

Testimony submitted by Audrey Lyon, Executive Director, Yachad

Testimony to the Committee on Transportation and the Environment
B23-407 ***The Lead Hazard Prevention and Elimination Act of 2019***

My name is Audrey Lyon, and I am the Executive Director at Yachad. Yachad is a local housing remediation and preservation program that addresses the healthy housing needs of low-income homeowners and renters. We bring communities together, as we work in partnership with homeowners, houses of worship, nonprofits, and other community stakeholders to repair and preserve housing. Our mission since our founding in 1990 is rooted in the Jewish commitment to seek justice by engaging in acts of loving kindness.

I am an attorney with extensive experience in housing and community development. Before coming to Yachad, more than 25 years ago, I was the ED and senior attorney with the Lawyers Committee for Better Housing, a Chicago housing advocacy organization. I am testifying in support of The Lead Hazard Prevention and Elimination Act of 2019 because of Yachad's commitment to better health through safe, sanitary, and well-maintained housing.

Over the years that Yachad has been remediating homes, we have seen time and time again that residents' sense of well-being has dramatically increased by making physical improvements to their home. After home remediation, we have seen stress levels – which are already extremely high for people trying to survive on low income in our expensive city – improve, as well as allergy and asthma symptoms, fall risks, and pest management. In fact, what had once been an anecdotally correlated relationship is now a well-researched and documented relationship.¹

According to the DC Department of Energy and Environment, the most likely place for a child to be harmed by an environmental health hazard is in the home.² Of the causes of harmful health effects, peeling and/or deteriorating paint, which poses a threat to lead poisoning in young children, is one of the most common. This is especially a problem of particular urgency for our city because of the age of DC's housing stock and high rate of housing unaffordability. As of 2017, over 80% of DC's housing stock was built prior to 1978, the year when lead in paint was banned from use, with 37% built before 1940.³ This means that the vast majority of residential buildings in DC contain lead paint and are continuing to age, which contributes to exposure through flaking and chipping of paint.

¹ <https://www.institutephi.org/our-work-in-action/policy-health-systems-improvement/dc-healthy-housing-collaborative/>

² <https://doee.dc.gov/service/dc-partnership-healthy-homes>

³ https://nchh.org/resource-library/Healthy-Housing-Fact-Sheet_DC.pdf

With 38% of children in DC living in homes with a “high housing cost burden”⁴ (and one of the highest child poverty rates in the country⁵), we can deduce that families are likewise unable to afford home maintenance – and/or live in properties which their landlords are not maintaining – that would keep them healthy and safe. We have seen this phenomenon clearly during Yachad’s work over the decades, and the problem has only grown more acute as DC faces an affordable housing crisis.⁶ The result is that low-income families, whether homeowners or renters, in private or public housing, have even fewer options for relocating to less decrepit housing.

Moreover, there are clear racial disparities in this issue, starting with the fact that the low-income population in DC is overwhelmingly black and Latino.⁷ The DC Fiscal Policy Institute produced a report about lead being an issue of race equity,⁸ noting that negative health effects accrue primarily to low-income families of color with young children. Author Kamolika Das quotes researchers who write that, “lead toxicity is a source of ecological inequity by race and a pathway through which racial inequality *literally gets into the body*.”⁹

For all these reasons, Yachad strongly endorses this bill, which would prioritize and increase protection of the health of DC’s children, require landlords to do more to preserve housing as safe and healthy, and decrease the racial disparities in healthy housing for DC’s black and Latinx families. Please pass *The Lead Hazard Prevention and Elimination Act of 2019*.

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⁴ https://nchh.org/resource-library/Healthy-Housing-Fact-Sheet_DC.pdf. Additionally, 22% of families have “severe housing problems,” such as being overcrowded, lacking complete cooking facilities, lacking a complete plumbing system, or being severely cost burdened (with rent being grossly out of proportion to total income). (*Ibid.*)

⁵ <https://www.dcactionforchildren.org/our-priorities/family-economic-security>

⁶ <https://wamu.org/story/19/03/11/d-c-must-double-its-investment-in-affordable-housing-report-says/>

⁷ <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/income-inequality-dc-highest-country/>

⁸ <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/addressing-lead-exposure-is-a-critical-first-step-towards-racial-equity/>

⁹ *Ibid.*