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**HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE**

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

*House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing*

Neighborhood Infrastructure

Monday, April 17, 2023 | 1:00 p.m.

Representative Morgan Cephas

**OPENING REMARKS**

1:00p.m. Rep. Morgan Cephas, D- Philadelphia

**ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION**

1:05 p.m. Darrell L. Clarke, Council President  
*Philadelphia City Council*

Curtis Jones Jr., Council Member  
*Philadelphia City Council*

David S. Thomas, CEO, President  
*Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation*

Emily Seeburger, MPH, Data Analyst  
*Urban Health Lab, University of Pennsylvania*

**TOUR**

2:15 p.m. Stop #1: Driveway 6000 Clifford Terrace between Clifford & Hazelhurst

2:30 p.m. Stop #2: Fallen Retainer Wall 6101-6231 Jefferson St

2:45 p.m. Stop #3: Alley Trees 6014 W. Thompson St

## **PA House Testimony: HB 948 (Neighborhood Infrastructure Repair Act)**

**Emily Seeburger, MPH | Data Analyst, Urban Health Lab, University of Pennsylvania**

Representative Cephas, thank you for inviting me to speak in support of the Neighborhood Infrastructure Repair Act today. My name is Emily Seeburger, and I am a researcher with the Urban Health Lab, which is housed in the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Emergency Medicine. Rooted in the power of community, we leverage research and action to dismantle structural racism and catalyze healthier, safer, and greener neighborhoods here in Philadelphia and beyond. Our vision is to toward racial, environmental, and economic justice for Black and Brown people and neighborhoods.

Everyone deserves to live in clean, safe, and green communities. However, we know that this is not the reality for many, and that the choices we have about where we live are influenced by historical and present-day factors. Structural racism has shaped our neighborhoods, and for decades has decided which communities we invest in, and which communities we do not. The concentrated disadvantage in segregated, predominantly Black neighborhoods can be traced to legacies of state-sanctioned racism through redlining and other discriminatory real estate and bank lending practices. This lack of neighborhood investment can be seen in crumbling housing stock, blighted spaces, and an absence of trees and parks. The results of this disinvestment are evidenced in the entrenched poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and failing public schools that we see in addition to the deteriorating neighborhood conditions.

Our physical spaces impact our health, as well as our safety. For people living in blighted neighborhoods, the distressed conditions around them produce fear, stigma, and stress. The same consequences of structural racism and disinvestment are also the root causes underlying gun violence. As I'm sure we're all aware, Philadelphia, like many other large cities, has faced historic levels of gun violence in the past few years. Whole neighborhoods suffer. Exposure to neighborhood violence is associated with an

increase in heart disease, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and mental health related pediatric ED visits in the immediate aftermath of a shooting. Babies are more likely to be born early; children are more likely to struggle in school. Up to 50% of Black children have heard or witnessed shootings in their neighborhood. And gun violence remains the number one cause of death for Black men under 45.

The good news is that we can change this. Simple, low-cost structural changes to the neighborhood environment are proven to promote safety and well-being. Research conducted by Dr. Eugenia South, the faculty director of the Urban Health Lab, and colleagues showed that cleaning and greening vacant lots led to a significant drop in gun violence. The most pronounced drop, 29 percent, occurred in the blocks surrounding vacant lots in neighborhoods whose residents live below the poverty line. This shows us that communities in greatest need can benefit the most from these kinds of place-based interventions. Furthermore, there was no evidence that crime was pushed to other areas. This intervention also improved the social fabric of the neighborhood. Participants reported feeling safer, less stressed, and more likely to go outside and socialize with their neighbors.

Research from our lab has also studied the impact of the basic systems repair program, which repairs structural issues for low-income homeowners in Philadelphia, such as electricity, heating, roofing, and mold remediation. Structural repairs to homes in low-income, predominately Black neighborhoods with the BSRP were associated with a 22% decrease in overall crime, 23% fewer robberies, 22% fewer homicides, and 19% fewer assaults. And, the more homes repaired on a block, the higher the impact on crime. Another study looking at the remediation of abandoned homes found significant reductions in both weapons violations and firearm assaults.

These interventions are low cost and high value. Every one dollar invested in home remediation translates to a \$5 taxpayer return and \$79 societal return; every dollar invested in vacant lot greening translates to \$26 taxpayer return and \$333 societal return.

Our lab is continuing to explore the impact of place-based interventions and community investment. We are currently enrolling participants for Ignite, A Randomized Controlled Trial intervening on multiple upstream drivers of health to more substantially and durably improve health among Black Americans. Specifically, we are delivering a suite of environmental and economic focused interventions, including vacant lot greening, abandoned house remediation, tree planting, trash pickup, connection to public benefits, emergency cash grants, and free tax prep. We also direct Deeply Rooted, a community-academic collaborative that uses the healing power of nature to promote health and wellbeing in Black and other minority Philadelphia neighborhoods. Deeply Rooted empowers communities to create new greenspace, provides grants for greenspace activation, creates career development opportunities for youth, returning citizens, and other community members, and advocates for policies and neighborhood investments that promote environmental justice.

Everyone deserves to live, work, and play in spaces that allow them to thrive. The Neighborhood Infrastructure Repair Act is an evidence-based, important step to undoing the legacy of structural racism and creating healthier, safer communities for all.