

# NAHMAanalysis

NATIONAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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December 11, 2020

NAHMAanalysis 2020-1211

### **Harvard JCHS Report: *For Older Adults in Publicly Funded Housing during the Pandemic, Service Coordinators Help Build Resilience***

#### **Introduction**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (pandemic), service coordinators have provided vital support for older adult residents in their respective communities, far above and beyond their normal responsibilities to help residents remain self-sufficient. NAHMA members are well aware how the pandemic has significantly disrupted and altered the lives of their residents. In many cases, senior residents have been impacted the hardest; thus, the work-lives and duties of service coordinators have changed, as well.

A new report, ***For Older Adults in Publicly Funded Housing During the Pandemic, Service Coordinators Help Build Resilience***, from Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies (JCHS), in partnership with the American Association of Service Coordinators (AASC), "presents results from a survey conducted between June 23 and July 17, 2020 to explore the experiences of these service coordinators during the early months of COVID-19....The Center developed an online survey and AASC disseminated it by email to all of the 3,500 service coordinators in its membership. A total of 1,175 surveys were completed by those working in multifamily properties, representing a roughly 30 percent response rate. Respondents worked for publicly subsidized properties that spanned 47 states as well as Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico. Many of the properties rely on multiple funding streams: 38 percent of properties employing survey respondents used Section 202, 25 percent were funded as public housing, and 42 percent accepted Housing Choice Voucher Program Section 8 waivers (Section 8 waivers)."

This NAHMAanalysis will highlight the report's key findings on how service coordinators' priorities and work-lives changed during the pandemic.

#### **Key Findings**

1. **Resident Experiences with COVID-19 Infection:** The pandemic's mortality rates have been the highest in minority and senior populations. The report finds that "respondents estimated that three-quarters of residents they served were at least 62 years old, and also that 36 percent of residents were people of color....At the time of the survey, about a third of respondents were aware of at least one resident on a property they served who had tested positive for COVID-19. Rates were highest among service coordinators working in public

housing properties and lowest among residents funded by Section 202....Service coordinators who worked with more residents were more likely to know of at least one resident with COVID-19.” In regard to testing, the report states, “Residents’ access to COVID-19 testing varied by location. Only 9 percent of properties offered coronavirus testing onsite; another 77 percent reported that testing was available offsite. However, at the time of this survey, asymptomatic testing was not typical practice. Onsite testing rates increased to 15 percent of properties where at least one resident had been diagnosed with COVID-19.”

2. **Service Coordinators Spent More Time Coordinating Resident Supports:** The report finds that most service coordinators indicated the pandemic disrupted or prevented essential in-person resident assistance needed to complete household tasks, such as assistance with dressing, running errands, compiling documentation and completing forms for acquiring and maintaining benefits, and providing increased translation to non-English speaking residents. This disruption was largely due to property access being restricted to visitors. This left service coordinators having to fill this gap and provide assistance to residents, including assistance usually provided by professional caregivers. The report finds that “a large part of ‘filling the gaps’ involved communicating with informal and formal members of residents’ support networks.... Half of coordinators spent more time facilitating virtual medical care, and 35 percent spent less time coordinating medical transportation. Forty-six percent spent more time coordinating with family and informal supports while 34 percent spent more time coordinating with formal healthcare resources....Thirty-six percent of coordinators spent more time assisting non-English speaking residents during the pandemic.” Service coordinators also shared that they were communicating the updates to property rules on contact and visitation with residents’ families.
3. **Service Coordinators Spent More Time Ensuring Residents’ Access to PPE, Food, Medicine, and Household Supplies:** The report documents that over time, essential life resources and necessities, like PPE, medicine, food, and supplies have become more readily-available for residents (these resources were scarce in the early days of the pandemic due to social distancing requirements and supply shortages). The report states, “Service coordinators estimated that 87 percent of residents had access to reusable cloth masks or disposable surgical masks, and 17 percent had N95 masks or face shields. Respondents estimated that 40 percent of residents of their properties did not have the food, medicine, or household supplies they would need to isolate for a week. Service coordinators estimated that 61 percent of residents had enough food to socially isolate for a week, while 65 percent had needed medications and medical supplies to last that long. Slightly fewer, 58 percent, were estimated to have household goods such as paper and cleaning products....78 percent spent more time helping residents with the purchase or delivery of food, 46 percent were more involved in the purchase or delivery of medications or medical supplies, and 64 percent were more attentive to the purchase or delivery of household goods.” As a result, many service coordinators ensured residents were noticed by donor organizations and served as an access and distribution point for donations to residents. Given the shift to online ordering at stores, service coordinators also assisted residents who did not have the internet or the technological skills to do it themselves.
4. **Service Coordinators Adapted Communications to Pandemic Realities:** The report finds that information dissemination was a critical responsibility for service coordinators.

