

United States Senate

COMMITTEES:

ARMED SERVICES

BANKING, HOUSING, AND
URBAN AFFAIRSHEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR
AND PENSIONS

AGING

January 29, 2020

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

Dear Secretary Carson:

I want to draw your attention to an alarming investigation by AL.com¹ that found tenants of public housing in Huntsville and across the country were exposed to hazardous levels of radon. I am writing to express my deep concern about these findings and to ask what the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is doing to address this very serious health issue and that funding for radon be included in your request for President's Fiscal Year 2021 Budget.

Reporters tested for cancer-causing radon in public housing units across the country, including Butler Terrace Addition in Huntsville, Alabama. The tests revealed that three apartments in Butler Terrace Addition had "an average level of radioactivity above the level that radon contractors say calls for specialized ventilation systems to remove it," while two others in the same development were found to be above the federal standard for radon.² This exposure is unacceptable.

Given the troubling results of this investigation, HUD should make every effort to ensure public housing across the country is tested for radon and, if found, also mitigated expeditiously. In fact, Congress recognized this danger to tenant health in 1988 and directed HUD to establish a policy to deal with radon contamination in public housing.³

As you know, radon is a radioactive gas that is created by natural processes and is the second-leading cause of fatal lung cancer in the United States. It is estimated that 21,000 Americans die from lung cancer caused by radon exposure each year.⁴ In Alabama, 15 out of 67 counties have

¹ AL.com. *Public housing in Huntsville shows elevated levels of radon, investigation finds*. Pub. November 22, 2019. Available at: <https://www.al.com/news/2019/11/public-housing-in-huntsville-shows-elevated-levels-of-radon-investigation-finds.html>

² Ibid

³ GAO. *Report to the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House of Representatives; Air Pollution: Actions to Promote Radon Testing*. December 1992. Page 2. Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/220/217349.pdf>

⁴ EPA.gov. *Health Risk of Radon*. Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/radon/health-risk-radon>

been identified as having the highest potential for elevated radon levels.⁵ Given these facts, I encourage HUD to do more to ensure that tenants in public housing are safe from radon.

One million-plus federally subsidized housing units across the nation may be contaminated by radon and, as the Center for Disease Control states, “testing your home is the only way to find out if you have a radon problem.”⁶ However, currently HUD neither mandates testing for radon nor enforces mitigation of high radon levels.

As you prepare the President’s Fiscal Year 2021 Budget for release, I ask that you include a request for funds that is sufficient to test for and mitigate high radon levels in federally subsidized housing. HUD must ensure Americans living in federally subsidized housing are free from the risks posed by high radon levels.

Thank you for your attention to this critical health issue for tenants living in public housing. I look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Doug Jones
United States Senator

⁵ Alabama Public Health. *Radon in Alabama, History of the Radon Program in Alabama*. Available at: <https://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/radon/radon-in-alabama.html>

⁶ CDC.gov. *Test Your Home for Radon*. Available at: https://www.cdc.gov/radon/toolkit/images/fact_sheet/radon_fact_sheet.pdf