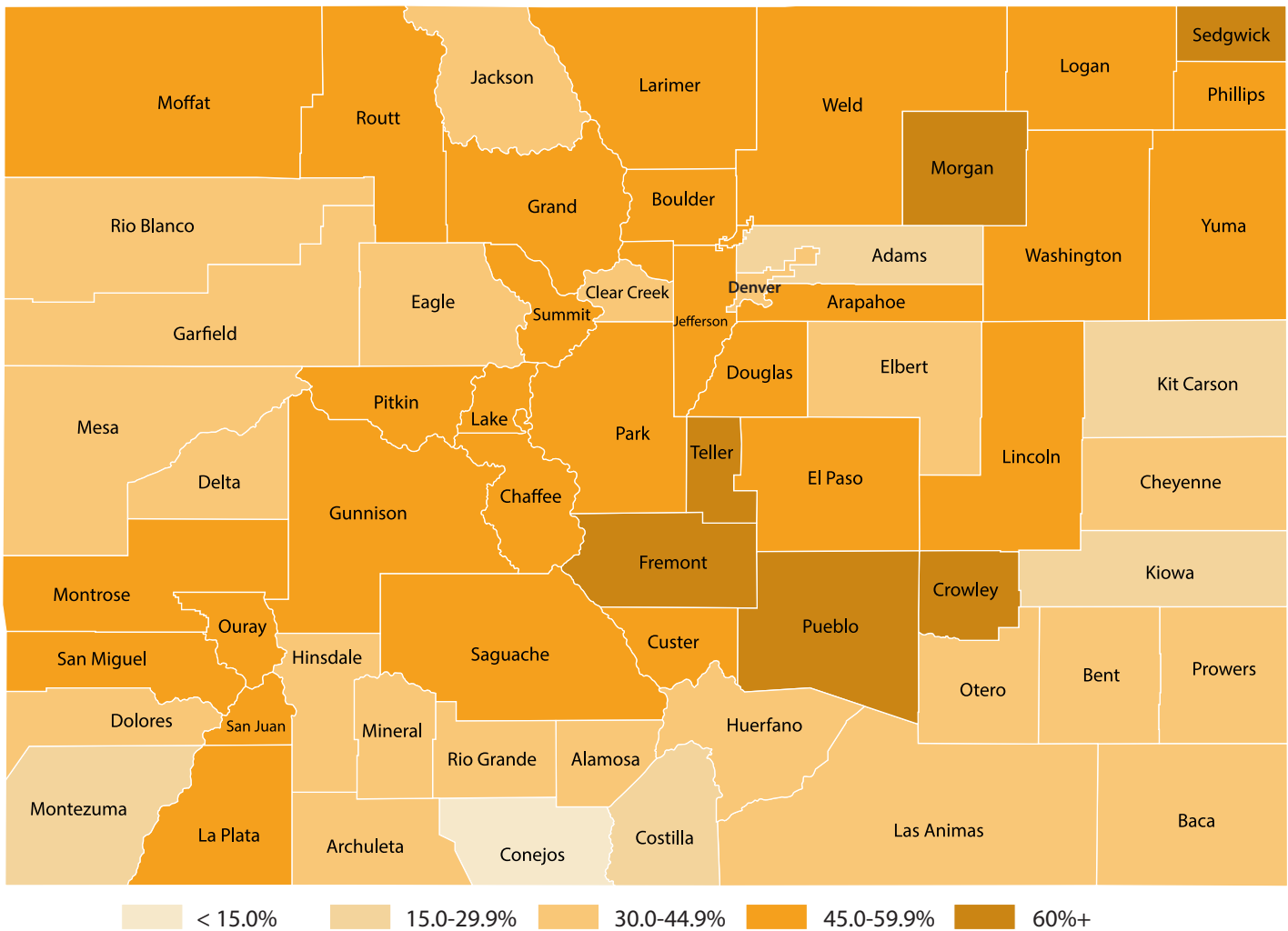
Even people with a roof over their heads can be at risk. Low-income Coloradans may have to choose between repairing a safety hazard and filling a prescription. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation notes that “families with fewer financial resources are most likely to experience unhealthy and unsafe housing conditions and typically are least able to remedy them.” When



Common Environmental Hazards in the Home

- Rodents**
- Mold**
- Asbestos**
- Allergens**
- Lead**
- Radon**

Radon In Colorado. Percentage of Indoor Radon Tests Above the Federal Maximum Recommended Level of 4 pCi/L by County, 2005-2012



Source: Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

people are financially insecure, health care can feel like a luxury and fixing a furnace or leaky roof can seem out of reach.

Children and seniors are particularly vulnerable to accidents and injury because of hazards in the home. Safety devices such as latches and locks can prevent a child from getting into household cleaners or falling from a window, and a grab bar inside a bath or shower can prevent a devastating fall.

