

2020 Housing Impact Report: Meeting Unique Needs and Building Accessible Homes



Publicly supported homes improved housing stability and financial security for 2.57 million people with disabilities in 2019.

Publicly supported housing programs reduce the cost of housing for low-income families by providing a subsidy, tax incentive, mortgage loan, or insurance to a property or by offering a voucher to a household¹. These programs help families move into homes that are more affordable and suitable for their needs than housing they would find on the private rental market. Access to publicly supported homes can also help families improve their health outcomes² by enabling them to spend more money on healthcare³, reduce their stress levels⁴, and improve the living conditions of their home and neighborhood⁵. By offering more affordable rents, publicly supported homes also enable families to make timely rent payments⁶, which helps protect them from the negative health consequences associated with late rent payments, evictions and homelessness⁷. This feature examines trends among people with disabilities and unique needs living in publicly supported rental homes and offers new insights into how housing providers are supporting people with mobility difficulties.

Trends in People with Disabilities and Other Unique Needs Who Receive Assistance

Publicly supported rental homes stabilized the lives of 2.57 million people with a disability and 2.18 million families with at least one person who has a disability in 2019⁸. People with disabilities comprise nearly one-fifth of all people living in publicly supported homes and nearly one-third of all households. These figures are likely underestimated, however, since some people may be in the process of applying for disability assistance or have a more moderate disability not covered by HUD's definition. An additional 25% of people living in publicly supported rental homes live with an activity, functional, or sensory limitation and have a more moderate disability not included in HUD's definition⁹.

The number of people and households with disabilities has continued to grow, increasing 2.9% and 4.2%, respectively, since 2018. These figures are expected to continue growing as the prevalence of low-income people with disabilities is expected to rise as the population ages. In 2018, the latest year data are available, 9.28 million people with disabilities and

7.47 million households with members that have a disability earned below 80% of the state median income (the HUD definition of low-income). The number of low-income people with a disability and households with members that have a disability increased 1.0% and 2.4% since 2017, respectively¹⁰.

Conservative estimates suggest that expanding rental assistance programs to likely eligible households with members that have a disability in 2018 would mean that an additional 3.69 million households could have realized the benefits of an affordable home. Likely eligible households include those earning less than 80% of the state median income and paying more than 30% of their annual income toward housing (the HUD definition of cost burden). These figures increased 1.7% from 2017.

Publicly supported housing also meets the unique needs of other low-income groups with special circumstances. HUD programs like Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH), implemented with the Veteran's Administration, serves over 75,000 veterans who are in need of an affordable home. This program and other supports have helped over 400,000 veterans find an affordable home¹¹ and helped three states and 79 communities declare an end to veteran homelessness¹². HUD also has special programs to meet the needs of families experiencing homelessness. Programs like Rapid Rehousing and Permanent Supportive Housing have helped 522,000 people exit homelessness¹³. Over 1,900 organizations administered these programs in 2019, including at least 141 public housing authorities¹⁴.

Figure 1: People with Disabilities and Unique Needs Living in Publicly Supported Homes

2.57M	million people with disabilities live in publicly supported homes.
400,811	veterans live in publicly supported homes, including over 75,000 who are assisted by VA Supportive Housing (VASH).
522,000	have exited homelessness through publicly supported housing programs.
32%	of assisted households include an individual with a disability.
2.9%	more people with disabilities live in publicly supported homes between 2018 and 2019.
3.69M	households with members that have a disability and likely qualify for rental assistance but don't receive it.



New Insights into How Housing Providers are Serving People with Disabilities

A growing number of people living in publicly supported homes use mobility devices to navigate their community independently. While not all people who use mobility devices consider themselves to have a disability and not all people with a disability use mobility devices, understanding the scope of mobility device usage highlights the need for in-home accessibility features. Nearly one-quarter of assisted households use a mobility device, such as a wheelchair, cane, or crutches¹⁵, up from 21% in 2011¹⁶. This trend is driven by an increase in households with people using a cane or walker—up from 16% in 2011 to 19% in 2019. The percentage of households using a wheelchair or motorized chair also increased from 7% to 8% between 2011 and 2019. Overall, assisted families use mobility devices at nearly twice the rate of their unassisted peers who earn below 150% of the poverty line¹⁷.

