

Surgeons General Make Urgent Call for Healthy Building Policies

In an open letter, public health leaders implore officials to design building policies for occupant health.



Photo: International WELL Building Institute

Rachel Hodgdon, president and CEO of the International WELL Buildings Institute and four former U.S. Surgeons General discuss the importance of buildings to human health during a session at the 2023 WELL Summit in Washington, D.C.

“The imperative for health-driven building policy has never been more pressing. Buildings must be fortified

This statement is part of an open letter addressed to elected officials and policymakers, and signed by six former U.S. Surgeons General, six CEOs, five executive directors of leading public health organizations, and the president and CEO of the International WELL Building Institute (IWBI). The signatories, organized by IWBI, call on their audience to “position buildings as a prescription for health,” urging them to see buildings as structures that support our country’s health—and to design and adopt build-

ing codes, standards, and policies accordingly.

The letter admonishes policymakers for largely ignoring buildings’ effects on occupant health. For example, it reminds the decision-makers, people spend about 90% of their lives inside, and the indoor air they breathe is, on average, two to five times more polluted than outdoor air—sometimes up to 100 times more. And although the COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of buildings to human health and safety, indoor air quality and ventilation policies are still insufficient, the letter adds.

The worsening effects of climate change will only exacerbate this and undermine building resilience, the signatories argue. The letter lays out ways in which adopting healthy building practices can lead to health, economic, and societal benefits:

- Reducing Sick Building Syndrome can increase worker productivity, according to [research](#) published by Berkeley Lab.
- That study, along with [another](#) from Berkeley Lab, shows that increasing minimum ventilation rates in offices can significantly improve workers' health and productivity, saving employers money.
- Workplace wellness programs can lead to reduced medical costs and absenteeism among employees, according to a [white paper](#) published by the American Institute of Preventive Medicine.
- Improving indoor environmental quality can also improve occupant cognitive function, according to [research](#) published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.
- [Research](#) published in *Buildings and Environment* studied buildings that have earned WELL Certification and concluded the standard's features can improve occupant satisfaction, perceived well-being, reported mental health scores, and productivity.

In the coming years, local, state, and federal governments are poised to invest immensely in the decarbonization of buildings across all sectors. The letter's authors argue that prioritizing occupant health within this work will help maximize the public health benefits of the investment.

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