

CUT OFF IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: The Digital Divide in Affordable Senior Housing



National Church Residences

Many of the inequities that existed in our communities before the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic are being exacerbated and starkly highlighted now, and this is especially true of what we call “the digital divide.”

The Problem: “Accessing the Internet has become a prerequisite to full and meaningful participation in society.” – Federal Communications Commission

Having a computing device and affordable and reliable internet access is now not only simply important for individual well-being and self-sufficiency, but in the event of pandemic, has become an actual lifeline for persons everywhere to continue to work, access care and services, and connect with loved ones and the outside world. Under the best of circumstances, internet access is associated with improved health outcomes and less social isolation; connecting to the internet is increasingly the way people learn, access health care information, share news, pay bills, and interact with the government. However, low-income renters – particularly seniors – are far less likely to have internet access or computing equipment at home. This persistent digital divide in the U.S. exacerbates economic inequality and risks leaving the poor even further behind.

Nationally, nearly 70% of very low income senior renters do not have a computer and 74% do not have home internet access, with many even relying on government subsidies for limited cell phone service as their only means of contact with the outside world as they shelter in place. This comes at a time when care providers are reporting exponential increases in telehealth visits, but a large majority of our residents, most of whom have chronic medical conditions, don’t have the resources needed to conduct such visits remotely. At a time like this, this leaves them quite literally cut off from the care, services, and support systems they need to remain healthy and thriving.

THE SOLUTION:

To help achieve affordable broadband connectivity for all residents of affordable senior housing, policy action and collaborative investments are needed at all levels of government, in addition to the private affordable housing and philanthropic communities. The National Housing Council Connectivity Working Group, in which National Church Residences has participated, has identified the following recommendations to effectively realize this goal:

1. Establish a national goal for connectivity in HUD properties, with a strong federal commitment of new resources and partnerships with the private sector. State commitments and investments in this goal as well could help to reach all Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) properties.
2. Implement digital literacy and equipment support into broadband provisions. For access to broadband to transform lives, it must be more than just a plug in the wall or a wireless access point. Low-income residents, especially older adults, need access to reliable and user-friendly equipment (particularly computers or tablets, not just smartphones, for a full range of health and socialization activities) and training in how to make the most of it.
3. Treat broadband as an eligible expenditure in affordable rental housing. As pilot programs have demonstrated, basic broadband provided at the property level can serve residents effectively while containing costs. HUD should issue guidance allowing properties to use available funds to implement cost-effective connectivity for residents and should support pilot programs to test different implementation methods. Building on these initial steps, HUD should explore treating cost-effective basic broadband as a standard operating cost for affordable housing properties.
4. Provide public funds to support broadband connectivity in affordable housing. Existing resources are not sufficient to accomplish all that is needed, including capital installation, ongoing operation, equipment, digital literacy training, and technical support. Funding authorities should allocate additional funding and explore tax incentives for public and assisted housing to pay for broadband costs in property operations, as well as large-scale pilots to refine best practices for implementing broadband at a property level.

5. Support broadband in affordable housing through Federal Communications Commission (FCC) actions. The FCC is well situated to work with interested public and private entities to enact and promote policies and programs that advance affordable digital inclusion efforts and telehealth solutions for vulnerable populations
6. Use public resources to leverage private resources. Private businesses can be part of the solution to the digital divide, through both corporate philanthropy and private investment. In-home connectivity can make property management more efficient for multifamily housing, deliver health care services efficiently, and allow telecommuting for workers. Scarce public resources should therefore leverage private contributions, of which there are many models, including community development financial institutions, tax credit incentives, loan pools, and in-kind contributions.



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