



March 6, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pence
Vice President of the United States
White House Coronavirus Task Force
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Vice President:

On behalf of LeadingAge, I am writing to request an urgent need for the White House Coronavirus Task Force to address the coronavirus-related needs of older adults in HUD-assisted communities by providing the resources, guidance, and tools necessary for affordable housing providers and the residents they serve.

LeadingAge represents more than 5,000 aging-focused organizations that touch millions of lives every day. Alongside our members and 38 state partners, we address critical issues by blending applied research, advocacy, education, and community-building. We are deeply appreciative of the White House Coronavirus Task Force's work to help prepare health facilities, including LeadingAge's thousands of nursing home, home and community-based services, and hospice provider members, for the coronavirus. We now urge you to help another key aging services lynchpin, affordable housing providers, with similar tools.

The coronavirus presents significant challenges to the residents and staff of predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities, and we applaud the addition of HUD Secretary Dr. Carson to the Task Force. The Task Force has a unique ability to coordinate and amplify the resources of multiple federal agencies. In the case of HUD-assisted seniors, the Task Force is in a position to bring the knowledge and resources of the Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development to address coronavirus-related needs of older adults in HUD-assisted communities.

Predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities are independent living environments where residents are very successfully encouraged to age in community. To facilitate this, residents rely on visits from home health and hospice workers to help them. Practically, predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities have networks of resident-coordinated and building-coordinated service providers coming and going from their buildings 24 hours a day to achieve the goals of aging in community.

More than 1.6 million older adults live in HUD-assisted housing, with more than 1.1 million of these households living in small, medium, and large apartment buildings. HUD's flagship senior housing program, the Section 202 Housing for the Elderly program, provides housing to more than 400,000 older adults in more than 6,600 communities. In addition, many Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance and Public Housing communities are designated as elderly-only communities. Of course, many HUD-assisted seniors live in communities with a mix of ages.

Centers for Disease Control data show the coronavirus has a disproportionate impact on older adults. Research from the Department of Health and Human Services tells us that HUD-assisted Medicare-Medicaid enrollees are significantly more likely to have five or more chronic conditions than Medicare-Medicaid enrollees without housing assistance (54.5% vs. 43.1%). Meanwhile, HUD-assisted older adults with Medicare are more likely than non-HUD-assisted older adults to be dually enrolled in Medicaid (70% vs. 13%).

Given that there are thousands of predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities, that their residents have more chronic conditions than their peers without housing assistance, and that the coronavirus disproportionately impacts older adults, we urge the White House Coronavirus Task Force to do more and to do more quickly to help providers and residents of predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities through this outbreak.

As just one example of what our members are facing, a member told us, “A resident of a HUD funded community WILL eventually test positive. We expect to have to quarantine every resident in the worst case scenario. Figure out how to get them food and water. We are concerned about the staff exposure as we are just eight people taking care of 165 people who need help.”

Thus far, HUD’s guidance has been inadequate. Rapidly expanding the types of information and resources provided to predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities is a real opportunity for the White House Coronavirus Task Force to meaningfully help an at-risk population through this outbreak.

Predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities are starting from zero at this moment. HUD’s current emergency preparedness plans and guidance do not include infectious disease control. Affordable housing providers, especially those with predominantly senior populations, need significantly more help from HUD specifically and the federal government in general. We recommend the following areas for the immediate attention of HUD and the Task Force:

Equipment and Staffing

Affordable housing providers will need funding and access to personal protective equipment as well as much more soap, sanitizer, and thermometers than they can readily access today. Emergency funding will also be necessary for hiring additional staff to cover a community’s needs if current staff must attend to personal coronavirus-related issues or simply for additional staff and cleaning services to keep residents as healthy as possible through this outbreak.

Guidance

These communities will need guidance specific to HUD-assisted communities about communicating with residents about quarantines, as well as guidance to owners and agents about how to implement a quarantine given in-building space constraints, the need for service professionals to assist residents as they age in community, and what funds owners can access for outbreak response. In addition, owners and agents may need waivers to certain HUD requirements if this situation reaches crisis levels in certain localities. Guidance to HUD’s field offices is also needed to help the field offices in assisting predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities manage this outbreak.

Communication and Technical Assistance

Predominantly older adult HUD-assisted communities could benefit tremendously from mobile coronavirus testing, documents translated into languages beyond English, Spanish, and Chinese, and the right phone numbers and emails providers should use to receive needed technical assistance from HUD.

LeadingAge also recommends HUD communicate with residents, or provide language to owners and agents to do so, to assure residents they are not at risk of losing their housing should they need to be hospitalized or otherwise treated for the coronavirus.

Again, we are appreciative of the White House Coronavirus Task Force's efforts, and we look forward to working together to keep our communities resilient. For questions, please contact Linda Couch, vice president of housing policy with LeadingAge, at 202-508-9416 or lcouch@leadingage.org.

Sincerely,

Katie Smith Sloan
President and CEO

cc: The Honorable Ben Carson, Secretary, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
The Honorable Alex Azar II, Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services