

## Sample Editorial: Healthy Housing for All Americans

*This editorial uses a timely subject, the release of the new National Healthy Housing Standard, as an opportunity to educate its readers about healthy housing and housing disparities in the US. It opens with the tested Value of Fairness Across Places, establishing the idea of a collective benefit to reinforce the “public good” argument that follows. The editorial then defines “healthy housing,” using a positive, solutions-focused definition that provides concrete examples, before explaining what the new Standard is and does. A positive Tone is important to circumvent unproductive cultural models like crisis thinking, which can leave an audience with a sense that the problem is too big to solve. Presenting Solutions also helps readers to scale the fix to the size of the problem and prevents fallback on individual-level solutions. The Metaphor Upstream Environments/Downstream Health is used to explain the critical role of environmental health workers in creating and maintaining a safe housing supply for all Americans. Lastly, it ends with a final appeal to Fairness Across Places.*

Although America’s many communities spread out over thousands of miles and an array of landscapes, we still share a common thread of responsibility: to make our country the best place it can be for all of us who call it home. When it comes to where we live, however, we have work to do in order to live up to our shared ideals. Not all of our communities have access to safe and healthy housing, and the resulting public health consequences should be of concern to us all. Of the 100 million structures—houses and apartments—that Americans inhabit, some 40 percent have one or more health and safety hazards, and 6.3 million do not meet basic health standards. Building and maintaining a safe, healthy, affordable housing supply for all Americans is critical for our national wellbeing.

What does healthy housing look like? Home environmental conditions can affect our health in ways we don’t always think about: removing radon exposure decreases the risk of lung cancer, preventing poisoning from lead-based paint in older homes eliminates a major cause of neurological damage in children, and improving indoor air quality can dramatically reduce the occurrence of asthma. Making sure home infrastructures are safe—with sound electrical and plumbing, properly functioning appliances, level flooring, and adequate fire-safety precautions, for example—can prevent millions of home injuries and deaths, especially among our youngest and oldest citizens.

Earlier this summer, the National Center for Healthy Housing and the American Public Health Association released a new, jointly developed National Healthy Housing Standard. The Standard provides comprehensive guidelines that can be adopted as a regulation by government agencies and voluntarily adopted by any property owner. The guidelines cover a range of housing components, such as structural integrity, moisture and chemical control, access to fresh air, natural light, adequate egresses, security, noise abatement, and fire safety. They are designed to reduce injury and illness and to promote good health.

The new Standard is a terrific step forward in promoting the importance of healthy living spaces to our overall national health and to addressing housing disparities, so that all Americans can live and work in safe and healthy spaces. We should all join the NCHH and APHA in calling for its speedy adoption.

Such modern safety guidelines might be contribution enough, but the Standard also calls much-needed attention to an often invisible piece of our social fabric: the many environmental health professionals, government agencies, and local organizations we rely on to improve the spaces in which we live, work, and play. We tend to think of our homes as extensions of ourselves—decorated to suit our tastes, the place we retreat to for privacy, the center of family life—and that can make it easy to overlook the substantial network of professionals who are responsible for keeping them, and by extension our families, safe and healthy. A lot of work goes into making a home healthy before we get to the fun stuff like unpacking and deciding where to hang our favorite family photos. And even though we may choose different paint colors or curtain patterns, we as residents are no more able to enforce building codes or to remove lead and mold than we are able to monitor air pollution or foodborne illness.

Safe housing begins long before a new development is built or families move into their new homes. It starts upstream from those events with research-based analyses by well-trained experts like scientists, engineers, and health practitioners of what people need to live healthy lives. Policymakers use that work to create sound regulations that protect our downstream living conditions, and those regulations are then implemented and enforced by the many professionals responsible for maintaining safe housing environments. This upstream work to take care of risks before they become problems helps to determine what happens downstream: fewer home safety hazards means better health and less stress, and that can lead to cascading positive effects, such as helping people to have the time and resources to be more engaged in their schools, workplaces, and communities.

