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New Harvard Study Reveals Service Coordinators' Pivotal Role During Pandemic Response to Assist Vulnerable Residents at Affordable Housing Communities

Research uncovers service coordinators support 163 residents on average during the pandemic

POWELL, OH – The American Association of Service Coordinators (AASC), in partnership with Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies, released a [report](#) that explores the experiences of service coordinators and the vulnerable residents in which they serve during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Charged with serving older adults, persons with disabilities, and low-income families, service coordinators assist residents at publicly funded housing properties to achieve financial stability, maintain social connections, and locate long-term community-based supportive services.

"Service coordinators assessed the emerging needs of their residents early in the pandemic. Their role was critical to helping residents understand new safety guidelines, securing food and essential supplies, and helping them cope with isolation and loneliness," said AASC President and CEO Janice Monks. "AASC members acted as liaisons within their communities to ensure the delivery of food, medicine, supplies, and masks to protect the health and safety of vulnerable populations amid major disruptions to services and supports."

Key findings include:

- More than half of respondents considered themselves at high-risk of COVID-19 due to age or comorbidity and another 55% are in personal contact with a person of high risk such as a partner or child. Also, 34% of respondents described themselves as a member of a minority racial or ethnic group which has also been correlated with higher risk from the coronavirus.
- At some point during the pandemic, 59% of service coordinators worked exclusively from home while 38% did not work remotely at all.
- Respondents supported 163 residents on average. Staffing arrangements varied between properties but in general, properties with more residents had proportionally fewer staff members.
- Survey respondents estimated that a large proportion of residents were at high risk of the coronavirus due to age since three-quarters of residents living at the properties surveyed were at least 62 years old. An estimated 36% of residents were members of minority racial or ethnic groups. Residents of these properties also lived with low-economic resources. Respondents estimated that 59% of residents were dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid.
- Technology access was low with only 38% of residents having both an internet accessible device and internet service.

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The loss of supports combined with pandemic-related shortages, transportation difficulties and social distancing recommendations brought new challenges for residents' access to needed resources and supplies. The study found roughly four out of every 10 residents were inadequately supplied with food, medication, and cleaning supplies to quarantine for a weeklong period. To address the challenges of the pandemic, service coordinators changed the way they spent their work time in the following ways:

- The majority of respondents (85%) spent more time responding to public health recommendations.
- For increased safety, 77% spent more time on facilities management activities such as cleaning common areas and rearranging indoor spaces.
- Nearly three quarters (74%) of service coordinators noticed an increased prevalence in the signs of resident loneliness or anxiety during the pandemic. In response, service coordinators increased referrals to professional mental health supports as well as other supportive organizations, instituted wellness checks, relied on peer supports, established games and other community-building activities, and distributed supplies and resources such as newsletters and fliers.
- Seven out of 10 (73%) service coordinators spent more time helping residents with the purchase or delivery of food, 46% were more involved in the purchase or delivery of medications or medical supplies, and 64% were more attentive to the purchase or delivery of household goods such as cleaning supplies and paper products.
- Half of service coordinators spent more time supporting virtual medical care, 38% of them spent more time helping residents navigate benefits, and 35% spent more time on documentation tasks.
- More than one third (34%) spent more time coordinating with formal, professional home healthcare resources. Service coordinators bridged losses of in-person care in a variety of ways and filled-in for missing healthcare aides.
- Lastly, most COVID-19 information was not accessible to non-English speaking residents or their non-English speaking family members, and multilingual service coordinators working with these residents were called on to translate updates from state or county health and aging services as well as the many new processes, rules and procedures instituted by the property's owner.

"The pandemic has highlighted the deep connections between health and housing. For those in publicly-subsidized housing, service coordinators have played a vital role in connecting older adults to food and healthcare and addressing mental health needs," says Jennifer Molinsky, a Senior Research Associate at the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies. "Not only that, but they've done so amid the challenges of social distancing and a deep digital divide. Indeed, their work helped older adult residents who don't have access to technology cope with the many challenges that social distancing presents."

AASC disseminated the survey to 3,500 service coordinators in its membership in June and July of 2020. A total of 1,175 surveys were completed, representing a roughly 30% response rate. Respondents spanned 47 states as well as Washington DC and Puerto Rico.

About the American Association of Service Coordinators

AASC is a professional membership association and a national resource for service-enriched housing professionals. AASC's 3,600 members assist elderly and disabled residents and families living in

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affordable housing communities to identify, locate, and acquire the services and supports necessary to become and remain self-sufficient. Established in 1999, AASC provides education, advocacy, best practices, leadership, and networking opportunities for its members.

About the Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies

The Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies advances understanding of housing issues and informs policy. Through its research, education, and public outreach programs, the Center helps leaders in government, business, and the civic sectors make decisions that effectively address the needs of cities and communities. Through graduate and executive courses, as well as fellowships and internship opportunities, the Center also trains and inspires the next generation of housing leaders.

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