2021 Housing Impact Report: FEATURE ON SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Supporting Physical and Mental Health through the Pandemic

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In the U.S., publicly supported homes improved housing stability and financial security for 2.85 million people with disabilities in 2020. Publicly supported housing programs help families move into homes that are more affordable and more suitable for their needs by providing a subsidy, tax incentive, mortgage loan, or insurance to a property or by offering a voucher to a household. Access to publicly supported homes can position families to spend more money on healthcare, reduce their stress levels, and improve the living conditions of their home and neighborhood, which can ultimately improve their health outcomes. Housing assistance also reduces the likelihood of late rent payments, eviction, and homelessness, which shields recipients from the physical and mental tolls associated with housing instability. 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 experiencing mental and physical health challenges.

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

In the U.S., publicly supported rental homes provided stability for 2.85 million people with disabilities, who make up one-fifth of all people living in publicly supported homes. Additionally, 2.17 million families living in publicly supported homes in 2020 included a person with a disability, representing nearly one-third of all publicly supported households. However, estimates suggest that as many as 44% of people living in publicly supported homes live with an activity, functional, or sensory limitation and have a more moderate disability not included in HUD’s definition.

Publicly supported homes also provide stability for other low-income people with unique needs, such as veterans, those seeking refuge from domestic violence, and individuals and families experiencing homelessness. For instance, the Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program, implemented by HUD and the Veteran’s Administration, supported 78,000 veterans in need of an affordable home last year. Housing programs have provided stability for 379,000 veterans overall. HUD also has special programs, like Rapid Rehousing and Permanent Supportive Housing, which have helped 522,000 people exit homelessness.

The number of low-income people with disabilities has increased 10.9% since 2019. This figure will continue to grow as the prevalence of low-income people with disabilities rises as the population ages. The number of households containing persons with disabilities paying over half their income toward rent or living in severely inadequate housing increased 7% between 2015 and 2017. In 2019, the latest year data are available, 9.4 million people with disabilities and 7.6 million households with a member with a disability earned below 80% of the state median income (the HUD definition of low-income). The number of low-income people with disabilities and households that include a person with a disability increased 1.3% and 1.7% since 2018, respectively.

Conservative estimates suggest that expanding rental assistance programs to likely eligible households that include a person with a disability in 2019 would have meant that an additional 3.73 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 1.1% from 2018.
New Insights into How Housing Providers are Serving People with Disabilities

While access to an affordable home can positively impact health outcomes, many families that seek housing assistance are often in poorer health than their unassisted peers. Adults living in publicly supported homes earning below 150% of the poverty line report higher rates of hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, COPD, asthma, anxiety disorders, depression, and a history of stroke and cancer compared to their unassisted peers. The most common health conditions experienced by more than a quarter of adults living in publicly supported homes earning below 150% of the poverty line include hypertension (48%), arthritis (38%), high cholesterol (35%), depression (34%), and anxiety disorder (27%). Overall, more than one-third of adults living in publicly supported homes reported being in fair or poor health.

Many adults living in publicly supported homes also continue to struggle with mental health challenges. Nearly a quarter of assisted adults reported feeling worried, nervous, or anxious daily in 2019. During the same time period, adults living in publicly supported rental homes earning below 150% of the poverty line also reported higher rates of mild, moderate, and severe depressive and anxiety symptoms. Thirty-nine percent of adults living in publicly supported homes earning below 150% of the poverty line experienced symptoms of depression according to the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ) scale and 31% experienced anxiety symptoms according to the General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) scale in 2019. Like the population at large, the number of people living in publicly supported homes experiencing depression and anxiety has likely risen since the start of the pandemic. The portion of adults reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression has risen 380% between January and June of 2019 and December of 2020.
As a result of these disparities, many affordable housing providers partner with health providers, social service providers, and local nonprofits committed to improving health outcomes. Half of housing authorities surveyed in 2018 reported having health-related initiatives in place, nearly all of which were supported through a partnership. The most common health initiatives among PHAs targeted preventative health (74%), followed by medical health conditions (63%), and substance use disorders (60%). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, affordable housing providers adapted their programs and partnerships or created new ones to meet the growing health needs that arose. For instance, affordable housing providers have collected and distributed PPE kits, partnered with hospitals and clinics to promote vaccine distribution among the families they serve, and have leveraged their relationships with the families to mitigate vaccine hesitancy.

Affordable housing providers engaged in health initiatives suggest that other organizations looking to implement housing-health initiatives start by defining internal priorities regarding resident health, securing internal buy-in and resources, prioritizing steps to implement a strategic health plan, and cultivating new partners. Once a partnership has been developed, it can be strengthened by improving communications between partners, securing funding to create, sustain, or expand initiatives, evaluating the initiative, and refining and expanding the initiative on an ongoing basis. Affordable housing providers looking to start or grow their health initiatives can access the following resources for tips and examples: PAHRC and CLPHA’s Strategies, Start, Sustain: The Evaluation of PHA Health Report, LeadingAge’s Housing and Health Care Toolkit, and HUD’s COVID-19 Vaccinations and Testing Toolkit. However, continued investment is needed to help affordable housing providers create and sustain these programs.
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.


12 PAHRC tabulation of CPS ASEC 2020.

13 HUD. (2019). “HUD 2019 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Assistance Programs Housing Inventory Count Report.”


15 PAHRC tabulation of American Community Survey (ACS) 2019 (one year estimates).


20 PAHRC tabulation of NHI 2019, adult file


