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Most U.S. Hazardous Waste Sites in Close Proximity to Federally Funded Housing

New Report Calls for Impacted Families Living in Affordable Housing to Drive the Change to this Urgent and Ongoing Environmental and Health Crisis

CHICAGO—An estimated 77,000 people who live in federally assisted housing across the United States are at risk of being poisoned by dangerous toxic contamination and the federal government has been aware of this hazard for years but taken no action, according to a new report released today by the Shriver Center on Poverty Law, Earthjustice, and faculty at the University of Chicago's Abrams Environmental Law Clinic and Columbia University's Health Justice Advocacy Clinic.

The report finds that decades of environmental racism have systematically put residents of federally assisted housing in direct proximity to these toxins. Many of these residents are Black and Brown and their housing was placed in harm's way due to the historic discriminatory housing policies of the federal government. Despite the risks, the federal government is still moving people into housing that is potentially hazardous, without notification to the residents, and continues to invest redevelopment dollars into these sites.

Poisonous Homes: The Fight for Environmental Justice in Federally Assisted Housing comes as the Trump Administration has proposed to [rollback regulations governing the National Environmental Policy Act](#) that will curtail environmental impact analysis of major projects and eliminate opportunities for community input. *Poisonous Homes* looks at examples of federally assisted housing developments located within or in close proximity to Superfund sites, as well as important stories of community activism in the face of that reality. These include case studies from East Chicago, Indiana; Carteret, New Jersey; Evansville, Indiana; Iola, Kansas; Omaha, Nebraska; Pueblo, Colorado and Portsmouth, Virginia. A full copy of the report is available at povertylaw.org/poisonoushomes.

The five million total families who live in federally assisted housing are predominately comprised of the people most vulnerable to exposure to environmental toxins, including Black people, Latinx people, children, people with disabilities, and older adults. Families who are

exposed to environmental toxins face an urgent and ongoing health crisis. Yet HUD and the EPA have taken no collective action to protect these families since releasing data in 2017 that more than 70 percent of hazardous waste sites officially listed on the National Priorities List are located within one mile of federally assisted housing.

“We found out we were living on top of a lead refinery,” said Akeeshea Daniels, a former resident of the West Calumet Housing Complex in East Chicago, Indiana, one of the case studies profiled in the report. “By the time we learned that the soil under our homes was contaminated, 40% of the children tested in our community had elevated blood lead levels. There were over 680 children in our housing complex, being poisoned by that lead every day.”

This first-ever comprehensive study of these intersecting issues of federally assisted housing and environmental contamination, conducted by housing, health, and environmental justice advocates, details a confluence of historic policies and practices that have encouraged the construction of federally assisted housing in areas of environmental contamination—and have also enabled polluting industry to be built near low-income housing. According to the report, federal agencies responsible for federally assisted housing and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) often exhibit a startling lack of coordination and communication that puts families at risk by:

- Failing to notify them of environmental contamination;
- Failing to provide them real choice as to where they live; and,
- Approving new construction and substantial rehabilitation while ignoring known environmental contamination.

“The government has put countless families who live in assisted housing at risk by failing to protect them from toxic exposure,” said Debbie Chizewer, Managing Attorney for the Midwest office of Earthjustice, and a coauthor of the report. “The COVID-19 crisis reveals this problem in more stark terms because chronic exposure to pollution in your home makes you more at risk for worse COVID-19 outcomes. The economic downturn also pushes more people into assisted housing.”

The report calls for a real commitment of financial resources from companies found to have polluted and environmental, health, and housing agencies to investigate contamination and protect communities. Advocacy to mitigate harm should center on needs and desires of impacted communities, allowing them to determine what is best and safest for their community.

“It is no accident that housing built for Black and Brown households has often been built in direct proximity to contaminated land,” said Emily Coffey, Staff Attorney, Housing Justice at the Shriver Center on Poverty Law and one of the report’s coauthors. “These families have been disproportionately exposed to health and environmental threats. Only a comprehensive solution, driven directly by the impacted communities, can achieve the justice that is deserved.”

Additional coauthors for the report are: Kate Walz, Vice President of Advocacy, Shriver Center on Poverty Law; Emily A. Benfer, Visiting Associate Clinical Professor of Law, Director of the Health Justice Advocacy Clinic, Columbia Law School; Mark N. Templeton, Clinical Professor

of Law, Director of the Abrams Environmental Law Clinic, University of Chicago Law School; and Robert Weinstock, Assistant Clinical Professor of Law, University of Chicago Law School. This report was made possible with a grant from the Joyce Foundation, a nonpartisan private foundation that invests in public policies and strategies to advance racial equity and economic mobility for the next generation in the Great Lakes region.

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The Shriver Center on Poverty Law fights for economic and racial justice. Over our 50-year history, we have secured hundreds of victories with and for people living in poverty in Illinois and across the country. Today, we litigate, shape policy, and train and convene multi-state networks of lawyers, community leaders, and activists nationwide. Together, we are building a future where all people have equal dignity, respect, and power under the law. **Join the fight at povertylaw.org.**

Earthjustice is the premier nonprofit environmental law organization. We wield the power of law and the strength of partnership to protect people's health, to preserve magnificent places and wildlife, to advance clean energy, and to combat climate change. We are here because the earth needs a good lawyer.