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Study Examines the Cost of COVID-19 for Low-income Seniors, People with Disabilities and Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Service Coordinators Report Affordable Housing Residents Lack Access to Reliable Internet

POWELL, OH – The American Association of Service Coordinators (AASC), in collaboration with researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, released a [study](#) of the impact of COVID-19 for low-income residents who live in federally-assisted rental housing communities.

“It’s widely known in the affordable housing industry that residents have suffered greatly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Michelle Missler, president and CEO of AASC. “The data in this report quantifies the toll that the pandemic has taken on vulnerable populations. It also highlights the critical role of a service coordinator to help low-income residents sustain life while facing barriers to accessing resources to meet their basic needs.”

[Impact of COVID-19 on Residents Living in Federally-Assisted Housing](#) is based on a survey conducted in June 2020 with 1,440 service coordinators in 49 states. Nearly all (96%) of the survey respondents are employed to serve a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-assisted property and 88% work at a property primarily serving adults 62 years and older.

Almost a third (32%) of survey respondents estimated that more than a quarter of the residents they serve are African American; 20% reported that more than a quarter are Latino; 14% reported that more than a quarter are Asian; 27% reported that more than a quarter have limited English proficiency; and 56% reported that more than a quarter are disabled.

“Research shows that low-income populations, mainly older adults, people with disabilities, and racial/ethnic minorities, are far more likely to experience negative outcomes of COVID-19,” said Craig Pollack, MD, MHS, associate professor of health policy and management at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

“Our research shows the notable impact of having limited resources for technology, medical care and food during the pandemic. We hope this data will be used to influence policies and shape programmatic changes in the future.”

Key findings include:

Technology

Service coordinators who work closely with affordable housing residents observed that most renters relied on telecommunications rather than video calls to connect with others due to a lack of equipment

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and technology literacy. In fact, only 8% of service coordinators reported that renters had reliable internet access. As a result, video calls—with a service coordinator, medical provider or family member—were limited by residents lacking reliable internet and the appropriate technology.

The study recommends, “Reliable internet and technology along with support for digital literacy is essential to help increase access to telehealth, online grocery delivery and access to other programs. Equipping each federally subsidized property with building-wide internet that is free for residents to access is the first step to ensuring residents can stay connected while social distancing and partake in telehealth.”

Medical Care

Several service coordinators (43%) reported being aware of residents who have elected not to seek routine medical care or treatment during the pandemic that they would have otherwise sought. Access to medical care, including primary, specialty, mental health care and substance use treatment, has decreased substantially since the start of COVID-19 while barriers to obtain medicines and help with activities of daily living have increased. Consequently, nearly six in 10 (58%) service coordinators reported that residents had difficulty picking up their medicines since the start of COVID-19.

At the time of the survey, 27% of service coordinators reported cases of COVID-19 in their buildings. In addition to educating residents about COVID-19 transmission and the importance of social distancing and wearing a mask, about half (52%) of service coordinators reported that their residents did not have enough masks. The study notes, “Personal Protective Equipment is especially important for service coordinators, who have continued to work on properties as essential personnel.”

Food Access

Service coordinators also observed that most renters (75%) were able to meet their food needs, but half of the survey respondents said residents with health conditions or physical limitations had difficulty shopping for food (69%) and preparing it (56%).

The study suggests that a coordinated response is necessary to support and maintain food access. “Continued federal investments in food programs and delivery flexibilities have allowed service coordinators to quickly connect residents with meals.” Nearly all properties helped residents access food while service coordinators facilitated food delivery (79%) or distributed food, food vouchers or meals (68%) during the pandemic.

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About AASC

The American Association of Service Coordinators (AASC) is a national nonprofit membership association dedicated to advancing professionals in affordable housing. Founded in 1999, AASC is made up of more than 3,800 members who connect older adults, people with disabilities and low-income families living in government-funded housing to vital resources in their communities. AASC supports its members through expert education, networking, advocacy and best standards of practice in service coordination.

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