

ADVANCING HOUSING AND HEALTH EQUITY FOR OLDER ADULTS: PANDEMIC INNOVATIONS AND POLICY IDEAS

REPORT SUMMARY & KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

REPORT SUMMARY

As the COVID-19 pandemic upended daily life around the globe, older adults, who were at highest risk for severe illness and death, faced disruptions in social routines and access to food, medications, and services. Organizations that support low- and moderate-income older people dwelling in the community—including housing and service providers, voluntary organizations, and government agencies—improvised solutions to address these challenges, while also emphasizing the importance of stable housing itself.

These responses offer lessons for improving housing and housing-related services over the long term. We explored these responses in COVID-19 RECAPP (Review of Equitable Community-based Aging Policies and Practices), a project of the Joint Center for Housing Studies and The Hastings Center. Drawing from more than 200 examples of housing-focused responses nationwide, and informed by a diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and researchers, we developed the following observations and recommendations:

- Interorganizational networks, particularly those with a focus on aging, played a foundational role in response by facilitating information sharing, conducting advocacy, and delivering goods and services. Nurturing networks and leadership development at trusted local organizations can benefit older adults in typical times as well as emergencies.
- Engaging older adults in planning processes and collaborating with them on responses enhanced effectiveness and equity. Local organizations are well-positioned to solicit input and engage older adults, but often need support to sustain their work.
- Flexible regulations and adequate funding expanded access to programs that fulfilled older adults' needs. Demand for resources including affordable housing, nutritious food, and medical care predated the pandemic and persists today. Additional research is needed to assess the potential for extending temporary administrative relief over the long term.
- Service delivery to the home demonstrated the value of locating supports where older people live.

In senior housing, service coordinators played a crucial role in identifying older residents' evolving needs and connecting them to information, goods, and services. The benefits of high-quality residential service coordination should be made available to more older adults living in the community.

- During the pandemic, the physical home was a vital link to resources. Going forward, age-focused housing design and community planning must be informed by an expanded concept of accessibility, acknowledgement that internet access is now a basic utility, and neighborhood design that is inclusive of older adults and caregivers.
- Despite progress, barriers to coordination and collaboration among the housing, social service, and healthcare sectors remain. This has resulted in a patchwork of programs that often only partially meet the needs of low- and moderate-income older adults. Greater collaboration is needed to serve goals such as creating an adequate supply of affordable housing for older adults.

The COVID-19 RECAPP project employed a “housing lens” to reflect the importance of homes and neighborhoods to older adults' health and wellbeing. A housing lens focuses on the affordability, accessibility, safety, and suitability of the home, including services provided there. It highlights the difficulties many face paying for both housing and care and the practical challenges involved in remaining in one's home and community. By advocating for the use of a housing lens in policy analysis and development, we hope to reframe our collective narrative on aging to recognize the social and health implications of the home in an aging society.

KEY OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OBSERVATIONS	MAIN ACTORS	RECOMMENDATIONS
Networks and partnerships were essential to efficient and equitable response	Funders (including government agencies and foundations)	<p>Nurture the development of networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value networks in funding decisions • Support inclusive network-building • Fund and support innovative partnerships, particularly those emerging from pilot projects • Reconsider restrictions on funding advocacy activities that may be necessary to support equitable aging in community <p>Invest in leadership development and organizational stability of trusted local organizations</p>
Collaboration with older adults contributed key perspectives and supported civic participation	Public, private, and nonprofit entities engaged in planning; funders	<p>Include older adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers in planning for foreseeable emergencies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit public input through trusted local organizations and inclusive outreach • Support leadership training for older adults • Inform planning efforts with accurate data on older residents' needs
Pandemic responses relied on flexibility in regulations and funding	Government agencies	Study outcomes of regulatory and administrative flexibility under emergency conditions; make permanent changes where they will support improved outcomes under typical conditions
Successful responses brought services to the home	Federal agencies, state and local networks of housing and service providers	<p>Prioritize coordination of services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequately fund service coordination in publicly-assisted housing • Explore lessons around service coordination from publicly-assisted housing for community-dwelling older adults • Leverage networks to build “no wrong door” approaches to service access
Design of homes and neighborhoods shaped access to resources	Funders, planners, architects, developers, providers of housing	<p>Build accessibility and equity considerations into the design and renovation of homes and neighborhoods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand concepts of accessibility • Consider broadband access a basic utility • Focus on inclusive neighborhood infrastructure
Barriers to coordination and collaboration across housing, social service, and healthcare sectors impeded effective responses	Federal agencies, state and local agencies, grantmakers, research centers	<p>Strengthen the connections between housing, healthcare, and social service programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create forums for collaboration, shared data and analysis • Coordinate subsidies and incentives • Change the narrative

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