

National Radon Action Plan 2021-2025 Interim Progress Report:

Changing systems and practices, saving lives.



Introduction

Radon is a colorless and odorless radioactive gas that is the leading environmental cause of lung cancer in the United States. Radon occurs naturally in rocks and soil and can enter buildings undetected, where it can be found in dangerous amounts. High levels of radon in buildings can be measured and fixed, meaning most cases of radon-related lung cancer can be prevented.

Unfortunately, millions of homes have elevated radon levels and radon continues to be a significant public health concern.

Since 2011, representatives from federal agencies, state radon programs, nonprofit organizations and the radon services industry have worked together to develop and implement coordinated plans to reduce radon risk. In 2021, this leadership group updated the National Radon Action Plan and declared a goal for the nation to find, fix and prevent high indoor radon levels in 8 million buildings by 2025, preventing an average of at least 3,500 lung cancer deaths per year. As in earlier versions, the strategies in the Plan remain focused on actions that will save lives by fixing homes and other buildings, constructing them with radon-resistant features, and ensuring a certified, professional radon workforce. The current Plan has an expanded focus on addressing radon as a health equity challenge and prioritizes strategies to reduce radon risk in underserved communities.

This brief report provides a few highlights of progress made under the National Radon Action Plan 2021-2025:

Decision makers nationwide have access to a growing source of radon testing data to help set priorities for risk reduction efforts.

Because resources to address radon are limited, government and industry decision-makers can benefit from having a readily available, centralized source of testing results to guide planning for addressing areas of need and opportunity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network brings together health and environmental data from national, state, and local sources to provide public access to information about the burden of disease related to environmental hazards. One of the content areas tracked is radon.

CDC, along with a national network of partners committed to improving access to radon testing data, continues to grow the number of entities that submit test results. Five new states started contributing data recently, and CDC has made enhancements to the system that now allow Tribes to share data for the first time. Since 2020, nearly one million test results have been added to the tracking network annually. With only 21 states and 7 testing labs reporting, there is still much to be done to ensure people nationwide have access to information that can drive actions to improve community health.

Major housing finance investors strengthen radon testing requirements.

Most radon testing and mitigation occurs during the sale of existing and newly constructed homes. Housing finance lenders have a stake in the habitability of a home, including protection of their investments from known safety and environmental hazards.

In 2023, after years of effort by radon advocates, the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) announced enhancements to existing radon testing requirements for multifamily properties applying for financing backed by lending giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Property owners and other loan applicants are now required to test a minimum of 25 percent of ground-contact units. This requirement falls far short of the more protective EPA-recommended American National Standard for measurement that requires evidence-based testing of 100 percent of ground-contact units and is in effect in more than half of the states that regulate radon activities. Nevertheless, FHFA's move represents noteworthy progress. NRAP leaders will continue to work with FHFA to further strengthen its requirements.

Concern about healthy school environments prompts increased spending on infrastructure improvements and consideration of requirements for radon testing and mitigation.

Schools are the second largest source, after homes, of radon exposure for individuals. According to the Environmental Law Institute, as of February 2023, eighteen states had created laws and regulations that address radon testing in schools. During this report period, two states (Iowa and Vermont) enacted school testing requirements, and advocates in other states such as Illinois, Kentucky and Pennsylvania have seen bills introduced. Many school officials have successfully tested buildings for radon or have had them professionally tested and mitigated, ensuring critical health protection for our next generation. Despite this progress, there remain too many schoolrooms in use today that have high short-term radon levels and EPA recommends that all schools nationwide be tested for radon.

The need for healthy and sustainable approaches to improving indoor air quality in schools gained public attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, the federal government authorized \$176 billion in emergency COVID-19 relief aid for K-12 schools. This funding provided a much-needed opportunity for schools to implement indoor air quality improvements, including radon testing and mitigation. It also focused attention on the need for states to institutionalize and unify policies and practices around indoor air and radon in schools. NRAP partners have worked to educate school stakeholders about both regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to testing schools for radon, and the importance of leveraging available infrastructure funding to get the work done.

The infrastructure for effective radon testing and mitigation capacity is growing.

Nationally recognized standards have been established for consensus-based practices for radon testing, mitigation, laboratory quality assurance, and new construction methods in all buildings. This, coupled with standardized credentialing requirements for service professionals are helping to ensure high-quality systems to protect the public from radon-induced lung cancer. The EPA's recommendation for its state and tribal radon grantees to adopt the latest consensus standards and progress toward finalizing national criteria for credentialing programs are important anchors for this growing infrastructure. State-level requirements for standards of practice and workforce credentialing are also critical to ensuring delivery of quality services and access to a qualified workforce.

Through technical assistance and support provided by NRAP partners, the number of states that have adopted the EPA-recommended consensus standards continues to grow. Additionally, states are increasingly developing processes for oversight and enforcement of workforce credentials. For example, legislation to require certification and licensure for any persons performing radon testing and mitigation services was enacted in Colorado in 2021. Similar bills have been introduced in Missouri and New York, and discussions are underway in several other states.

Radon champions raise awareness of the need for policy solutions to protect tenants from radon.

Most radon policies apply to owner-occupied units; fewer policies apply to rental units, which are disproportionately occupied by people with lower incomes and people of color. Although new federal requirements will expand the number of rental homes tested and mitigated when federal assistance is involved, federal policies reach a very small proportion of rental housing in the United States. State and municipal policies are needed to help fill the large gaps remaining in protection for tenants.

Since 2022, new policies have been adopted to protect tenants in Colorado, Illinois and Montgomery County, Maryland. Radon champions are working together to build a network of public health and healthy housing partners that together can support development of a national strategy aimed at expanding tenant protections at the state and local levels. This movement is still in its infancy but is slowly building momentum.

Federal agencies increase investment in radon risk reduction in under-resourced communities.

More than a decade after federal agencies, including EPA, HUD, and USDA, released a federal action plan for addressing radon, their collective efforts to increase funding support for testing and mitigation in low-income communities have reached historic levels.

Progress on the National Radon Action Plan's focus on health equity received a significant boost from funding made available through the Inflation Reduction Act to advance environmental justice. EPA's \$2 billion Community Change Grant program is designed to empower disadvantaged communities to build climate resiliency and reduce exposure to toxic pollutants, including radon and other indoor air pollutants. Other federal funding streams making a difference in under-resourced communities are EPA's State and Tribal Indoor Radon Grant program, recently expanded to include a tribal set-aside set by the regions, HUD's Healthy Homes program providing grants for radon testing and mitigation in public housing, and USDA Rural Development's housing rehabilitation loans and grants for low-income rural homeowners.

Looking Ahead to 2025

The coalition of federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, state radon programs and the radon services industry supporting the National Radon Action Plan have set some ambitious goals for 2025. Some of the impactful policy and systems changes in the works are the incorporation of evidence-based radon interventions into the primary prevention strategies in state cancer plans; increased access to available funding resources for low-income households; and further strengthening and expanding housing finance lenders' testing requirements.

Working together, and welcoming engagement with others concerned about lung cancer, healthy homes and healthy schools, health equity and environmental justice, radon champions aim to achieve the goals of the National Radon Action Plan, advance health equity and save many lives.

Disclaimer

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