

# NAHP Update

## Affordable Housing Industry Pivots to New Normal

BY JENNIFER JONES

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Just a few short months ago nobody ever thought terms and phrases such as self-isolating, stay-at-home orders, flattening the curve, pandemic and new normal would be commonplace. But thanks to COVID-19, the world we live in today is not the same world we lived in as recently as six months ago, nor will it be the same moving forward.

As municipalities, states and the federal government put in varying levels of restrictions aimed at stemming the spread of the deadly coronavirus, the affordable housing industry had to rethink how it did business while continuing to serve those most vulnerable to the disease.

Frank Mooney, president of Wesley Property Management, said they were able to start preparing for the pandemic prior to the leaders of the national capital region—consisting of the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia—instituting restrictions and lockdowns, in part because of its membership in



IMATT/UNSPLASH

the Housing Partnership Network (HPN), which includes nonprofit organizations in California and Washington state. The first known cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. were confirmed in late January in Washington state.

“They were going through things that were at least a week away for us. We saw and heard what was happening for them,” Mooney said. “We’re all going through all types of changes.”

As a result, Wesley, which manages multifamily, seniors and special needs properties ranging from independent living to group homes to high-rise apartment buildings throughout northern Virginia and the District, limited office hours to appointment only, put maintenance calls on hold except in the case of emergencies and is limiting the interactions between staff and residents.

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**NATIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION (NAHMA)**—Protecting the Interests of Affordable Housing Property Managers and Owners

“Our interactions with our seniors have completely changed because they are the ones most at risk,” Mooney said. “Our staff are wearing

the Columbia Property Group Inc. (TCPG), which specializes in project rental assistance contracts for Section 811 Supportive Housing Pro-

protected in the best manner possible,” Tara M. Phelan, vice president, said.

Some of the guidelines included placing all office staff

to all staff and is required to be worn at all times while on-site. Additionally, all staff members are required to take Pandemic Outbreak, PPE and Safety On-site courses through the company’s learning portal known as TCPG University.

“The changes were not intended to be permanent, but we don’t know if there will be a second wave in the fall,” Phelan said. “The restrictions set in place have been loosened as each state begins to open up, but our guard is not being let down. PPE will continue to be mandatory.”

In addition to keeping staff and residents healthy, companies are also faced with caring for their residents’ mental and financial well-being.

“Many of our multifamily residents are in the service industry, so their jobs were curtailed,” Mooney said. “So they can’t pay their rent. We are mission-oriented. We aren’t in the business to throw people out of their



face masks. We’re doing deep cleaning in high-touch areas like elevators and handrails, common areas, the mailboxes, public bathrooms. We’re not opening the pools. One of the things we found surprising in talking to our partners at HPN, they kept playgrounds open and then soon found out people would congregate there. So, we closed ours early. We’re learning as we go from others’ mistakes. If you aren’t going to pay attention to what others are doing, you are going to make the same mistakes.”

Unlike the coordinated effort in the capital region,

program for Persons with Disabilities, Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly and Section 8 properties in Florida, Georgia and Mississippi, found itself dealing with multistate guidelines.

on a rotation schedule permitting only one staff member in the office at a time while the rest teleworked, and limiting office visits to appointment only. Maintenance staff is only allowed to enter units

**“I THINK OF OUR RESIDENTS as if they were my grandparents,” Mooney said.**

**“We’re involved in our residents’ lives. We’re all trying to do the right thing.”**

“TCPG is following the Centers for Disease Control guidelines, Occupational Safety and Health Administration compliance and all state-mandated regulations in order to keep all parties

in the case of an emergency while stay-at-home orders are in place. Instead, the maintenance staff concentrated on exterior projects. Personal protection equipment, collectively known as PPE, was given

housing when they need it the most.”

Wesley anticipated residents having issues with being able to pay rent, so they proactively began work-

*continues on page 3*

ing with residents to identify services and programs that could assist the residents in getting their bills paid. Wesley had to make sure it would be able to pay its bills as well.

“We recognized right away that finances would be an issue and started taking action,” Mooney said. “We started early on trying to figure out what the impact would be on our collections. We’re going to help our hardest-hit residents.”