The National Healthy Housing Standard, and all of the experts responsible for its design, adoption, and implementation, can ensure that what happens upstream in housing design and regulation will extend to all Americans the opportunity to lead healthier lives. We need to make sure that all Americans, no matter where they live, have access to healthy housing.

## Sample Editorial:

### Are You Gonna Eat That? Thanks to Our Food Safety Ground Crew, You Can

*Making use of an annual event—National Food Safety Education Month—this sample editorial turns the conversation to the behind-the-scenes work of controlling foodborne illness and keeping our food supply safe for consumption. It begins by introducing the size of the task, the many local and state agents who collaborate on the work, and the kinds of responsibilities they undertake to ensure food safety. Appealing to the public’s general belief that government does serve an important protective function is a strategic way to counter the cultural model of government ineffectiveness. The remaining paragraphs apply the tested Ground Crew metaphor to local environmental health professionals, emphasizing the scope of their food safety work, the necessity for well-trained personnel, and the importance of increasing the network of experts available to carry out this work. The conclusion applies the Fairness Across Places value.*

September is National Food Safety Education Month, a public education campaign focused on food workers’ and consumers’ safe food-handling practices. The importance of proper hand-washing and other hygienic practices are important strategies in the effort to prevent foodborne illness. But much of the work of food safety is actually out of our hands, and that’s how it should be.

This month, as we patronize our favorite restaurants (we can choose from nearly a million in the US) and make our regular trip to one of more than 37,000 supermarkets, it’s worth taking a moment to contemplate an everyday reality we Americans tend to take for granted: the safety of our food supply.

By and large, Americans presume the safety of the \$672 billion worth of food we buy annually (according to a 2012 USDA report). That’s a tribute to the good work done by researchers, inspectors, data analysts, policy makers and other technical experts at local and state agencies dedicated to ensuring that our food is healthy and safe. Their efforts are largely invisible, but their impact on public health is immeasurable.

Like an airport ground crew responsible for the safe passage of hundreds of airplanes every day, this environmental health ground crew consists of highly trained professionals who protect our health and safety in ways that we ourselves cannot. At the airport, ground crew members analyze information, conduct inspections, perform repairs, manage the flow of traffic, assist passengers, and clear planes for takeoff and landing.

Similarly, our state and local food safety ground crews carry out a host of responsibilities that help to reduce the risk of foodborne illness and to maintain robust, healthy environments and populations across the country. Just like an airport ground crew lets pilots know a plane is

ready for takeoff, food safety ground crews clear food producers and sellers for business operations. Perhaps most importantly, these ground crew members inspect food manufacturing facilities and restaurants and other food retail sites for safe processing and food-handling practices. They also collect food samples for laboratory testing and disseminate important data and information, so that we can make informed decisions about the food we eat. Their work is vital to national agencies, too, which rely on local and state research and data to identify trends and patterns in foodborne illness outbreaks, so problems can be addressed quickly and effectively. Food safety ground crew members train food workers to comply with regulations that protect us from contaminants and foodborne illnesses. When a foodborne illness occurs, they trace it back to its source, identify any environmental causes, and work with producers to take corrective action. In collaboration with national agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the food safety ground crew resolves food-safety risks caused by environmental disasters like flooding or oil spills.

But all of this work happens out of the public eye, and when work is invisible, it runs the risk of being unsupported.

We might well think twice about flying if we knew there weren't enough engineers and technicians at the airport to prepare every plane for departure. The same is true of food consumption: given the choice between food produced and processed in accordance with scientifically tested, government-enforced standards and food to which those standards had not been applied, most people would choose the former. Wisely so. Without the regulatory efforts of the environmental health professionals at local and state health departments and agriculture agencies who monitor and enforce safe food-processing and food-handling standards, restaurants, supermarkets, and food manufacturers would have little incentive to invest in food safety practices that could eat into profit margins. That would pose a risk to all of our communities.

For all those reasons, we need to support efforts to direct resources to maintaining an environmental health ground crew large enough to meet the needs of our population, one with the skills and expertise to protect all of our communities and ensure their access to affordable, safe, and healthy food.

