



## Research Brief

# Keeping People Healthy Indoors

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At a workshop for environmental health officials in D.C., directors of municipal programs from around the country grappled with community health problems. The workshop participants — public-health professionals from communities ranging from Hartford and Chicago to the Seminole Tribe in Florida — turned to ELI Senior Attorney Tobie Bernstein for help. She responded by outlining how local agencies can use existing laws to protect community residents now and how they can work to develop stronger policies in the future.

We all know that indoor air quality is affected by many factors — the ventilation within a building and a wide variety of contaminants, including radon gas, mold, dust, and lead paint. But most of us don't realize that indoor levels of pollutants may be 2–5 times higher than outdoors. Pollutants such as radon, asbestos, and formaldehyde have been identified as carcinogens.

There is a lot known about how to manage some major indoor environmental risks — through proper ventilation and

moisture control, remediation of mold, radon, asbestos, and lead problems, and use of healthier cleaning practices and integrated pest management to reduce exposure to chemicals. Yet building management is a vast, decentralized arena. Stronger laws and regulations are needed to institutionalize best practices.

For nearly two decades, Tobie, the Director of ELI's Indoor Environments and Green Buildings Program, has worked to strengthen laws and policies that protect health and improve indoor environments throughout a state, school district, or locality. She has published dozens of reports aimed at educating policymakers, advocates, and parents about how to improve state and local policies.

One of the best ways to prevent problems is to incorporate key design features into new buildings. This is why we published our 2003 report, *Building Healthy, High Performance Schools*, which describes promising policies and programs that jurisdictions might adapt to transform how they design and build facilities. Since then,

about a dozen states have adopted laws that require schools to use healthy and green building criteria.

Yet it is existing buildings that pose the greater policy challenges. Underfunded and understaffed, our country's 125,000 schoolhouses are often ill-equipped to support the learning process. So this summer, Tobie released a new report, *School Indoor Air Quality: State Policy Strategies for Maintaining Healthy Learning Environments*, that shows how state laws and policies can be crafted to ensure that all schools deal with basic indoor air issues as part of their operations and maintenance. State officials in New Hampshire and Washington and advocacy groups in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York are already using the report to improve existing laws and regulations to address indoor air issues.

As a former legal-aid attorney, Tobie is poised to help address the even more daunting challenges posed by multi-family housing, where many families live with poor conditions they are powerless to fix and unable to escape.

In 2003 we issued *Im-*

*proving Indoor Air Quality in Rental Dwellings: A Review of Policies in Five U.S. Localities*, which describes how local governments are making effective use of housing and health codes to address mold, pest control, and other issues. And in the 1990s, ELI began calling for attention to radon in rental housing through reports, articles, and tenant pamphlets and providing policy options to ensure that tenants are not exposed to high radon levels. Just this year, Maine became the first state to require that landlords test for and mitigate radon in their buildings — a first in the country, and a policy that ELI highlighted in those early reports and our ongoing education programs.

Strong state and local policy frameworks will be even more important in coming years, as we confront the effects of climate change and work to mitigate and adapt to it. Temperature and weather extremes will cause people to spend even more time inside. More severe storms increase the potential for mold contamination. And as we work to make buildings more efficient, retrofitting and tightening to reduce the use of energy, we also risk reducing ventilation and increasing contaminant levels. In the face of these continuing challenges, Tobie and our Indoor Environments Program will continue to ensure that state and local officials, advocates and policymakers have the tools they need to keep people healthy indoors.