**“WE RECOGNIZED RIGHT AWAY THAT FINANCES would be an issue and started taking action,” Mooney said. “We started early on trying to figure out what the impact would be on our collections. We’re going to help our hardest-hit residents.”**

TCPG also had to make adjustments in how services were being delivered to its residents. For example, some of its properties typically receive meal service delivery. Since community rooms were closed to avoid large gatherings and promote social distancing, staff members delivered the meals to residents’ doors. Additionally, community outreach programs began bringing food to properties that weren’t receiving meal service before the pandemic.

“[The meal deliveries] allowed our staff to have daily contact with residents, and in turn, they have been able to monitor their behavior,” Phelan said. “Since we

serve a vulnerable population any [unusual] behavior would be reported immediately to service providers and appropriate attention was sought in a timely manner.”

And since regular day programs were canceled, TCPG brought in therapists and counselors for residents to feel some form of normalcy and have the monitored interaction they required, Phelan said.

Wesley’s housing resource

services division increased visits to make sure the residents were doing OK mentally.

One of the things Wesley had to cancel was summer children’s activities such as day school and summer school programs. One positive, Mooney said, was that parents could still take their children outside even though playgrounds and pools were closed, as long as social distancing was practiced.

While the country is slowly easing restrictions, some changes at properties will be staying for at least the immediate future such as wearing masks, frequent hand washing, and more areas being

sanitized, as well as teleworking, said Mooney.

“I think of our residents as if they were my grandparents,” Mooney said. “We’re involved in our residents’ lives. We’re all trying to do the right thing.”

Phelan said communication with residents and owners was important especially as situations and restrictions changed almost daily.

“You can plan and prepare for what you think will happen, but in a multistate

industry with a vulnerable population such as the communities we serve, we found that adhering to all the local and federal guidelines and not creating more restrictions than necessary, your staff and residents will appreciate the protection,” Phelan said. “TCPG is currently planning for a second wave, praying it doesn’t happen but if it does, we will be prepared. The best advice that can be given is that sometimes you cannot plan ahead, and we must take it one day at a time. Patience and total adherence are the best formula for success.” **NU**

*Jennifer Jones is manager of communications and public relations for NAHMA.*

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# Tips to Maximizing Staff Performance

Attendees to NAHMA's March meeting were given the tools to Maximizing Staff Performance Best Practices in Hiring, Coaching and Firing in a session led by Dena Calo, Esq., a partner with Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP, and Brenda Harrington, PCC, certified executive coach and founder of Adaptive Leadership Strategies.

It is important employers know what at-will employment is and the different types of discrimination, said Calo.

She said at-will employment means an employee can be fired or quit at any time for any reason except for contract employees, public policy and discrimination.

child bonding and not men; and pretextual discrimination when a company argues valid business reasons for adverse actions.

"When it affects someone's pocket, it can rise to the level of discrimination," Calo said.

When it comes to hiring, Calo said, "The paper—application, resume, job description—becomes as important as getting background checks. Get your own legal advisor to tell you what you can and can't get and when."

She said part of the upfront hiring process should include telling the potential employee if drug testing will be required and what happens if that person should test positive for being under the influence. She also recommended providing in writ-



Dena Calo

She said it is permissible to ask about disabilities only if they are business related and that you ask across the board.

What happens when you find out an employee may not be the perfect fit for your company as you thought? Harrington said coaching might be the answer.

"Nobody likes to have challenging conversations,"

specific and documented."

Even after trying to assist an employee rise up to expectations, sometimes the only thing that can be done is parting ways.

"When it comes to having to fire someone, contemporaneous documentation is so important," Harrington said. "So leave yourself a voicemail or text a message after any conversations, and email it to yourself. It doesn't have to be formal. People have a hard time seeing themselves."

And as much as people don't like having challenging conversations, avoiding the uncomfortableness can have an overall negative outcome for the company in the long run.

"If we keep a mediocre employee because we didn't want to have the difficult conversation, it affects morale," Harrington said. "Other employees see this person is allowed to just skate by."

Harrington recommended telling the person how their conduct affects everyone else and the company. She said to provide written warnings that explain policy, explain how the policies were violated, what are the consequences and how the violations affect the overall company.