Environmental hazards in the home — such as allergens, mold, rodents, lead and asbestos — can also result in serious illness or disease. Exposure to high levels of radon is a particular cause for worry in Colorado. Radon is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, and Colorado is in the most severe category for indoor radon.

Beyond environmental hazards and safety concerns, most homes still have room for improvement. Houses that lack enough natural light can worsen depression; apartments that don't provide opportunities for exercise make it harder to fight obesity. Ultimately, spaces that are both functional and beautiful can boost our everyday happiness.

In addition to conditions in the home, neighborhood factors — such as sidewalks and safe streets to encourage exercise — can have strong impacts on health.

A 2004 study found that neighborhood conditions can worsen the effects of poverty on residents' health and behaviors. People who feel unsafe are 40 percent more likely to experience poor health, while those who feel secure in their neighborhood are more likely to venture outside to play, socialize, or bike to school or work.

SPOTLIGHT
COMMUNITY

Dwelling in Durango: Mercy Housing Provides a Solid Foundation

Piñon Terrace, a multifamily affordable housing community in Durango, has been serving low-income families, seniors and people with special needs since 2008. These populations often struggle to find stable, safe and accessible places to live.

Piñon Terrace is home to 140 people, 40 percent of whom are 17 or younger, and their median household income is just over \$18,000 per year. The community is funded primarily through the Federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit Program.

The land for the project was donated by Mercy Regional Medical Center, a local hospital and the largest medical facility in southwest Colorado. Piñon Terrace features more than 60 units along with a playground, community room and gardens. It includes accessible walkways, which are wide with a gradual slope and handrails for support. The community is within walking distance to outdoor recreation, shops and restaurants, and it offers convenient access to Durango's trolley line, which is free to ride.



Piñon Terrace is owned and managed by Mercy Housing, a national nonprofit that is one of the country's largest affordable housing organizations. Its goal is not only to alleviate poverty, but to promote health. Founded by the Sisters of Mercy in Nebraska in the early 1980s, Mercy Housing serves vulnerable populations in 20 states, including Colorado, where it houses about 2,000 low- to moderate-income people. The organization's national headquarters is in Denver.

To date, Mercy Housing has helped create more than 48,000 affordable homes for people with low incomes.

In addition to amenities like parks and playgrounds, Mercy Housing's communities feature programmatic benefits. Piñon Terrace has a free after-school program for its young residents that offers healthy snacks, at least 30 minutes of physical activity and tutoring to help them read at grade-level and feel confident in school. The community also has a computer lab, which adult residents use frequently for education and job applications.

Along with Mercy Housing's 11 other Colorado developments, Piñon Terrace provides a firm housing foundation for vulnerable residents that promotes physical and mental well-being.



Piñon Terrace in Durango is located within walking distance of outdoor recreation and public transportation. The community has wide sidewalks and a playground.

PHOTOS BY MERCY HOUSING

“The basic equation is no longer all that controversial: **Housing is health care.** We know that poor health can lead to homelessness. We know that homelessness is a major cause of poor health.”

David Wertheimer, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and **Bill Pitkin**, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2014

And it's important not to overlook gentrification: the displacement of established residents as development attracts more affluent people. The phenomenon is pushing low- and middle-income Coloradans farther out of city centers, where they can no longer afford to live, disrupting communities and increasing stress.

Some worry that Denver is on its way to becoming a prohibitively expensive “San Francisco of the Plains,” which would create challenges for affordable housing and the city's social, economic and ethnic diversity.

Ongoing Efforts in Colorado and the U.S.

Scores of initiatives are in place to promote better housing and better health. Among them:

- An estimated 450 communities nationwide have developed 10-year plans to end homelessness. Among them is **Homeward 2020**, a program in Fort Collins that seeks to provide affordable housing while working to address related issues such as mental health, domestic violence and substance use.
- **Habitat for Humanity**, an international organization established in 1976, builds or renovates “simple, decent houses” in partnership with volunteers and the individual or family in need. In Colorado, 27 organizational affiliates are providing homes for low-income families in 42 communities.
- Other groups work more broadly. The **Community Resources and Housing Development Corporation** (CRHDC) has helped Colorado residents for more than 40 years. The nonprofit, which has offices in Denver and the San Luis Valley, offers financial counseling, affordable rentals and new multifamily developments. It was originally founded to help migrants and seasonal farm workers.
- The **City of Aurora** provides radon mitigation help for low-income homeowners. Radon assistance



Denver's Road Home, a plan approved in 2005, aims to develop nearly 3,200 housing opportunities for the homeless and link people in need to shelters and other community resources. People can donate to its efforts at repurposed parking meters around central Denver.

is also available through the **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development** and the **U.S. Department of Agriculture**.

- Dedicated government funding for preserving and maintaining affordable housing is crucial, especially in a state with few protections for renters. **Denver Mayor Michael Hancock** and others hope the city will dedicate \$150 million for this purpose over the next 10 years, and Boulder residents are lobbying for similar funding.