



Affordable Housing, Health Care Are Inextricably Linked

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The connections between quality affordable housing and health could not be clearer. Once an individual or family secures decent housing, programs and services linking tenants to resources that will improve physical, emotional and mental health can be more easily accessed. The service-enriched housing model is designed to provide programs and services that promote health and is the next step in providing an environment free of housing-related illnesses driven by unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

The “Housing First” concept has proven to be a key component in offering decent housing to people in need of case management, such as the chronically homeless or those battling substance abuse. The affordable housing community has come to understand individuals have different levels of needs that must be satisfied in order to ultimately fulfill one’s self-actualization. According to researchers and health professionals, the first level is defined as “physiological needs,” those that are vital to survival. Among these needs are the most basic of biological functions such as eating and breathing, but this level also includes the need for adequate shelter. True access to quality housing is a basic need, but it is also a reoccurring necessity as individuals

progress through the different levels of need. Safety, community and the recognition of accomplishment all have roots in an individual’s living situation. Supporting the physical and mental well-being throughout the process is essential, and housing’s role is key throughout.

Modern medicine continually produces research that supports the critical importance of having quality, stable and affordable housing. The National Housing Conference teamed up with Children’s HealthWatch to release a “Housing as a Health Care Investment” policy paper. Building on previous research, this paper revealed new findings that associate better health outcomes for young children living in affordable housing made possible through rental assistance. The research showed that investments made in housing vulnerable families with children pays massive dividends. Those children who experienced pre- and post-natal homelessness were 41 percent more likely to have been hospitalized since birth. The research showed that in 2014 an estimated 671,000 children 4 and younger had been homeless at some point. Despite the obvious tremendous developmental detriment, there is a significant cost associated with pediatric hospitalization. Calculations put the cost in 2015 for homeless children hospitalization at

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\$238 million. This is just one of many costs related to homelessness and does not take into consideration post-emergency room care and long-term health conditions.

Though not always immediately measurable, fulfilling a moral imperative to house our community’s most vulnerable people has economic benefits. Focusing on providing mental and physical health services within the context of affordable housing directly translates into stable communities. Savings realized from avoiding emergency medical care can significantly offer a boost to a family’s budget. That money can then be devoted to preventive care, healthy eating and promoting active lifestyles. Combined with efforts to revitalize traditionally underserved communities—rural or metropolitan—the results can be overwhelmingly positive. In particular, mental health advocates have made a strong case for the model and the data supports this. Pathways Housing reports that its retention rates remain at 85 to 90 percent. More importantly, this approach is tremendously cost-effective. By way of comparison using New York City, the municipal cost per capita per night in a “Housing First,” service-enriched home was \$57 versus \$1,200 in a hospital. Continued coordination between medical and housing professionals can produce positive, lasting change for individuals and the areas they call home.

In communities where Rainbow Housing Assistance Corporation provides its service-enriched housing model, resident services coordinators practice this on a daily basis. Identifying the needs of a specific tenant population is critical to the development of a tailored

provision of services that address health-related illness stemming from stress, income deficiencies, inadequate knowledge of health needs and parenting skills. Wrap-around supportive social services ensure that health-centric programming is offered to residents. Using improved health outcomes as the goal, services that include healthy eating workshops, nutritional needs assessments and dental care can have a positive effect on resident well-being. In addition, onsite coordinators may add in active lifestyle events into a community’s programming schedule to address health-related issues such as hypertension and obesity.

Health and housing are inextricably linked and residents who have access to wrap-around supportive social services are better equipped to live healthy lifestyles. Investing in the health of the resident population creates successful and more stable communities. Every day, new opportunities present themselves within the affordable housing industry, whether it’s educating elected officials, investing in groundbreaking technology or simply finding new and creative ways to promote a holistic healthy lifestyle as part of the service-enriched housing model. ❖

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This article first appeared in the July 2016 issue of the Novogradac Journal of Tax Credits.

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ISSN 2152-646X

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