She also recommended that when it becomes time to terminate someone's employment to not be the only person in the room. "Stick to the script. Don't drag it out. Be prepared for a reaction. Don't admit fault. Document everything," she said. —JJ NU

**"IF WE KEEP A MEDIOCRE EMPLOYEE because we didn't want to have the difficult conversation, it affects morale," Harrington said. "Other employees see this person is allowed to just skate by."**

"It means you don't have to give a reason, but you should because you don't want to be accused of retaliation ...." Calo said. "And you can't fire someone for doing something the law requires such as workman's comp, jury duty ...."

Calo defined discrimination as subjecting employees to different terms and conditions of employment because of the employee's protected status. Discrimination can be further broken down into familial discrimination, such as only allowing women to take time off for

ing, what the expectations for the applicant are and the steps of the hiring process. That way, there is a paper trail should it be discovered the person provided false information. And never ask about race or religion.

"If you require weekend work, it needs to be in the job posting," Calo said.

When it comes to checking a potential employee's social media, Calo said, "If you can't use that information during the interview, you can't use that information from their social media."

Harrington said. "Coaching can create a process to improve a person's potential."

She said providing feedback—information that describes reactions to a person's performance to help that person to improve—can be a starting point and a way to focus on future outcomes.

"Use open questions: How? When? What? to bring people into deeper conversations," Harrington said. "We can't use our own mindset for what someone else is thinking. Make sure conversations are timely,

# The Piece of Paper that Changed Her Life

BY STEPHANIE LEE

Most people who see a piece of paper on the ground just walk by it. For Jessica Kidwell, a resident of Mosby Heights in Harrisonburg, Va., deciding to pick up the piece of paper would be one of the best decisions she ever made.

"I literally thought I was just picking up a piece of trash, but when I looked closer, I saw it was a scholarship flyer from the NAHMA Educational Foundation," Kidwell explained. "I immediately started looking into it because I'm in school and it's expensive!"

Kidwell is a single mom who is currently in the Sentara

When asked about why she selected radiology as her career of choice, she explained that the radiology program will give her lots of opportunity for growth. "You can eventually choose specialties and keep earning licenses along the way. I want to learn everything I can and become licensed in different areas within the field. I know that will give me lots of versatility in my career path," she said.

Going back to school wasn't an easy decision for Kidwell, especially while juggling her many responsibilities.

"My family wasn't able to support me financially to go back to school, so I constantly



times that's my safe space to fall apart. I remember the day I learned I was a recipient of the NAHMA Educational Foundation scholarship very vividly. I was in my car and was just thinking about all

needed to keep going. It was extremely emotional to know I had so much support and that the NAHMA family believed in me," she said.

Thanks to her support from NAHMA and the AHMA, Kidwell was on pace to graduate debt free from school in May and will be able to focus on the next steps in her educational journey. "I'd like to say thank you again for all that you do," she explained. "I know so many people who have given up on school because there's no way to make it work and they have families to take care of, so it's just easier for them to quit and get a job to make ends meet. Without your support, I may have been in that same situation, so I just encourage you to continue making other student's educational dreams come true."

When asked what she would say to other students who are thinking about going back to school, Kidwell said, "that you'd be surprised what you're capable of. Once you get a taste of how successful you can be, it will just motivate you to keep going. It's not easy, but you can make it work if you want it bad enough. You can do it!" **NU** *Stephanie Lee is a community relations specialist for CAHEC and currently manages the CAHEC Foundation, the organization's philanthropic arm. Lee also serves on the board of the NAHMA Educational Foundation.*

**"MY FAMILY WASN'T ABLE TO SUPPORT ME financially to go back to school, so I constantly wondered how I would make everything work. I took it one day at a time and everything eventually fell into place," she said.**

School of Radiologic Technology. She was on track to graduate in May but wants to continue pursuing her education in the radiology field.

"I applied for a program at the University of North Carolina's Nuclear Medicine School. They only accept five people nationwide each year and I really hope I get in." Kidwell said.