Much of the work to reduce foodborne illness may be out of our hands, but prioritizing food safety is too important to Americans' wellbeing for us to just wash our hands of responsibility for it. Let's make National Food Safety Education Month more than just an internal industry campaign for food workers. Let's make it an opportunity to support environmental health ground crews in municipalities and states across the country, whose work is vital to food safety and public health. Because whether we're talking about takeoff or takeout, the safety of all Americans needs to be a national priority.

## Sample Editorial:

### Reducing Power Plant Emissions Is a Smart Move for Public Health

This sample editorial responds to the EPA's recent proposal to reduce to carbon emissions from coal-powered plants, taking the opportunity of a news event to draw causal links between climate change and public health. It first expresses support for the proposal and applies the Value of *Fairness Across Places*. Then it uses the tested *Heat-Trapping Blanket* and *Upstream Environments / Downstream Health* metaphors to build a clear explanatory chain that teaches the reader point by point how carbon emissions affect public health. It concludes with a call for collective support for the EPA carbon reduction proposal.

For all our ingenuity and adventurous spirit, we Americans also have a healthy appreciation for safety and precaution: the automobile may not be an American invention, but the retractable seatbelt and safety airbag are. Ditto for elevator brakes, bike helmets, and surgical gloves. In fact, some of the most important American inventions are actually *preventions*: we have a history of finding opportunities to protect people from harm . . . and, in the process, changing the world. With the Environmental Protection Agency's recent proposal to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, we have another opportunity to protect our communities from harm and change our world for the better. The proposal, which would require a 30 percent reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from existing power plants by 2030, would be an important step not only toward addressing climate change but also toward improving the nation's health. Those Americans living in communities closest to coal-powered plants stand to feel the most immediate positive effects of carbon emission reductions, but if the proposal is adopted and implemented, its long-term outcomes will allow all of us to breathe a lot easier.

Coal-powered plants are the largest source of excess carbon emissions in the US. The carbon output from these plants builds up in the earth's atmosphere, where it acts much like a blanket, trapping in heat around the world. This heat-trapping blanket causes the planet's average temperature to rise, and that higher temperature leads to environmental changes such as more extreme weather events of longer duration, prolonged insect-breeding seasons, and warmer conditions that worsen air quality. All of these ongoing environmental changes have important consequences for human health. For example, crops can fail when farms are hit by a severe flood or drought, affecting the cost and availability of many foods we take for granted. Warmer, wetter weather creates better breeding conditions for insects, producing bigger and stronger bug populations; because they can carry and transmit the pathogens that cause certain human diseases, bigger insect populations expose more people to the risk of contracting diseases like West Nile virus, malaria, and Lyme disease. Warmer temperatures also extend the lifespan of airborne allergens like pollen and mold, which exacerbates allergy, asthma, and other respiratory illness rates.

In effect, the coal plants' carbon emissions set off a cascading reaction that begins upstream, at their origin point, and then flows downstream to the environments in which we live and work. Some populations, however, are more vulnerable to the health risks posed by climate-change-related health problems. For example, poor air quality puts children at greater risk than adults of developing respiratory illnesses because their lungs' defense mechanisms are not yet developed but they spend more time outdoors. Poor air quality can also contribute to cardiovascular disease, which most affects senior citizens, another at-risk population. As climate change increasingly affects crop yields and food prices, low-income communities will be hit hardest. Americans in certain parts of the country are more susceptible to the water- and insect-borne diseases fed by increasingly powerful rainstorms and more intense flooding. And all of us are affected by the need to commit increased resources to assist those of us affected by severe weather events—in the absence of such emergencies, we could use our resources for other kinds of public health projects and preventive solutions.

It may be easy to overlook the connection between what's burning at the power plant and what's cooking on the stove or incubating in the air, but they are inextricably linked. We need to seize this opportunity to protect our environments and public health by managing our resources responsibly. One way to promote better health for ourselves and our neighbors down the road is to support policies that promote better, more efficient energy uses upstream, beginning with the effective implementation of the EPA's proposal to reduce coal-powered plants' carbon emissions.