Many had to adapt and develop new communication systems to disseminate pandemic-related updates on mask wearing and social distancing, identify needs and provide resources, prevent scamming, and ease resident loneliness and anxiety. The report states, “Seventy-four percent of service coordinators noticed more loneliness or anxiety among residents....On average, service coordinators estimated that 38 percent of residents had both internet service and an internet-capable device such as a computer or tablet....Prior to the pandemic, service coordinators estimated that they interacted with 57 percent of residents in a typical week. This dropped slightly to 50 percent during the pandemic, including both face-to-face and virtual interactions. Telephone communication was relied on by 90 percent of service coordinators to communicate with residents....Over three-quarters of coordinators posted notices around the building, especially focusing on high traffic nodes such as mailboxes and community bulletin boards. 78 percent reported that they often delivered fliers and newsletters to residents’ doors...Over three-quarters of service coordinators reduced time spent organizing social activities, physical activities, and access to religious worship.”

As a result, the report finds service coordinators “increased referrals to professional mental health providers, community crisis lines, prayer lines, and both local and national phone chat and peer support hotlines for residents to connect with other older adults. Many service coordinators initiated proactive wellness checks with residents. Peer supports also emerged as a central strategy to address loneliness and anxiety as service coordinators sought opportunities to emphasize communal decision-making and to bring a sense of agency and a sense of community to residents’ pandemic experiences.”

5. **Shifts in Service Coordinators’ Work Practices:** The report finds that pandemic-related demands have changed service coordinators’ workplace practices, including changes to time allocation, work location, and sources of information. The reports states, “while 85 percent of coordinators spent more time responding to public health recommendations, 77 percent also spent more time on facilities management activities such as cleaning, particularly focusing on common areas and high-touch spaces such as doors, stairwells, and elevators....Increased time spent on facility maintenance and administration is particularly significant, given that more than half of coordinators were working remotely. 59 percent of service coordinators worked exclusively from home, while 38 percent did not work remotely at all....Thirty-eight percent of coordinators spent more time helping residents navigate benefits.... Thirty-five percent of respondents also spent more time on documentation tasks during the pandemic, like reporting the property’s COVID-19 statistics to county health infrastructure or documenting receipt or distribution of donations. Despite the changes, the report finds that when “service coordinators were asked if they agreed with managers of the property about what needed to be done to address pandemic challenges, 71 percent of respondents reported feeling aligned with managers most of the time. Coordinators appreciated this cooperation with property managers.”

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this pandemic has highlighted the critical role service coordination plays in the lives of residents, especially in times of uncertainty and rapid change. The report ends with two very important sections: Service Coordinators Identified Ongoing Challenges that Need to Be Addressed, and Changes in Practice that Service Coordinators Hope to Maintain. NAHMA

members with or without service coordinators would be well-served to read these sections for more details, as they are broadly applicable to other staff and operations. In regard to ongoing challenges that will need addressing, service coordinators noted a few significant challenges: support for residents' mental and physical health; help to meet residents' needs for social support; building and maintaining partnerships; and expanding technology access to the internet, along with increasing access to devices, and resident capacity to use the technology. As far as practices to maintain, service coordinators identified: "thinking outside the box"; remote work; social distancing/hygiene; increased communication with residents; a sense of resident community and empowerment; and maintaining new community partnerships.