The NAHMA Educational Foundation is proud to be able to support the educational goals of residents living in affordable housing. If you'd like to help other students receive the same support as Kidwell, please consider donating at <https://e.givesmart.com/events/g6U/>.

wondered how I would make everything work. I took it one day at a time and everything eventually fell into place," she said.

In addition to attending school full time, Kidwell also works 20-30 hours each week to make ends meet. "I am always on the go and know that it will eventually pay off. I want to provide a great life for my daughter, and I know the time I'm spending away from her is a sacrifice I'm making for both of us," she said.

Remaining positive and pursuing her dreams has been a struggle for Kidwell at times. "I'm in my car a lot and some-

that I have going on and I was in tears thinking about how I was going to keep going. But then I received an email about the scholarship, and it was at that moment that a weight was lifted off my shoulders and I knew I'd be able to push forward," she said.

Shortly after Kidwell found out she'd be receiving \$2,500 through the NAHMA Educational Foundation, she also learned that she was selected to receive a \$5,000 George Spreitzer Resident Scholarship Boost Award from the Mid-Atlantic AHMA to help cover even more of her educational expenses. "That was the motivation I



# Doing What's Right For the Working Poor

**NAME:** Eileen Wirth, SHCM, FHC, NAHP-e

**MANAGEMENT COMPANY:** Octavia Hill Association Inc.

**POSITION:** President and CEO

Ask Eileen Wirth what her job is and she'll respond, "chief firefighter." However, the title on her business cards is president and CEO of the Octavia Hill Association Inc. (OHA), located in Philadelphia. For just over seven years, she has been at the helm of the for-profit organization that was founded in 1896 by a group of Quaker women to create housing for the working poor.

"I oversee the operations of the company, and provide guidance to staff for compliance," she said. "We have 450 units throughout Philadelphia—the property managers report directly to me. I also do site visits, contract renewals and oversee capital investments, all while dealing with the unexpected. I'm the



This profile first appeared in the January/February 2020 issue of *NAHMA News*.

point person for a lot of outside company vendors. I just oversee it all."

Even after more than 100 years, OHA keeps rents below the neighborhood average because the association has owned the properties for generations, and there is no longer any debt for most of the homes. Today, OHA owns and manages both market-rate and affordable row homes and apartments throughout the city, most

dating back to World War I. One home dates back to 1746 and has been owned by the organization since 1906.

"We do the right thing because it's the right thing to do," Wirth said.

As a result, some of OHA's residents have lived in their homes for generations. One family, for example, has been in their property since the 1940s. Wirth said there are no income restrictions on most of their portfolio because the goal

is to try to keep people in an affordable decent home.

"Growing up I didn't want to work in property management," she said. "I was a dancer. I started at age 2 and stopped at 17. I got injured and that killed my audition with the [Radio City] Rockettes."

Wirth got her first taste of the affordable housing industry working as an intern for the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency, while she was attending Rider

Wirth said. "I can have the best to-do list going into the office, but might not get to do any of it."

One of the things she wants to do is put some of OHA's proceeds back into its properties through updates and renovations. And as PennDel AHMA president, Wirth wants to take what the association is doing and focus on making it better.

Even though the New Jersey resident is actively

**"WE DO THE RIGHT THING because it's the right thing to do," Wirth said. As a result, some of OHA's residents have lived in their homes for generations.**

College—now Rider University, where she earned both a bachelor's in finance and then a Master of Business Administration. She ended up staying with the state agency for 16 years before moving onto positions at two large faith-based nonprofits.

She is drawn to the industry because of the unpredictability and the basic need for affordable housing.

"There is always some new challenge. I've never had two days exactly the same,"

involved in several professional organizations including NAHMA, PennDel AHMA, the Institute of Real Estate Management and the Rider Alumni Board of Directors and Women's Leadership Council, she still finds time to go to a lot of concerts and shows. Wirth is also a New York Giants football season ticket holder, even though her boyfriend of several years, Adam, is a Jets fan.

"We are constantly on the go," she said. —JJ NU



# Data and Research that Support Affordable Housing

HUD User is the source for affordable housing research, reports, and data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R). Visit [huduser.gov](http://huduser.gov) to explore the various resources available on HUD User, including Income Limits and Fair Market Rents for assisted housing units.

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