

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 13, 2020

The Honorable Dr. Ben Carson
Secretary, Department of Housing and Urban Development
451 7th Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20410

Dear Secretary Carson:

We are writing to you regarding the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) lack of oversight regarding its legal responsibility to protect occupants of federally subsidized housing from the cancer-causing gas radon. Under federal law, HUD is required to "develop an effective departmental policy for dealing with radon contamination... to ensure that occupants of [public housing] are not exposed to hazardous levels of radon."¹ However, HUD does not require radon testing in all one million-plus federally subsidized housing units nationally. As the federal agency that administers aid to local housing agencies, we believe HUD is directly responsible for ensuring that the homes of all Americans are protected against carcinogens such as radon.

Radon is an invisible, odorless gas that is formed through the decay of radium. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), radon is the number one cause of lung cancer among non-smokers and is responsible for about 21,000 lung cancer deaths every year.² Despite the fact that studies have found definitive, direct evidence of an association between residential radon exposure and lung cancer, HUD does not require radon testing in all of its housing units.

The technology to address the issue of monitoring for and removal of radon currently exists. Many private residences across the country are fitted with specialized ventilation systems that successfully remove radon, but few federally subsidized homes are. Fewer than one in three of the 64 public housing agencies surveyed in a recent report by *The Oregonian*³ provided proof of radon testing. Yet, there have been no installations of radon removal systems after tests showed high levels of radon.

Radon is present in public housing units in Massachusetts, but testing is uneven. According to an investigative report by *The Oregonian* newspaper, only 2 of the 7 housing authorities in Massachusetts that they surveyed tested their public housing units for radon and in some cases, those tests came back positive. It is the responsibility of HUD to ensure that housing authorities are given the resources they require for radon testing and mitigation. The President's national budget for fiscal year 2021 requested only \$5 million for radon testing and remediation in public housing, which is not nearly enough.⁴ Unfortunately, HUD did not request any additional

¹ PL 100-628-Nov. 7, 1988 §1091(a)

² Environmental Protection Agency. *Health Risk of Radon*. <https://www.epa.gov/radon/health-risk-radon>

³ The Oregonian. *Cancer Cloud: The government urges private homeowners to test for cancer-causing radon gas. For low-income tenants of public housing, the government ignores its own advice*. Pub. November 22, 2019.

⁴ The Oregonian. *Trump's budget plan includes \$5 million for radon in public housing*. Pub. February 10, 2020.

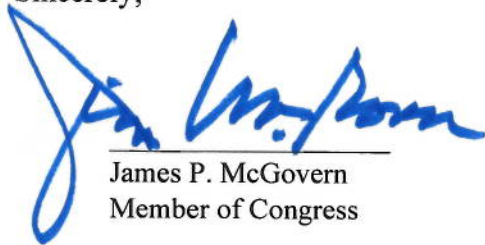
funding for either radon testing or mitigation in its past two budget justifications. If housing authorities are not given both funding and guidance, Americans living in federally subsidized housing will be disproportionately at risk for radon exposure. By choosing not to enforce radon testing and mitigation at the local level, HUD is disproportionately harming lower income Americans who do not have the ability to move.

HUD issued guidance in 2013 encouraging housing authorities to test for radon, recognizing that studies have shown “definitive evidence” that radon is a carcinogen. However, the aforementioned report⁵ stated that between 2013 and 2018, HUD did not test for radon in a single unit operated by a housing authority directly managed by HUD. In response to the report, HUD issued a reminder to housing authorities that encouraged them to test for and mitigate radon. Quite frankly, an email will not suffice.

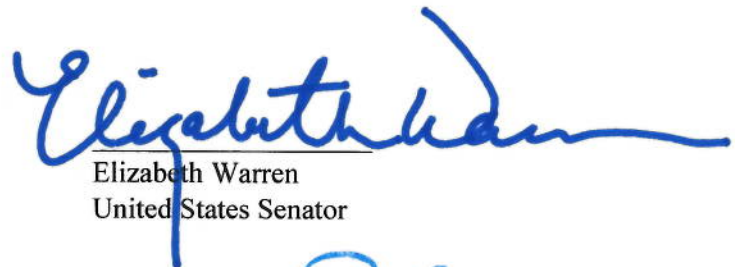
HUD’s Multifamily Radon Testing and Mitigation Policy states that “testing for radon is the only way to know whether there is a radon problem on a site.”⁶ In accordance with its own policy, HUD must take action to ensure that the 3,300 housing authorities nationwide are given the guidance and resources to ensure that the 1.2 million households living in federally-subsidized housing units are protected against radon exposure.

We thank you for your time and attention to this important issue.

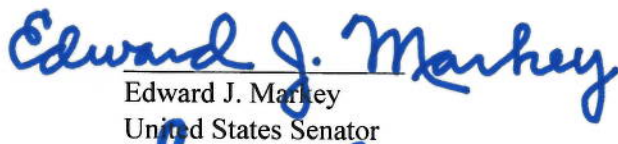
Sincerely,



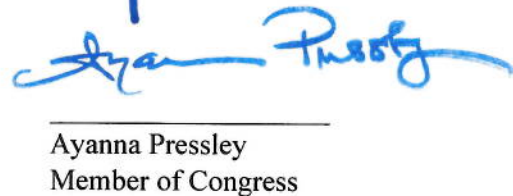
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



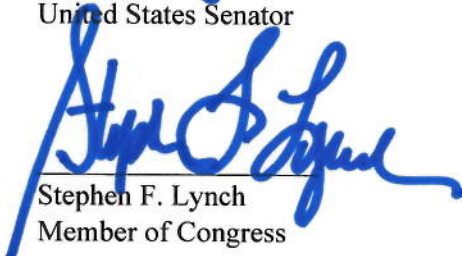
Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



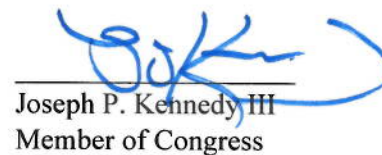
Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress



Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress




Joseph P. Kennedy III
Member of Congress

⁵ The Oregonian. *Cancer Cloud: The government urges private homeowners to test for cancer-causing radon gas. For low-income tenants of public housing, the government ignores its own advice.* Pub. November 22, 2019.


⁶ https://aarst-nrpp.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/HUD_Multifamily_Radon_FAQs-Final_Primary_Market_Stakeholders.pdf



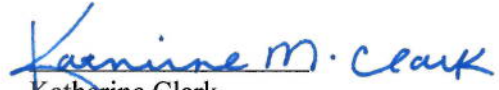
Richard E. Neal
Member of Congress



Lori Trahan
Member of Congress



William R. Keating
Member of Congress



Katherine Clark
Member of Congress



Seth Moulton
Member of Congress