Accessible design features are another tool that can help people with mobility limitations to maintain independence. Accessible features are more prevalent in publicly supported rental homes compared to market-rate rental housing. Thirty-eight percent of families in HUD-assisted homes live in potentially modifiable homes; an additional 10.7% reside in homes livable for those with moderate mobility disabilities, and 0.4% live in homes accessible to those with a wheelchair¹⁸. More than half of HUD-assisted homes have basic accessibility features, such as single-floor living, no-step entrances, and bathroom grab bars¹⁹. As a result, over half of families living in publicly supported homes with a household member using a mobility device believe that their home layout supports their accessibility needs very well²⁰.

Figure 2: Nearly a quarter of households living in publicly supported homes have a household member that uses a mobility device

8%

Use a wheelchair or motorized chair

16%

Use another type of mobility device

PAHRC tabulation of AHS 2019.



Figure 3: Self-rated home accessibility among assisted families with people using mobility devices

Uses any mobility device ▼



Uses wheel chair or electric wheelchair ▼



Uses other mobility device ▼



1 2 3 4 5

PAHRC tabulation of AHS 2019.

Despite having greater access to accessibility features in publicly supported homes compared to the private rental market, many families in publicly supported homes still experience mobility challenges that could be improved by expanding the number of accessible design elements, particularly for those who use wheelchairs. Nine percent of assisted households with mobility devices believe their home layout does not support their accessibility needs. Assisted households with wheelchair users report unmet accessibility needs at higher rates compared to assisted households containing people who use other mobility devices, and 16% of assisted households with wheelchair users believe their home is not at all accessible compared to 5% of assisted households who use other mobility devices²¹. While 8% of assisted households used a wheelchair or electric wheelchair in 2019²², only 0.4% of assisted households were fully accessible and only 2.4% of homes occupied by seniors were nearly accessible for wheelchairs in 2011²³. This suggests accessibility should be a larger design consideration for affordable housing providers.

Universal design principles that incorporate some level of accessibility features as standard can make housing stock more adaptable to meet the current and future needs of residents as they age. It also removes the stigma associated with disabilities²⁴. At the same time, more homes incorporating design features that position wheelchair users to live comfortably are also needed. These features include extra-wide doorways and hallways, handles and levers instead of knobs, and switches, countertops, cabinets, and kitchen features that are within the

reach of wheelchair users. The following guides can help housing providers incorporate accessibility modifications in their new construction and rehabilitation projects: HUD’s [The Fair Housing Act Design Manual](#), AARP’s [How to Develop a Home Modification Initiative](#), AARP’s [HomeFit Guide](#), and REMAX’s [Creating a Wheelchair-Friendly Home: A Complete Guide](#).

Many affordable housing providers have embraced accessibility principles in their developments. For instance, Quadriplegics United Against Dependency (QUAD) has built numerous affordable housing properties in the Portland area that incorporate barrier-free design principles that pre-date the Americans with Disabilities Act²⁵.

Affordable housing providers are also required to adopt policies and practices that ensure persons with disabilities are reasonably accommodated to access affordable housing²⁶. As a result, they may increase their payment standard to enable people with disabilities to locate accessible housing, strategically project-base their vouchers in accessible units, and modify units to meet the accessibility needs of their residents.

Expanding access to accessible affordable housing options can enable those with mobility limitations to navigate their home freely with independence. However, more funding is needed to ensure housing providers are positioned to incorporate additional accessibility features into existing properties and build new properties that comply with modern accessibility building codes²⁷.



Citations

- 1 Each reported estimate specifies the exact types of federal assistance programs included in the figures. In general, programs covered in this report include public housing, Housing Choice Vouchers, project-based section 8, low-income housing tax credit (LIHTC), Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loans with affordability restrictions, special purpose vouchers, and some selected state programs. For more information regarding how estimates in the Trends in Children Receiving Rental Assistance section were generated, access the methodology documentation.
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