

HELPING AFFORDABLE HOUSING RESIDENTS COPE WITH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities, Trusted Space Partners, and the Programs in Property Management and Real Estate at Virginia Tech convened a group of affordable housing professionals operating mixed-income communities to discuss how they are helping their residents cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommendations that follow are a product of that conversation.

1. STAY CONNECTED

- **Empower residents with information:** A great deal of confusion exists about how COVID-19 is transmitted and about what residents can expect from their housing providers. Address this confusion head-on by providing residents with information from trusted sources. Be as transparent and communicative as possible about emerging housing policies, and help them understand how they can prevent transmission by frequently washing hands, disinfecting surfaces, and participating in social distancing.
- **Pick up the phone:** Many residents feel isolated and afraid. Phone calls are a personal way to assure them they are not alone and that property managers and resident services coordinators are there to support them through this difficult time. Collect email addresses and emergency contact information so channels of communication are reliable. Staff who otherwise might have dedicated time to coordinating community activities may be well positioned to take on this role.
- **Ask questions and seek input:** Residents' needs are rapidly changing. Ask them about the challenges they currently face and those they anticipate facing in the future. Document the responses so they can be matched with appropriate resources as they become available. When communal challenges arise, reach out to a few trusted residents to brainstorm ideas for self-organization and self-management.
- **Follow-up regularly:** Support must be continuous to be effective. Complement recurrent phone calls to individuals with periodic community conference calls that allow residents to ask each other questions and raise concerns. Consider using online surveys to collect additional data on resident wellbeing as the pandemic continues.
- **Go low-tech:** Complement online information channels with low-tech information channels such as bulletin boards and flyers. Post or distribute information about support services and safety tips in public spaces to reach as broad an audience as possible.

- **Tip for supporting staff in these efforts:** Create spaces for staff to seek guidance. Consider setting up voluntary conference calls once or twice a week for staff to connect with management and one another. Use these spaces to address immediate concerns and reinforce policies.

2. COORDINATE ACCESS TO RESOURCES

- **Reach out to social service providers:** Relationships with social service providers are perhaps more important now than ever before. Reach out to local providers to determine if any new resources are available to economically disadvantaged populations. Convey the information obtained to residents as quickly as possible.
- **Keep mental health top of mind:** Stress exacerbates many mental health problems. Make sure residents have contact information for mental health service providers. Consider expanding access to mental health hotlines typically used for staff, and maintain routine contact with those who have known mental health issues.
- **Set the table:** Food security is imperative in times of financial hardship. Coordinate with foodbanks, identify grocery stores that deliver, and ask neighborhood restaurants to provide special pricing on select or perishable menu items. Encourage third-party distribution of food from these sources when possible, recognizing that property managers may be required in some instances to put procedures in place to coordinate food pick-up and ensure food safety. For example, it may be prudent to ask residents to pick up food in groups of less than 5 people.
- **Increase access to essentials:** Residents' immediate needs often extend beyond food. Ask procurement agents to explore opportunities to buy cleaning supplies and household goods in bulk to increase availability and bring down cost. Provide residents with "care packages" comprised of a small amount of these essentials to bridge the gap until they can be purchased. Such distributions are an additional opportunity to share safety and cleaning tips.
- **Get creative:** Some residents have unique needs. Think outside the box to satisfy them. For example, there are property managers and resident services coordinators who have asked mobile ultrasound units to visit their sites to serve pregnant women. Others have contacted local cable companies to assess their willingness to provide free internet to households with school-aged children who need it for educational purposes. Follow the lead of these individuals and look for other creative ways to broker information and resources for homebound residents.

- **Tip for supporting staff in these efforts:** Be flexible in addressing staff needs. These are unprecedented times and in order to ensure safety and adequate coverage explore opportunities for staff to work nontraditional hours, receive virtual training, or take extended leave. Provide staff with the opportunity to work overtime, particularly maintenance staff, who may be able to cover shifts for those who need to step down hours due to child-care or other family needs. Consider contacting recently retired staff who may be able to rejoin your team temporarily.

3. ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY BUILDING

- **Promote safe socialization:** Residents continue to crave opportunities to socialize, especially during this time when their ability to congregate is limited. Make such opportunities available to the extent possible. For example, see if there are volunteers willing to hold fitness classes outside where social distancing is possible, work with faith-based groups to organize bible studies via conference call, and promote cross-generational interaction by encouraging children and seniors living onsite or across sites to play games online.
- **Develop quality-of-life marketplaces:** Don't underestimate the value of resources that already exist onsite. Coordinate bulletin board and virtual quality-of-life marketplaces where residents can ask for or offer services, support, and small favors to their neighbors by posting requests and offers in common areas, or creating a space to do so over the phone, via email, or through social media. Curate the marketplace to ensure asks and offers are expediently matched.
- **Leverage resident stewards:** Some affordable housing complexes have resident stewards living onsite who are paid small monthly stipends to engage in community building activities. If trained and supported resident stewards are not available, consider developing them for a possible wave of COVID-19 in the fall. Stewards are helpful in providing a resident's perspective on ways to alleviate boredom and anxiety among both children and adults while they are spending more time at home than normal.
- **Recognize and respond to financial distress:** Continue to enforce lease obligations, while acknowledging financial hardship. Notices of late payments and other lease violations should not be discontinued, however consider modifying traditional language to acknowledge current pandemic circumstances. Work with residents on a case-by-case basis after they have demonstrated an inability to satisfy their lease terms to communicate they are a valued member of the community. Examples of modifications are: allowing residents to pay partial rents, creating payment plans, and allowing residents to perform self-certifications due to a decrease in income. All modifications to rent payment should be closely documented for later follow-up.

- **Tip for supporting staff in these efforts:** Staff are spread thin and are increasingly encountering new challenges. Explore ways to share ideas and community building resources across sites to meet short term needs. Continue to make housing resources available to new residents, while engaging in social distancing, by conducting virtual property tours and remote lease signings.

Special thanks to the affordable housing providers and mixed-income community representatives who took time out of their busy schedules to share their insights. Feedback from others is welcome as the pandemic evolves and can be provided by contacting any of the following individuals:

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