COVID-19 Intervention Actions: Supporting Individuals Experiencing Homelessness

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OVERVIEW

The spread of COVID-19 in U.S. communities presents unique challenges for people experiencing homelessness. As nationwide mitigation efforts for COVID-19 are implemented, strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within the homeless population – which already experiences increased risks and challenges for disease prevention (e.g. limitations to frequent handwashing, crowding in shelters) – should be considered. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) provide policy and programmatic guidance and resources for homeless and housing services across the country, as well as coordinate housing and the care of homeless people.

While state health and human services agencies provide policy leadership, cities and counties typically take the lead on service provision. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health recently issued guidance for Homeless Service Agencies and Outreach teams and developed a COVID-19 assessment tool for Homeless Shelters. The New York City Department of Health also released interim COVID-19 guidance for homeless shelters, and the City of San Francisco created a $5 million fund and public health order aimed at reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 for vulnerable populations including individuals experiencing homelessness. In addition, other organizations have also contributed efforts to respond to the outbreak, such as Kaiser Permanente which recently pledged $1 million toward efforts to prevent and treat COVID-19 cases among the homeless population.

STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY ACTIONS

Several state and federal level actions have been implemented to support the homeless population by providing guidance to shelters, housing advocacy groups, and healthcare professionals on how to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Actions have also been taken to protect Americans that are experiencing financial distress caused by Coronavirus from losing their homes and access to critical utilities such as water, electricity, and the Internet.

Examples of state and federal actions to address homelessness include:

- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development authorized the Federal Housing Administration to implement an immediate foreclosure and eviction moratorium for single family homeowners with FHA-insured mortgages for the next 60 days.
- States (CA, KS, KY, MD, NC, NY, WA) are issuing emergency measures to temporarily halt evictions that can be attributed to COVID-19-related hardships. These protections are issued due to gubernatorial executive order and rulings from state court systems.
- States (CA, KS, MD) are also preventing the shutoff of critical utilities during the COVID-19 response.
- California's Business, Consumer Services, and Housing Agency released COVID-19 guidance for homeless assistance providers.

- Connecticut's Department of Housing released guidance for emergency shelters on how to prepare for COVID-19, which included a statewide Connecticut COVID-19 Homeless Response Assessment to evaluate their preparedness needs.
- Indiana **released** COVID-19 resources for healthcare professionals, including those working in local health departments, long-term care facilities, and those implementing homecare.
- The Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCAD) **posted** its COVID-19 policy for compliance and monitoring.
- The State of Washington Department of Commerce **announced** an emergency housing grant totaling $30 million to address the COVID -19 related public health needs of people experiencing homelessness or in need of quarantine or isolation due to the outbreak.

CONSIDERATIONS
- Prohibit evictions, encampment clearings, and other actions that destabilize living conditions and service connections.
- Expand outreach teams/mobile services so that very vulnerable and isolated people can receive public health messages as well as continue receiving needed services.
- Use Medicaid to expand care, prevent loss of coverage, and eliminate out-of-pocket costs.
- Identify emergency funds to expand medical respite programs to deliver health care and support services to individuals experiencing homelessness who need ongoing care but do not need to be hospitalized.
- Identify a list of healthcare facilities and alternative care sites where clients with respiratory illness can seek housing and receive appropriate care.
- Identify appropriate isolation/quarantine venues for people experiencing homelessness.
- Ensure continuity of care to the extent possible to prevent poor outcomes (such as strokes, suicides, overdoses, heart attacks, etc.) from disruptions in access to services.

KEY RESOURCES
- COVID-19 & the HCH Community: Needed Policy Responses for a High-Risk Group (issue brief), by the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.
- COVID-19 FAQs for the Public Housing, Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) (including the Project-based Voucher Program [PBV]) and Native American Programs (PDF), by HUD.
- Interim guidance for homeless service providers to plan and respond to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (PDF), by CDC.
- Specific Considerations for Public Health Authorities to Limit Infection Risk Among People Experiencing Homelessness (PDF), by HUD.
- Disaster Preparedness to Promote Community Resilience: Information and Tools for Homeless Service Providers and Disaster Professionals, by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Infection control in homeless shelters in the state of Alaska (PDF), available on the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services website.

For questions, feedback, or additional information, please email preparedness@astho.org.