



# Commonwealth of Massachusetts

## DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Charles D. Baker, Governor ♦ Karyn E. Polito, Lieutenant Governor ♦ Jennifer D. Maddox, Undersecretary

### Public Housing Notice 2020-15

To: All Local Housing Authorities

Fr: Ben Stone, Associate Director, Division of Public Housing

Date: April 6, 2020

Re: Resources & Best Practices for Resident Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This memo is a compilation of resources and ideas for LHAs and/or service providers to consider implementing to support residents while the COVID-19 emergency continues. While we cannot forecast the length of the emergency, LHAs need to work with and through their service providers and residents to ensure that residents' critical needs for food, medicine, and social support are met during the stay-at-home advisory period. We understand that due to staffing and resource issues LHAs will not be able to implement all the suggested measures, but hope that this resource helps LHAs meet resident needs as far as they are able. There are five main sections addressing the following topics:

- ⇒ Communication with Residents
- ⇒ Coordinating with Other Service Providers
- ⇒ Food Insecurity
- ⇒ Social Isolation and Bullying
- ⇒ Resources

We will work to continue to update this resource and would like to add your ideas. If you have ideas to add please email Aviva Rothman-Shore at [aviva.rothman-shore@mass.gov](mailto:aviva.rothman-shore@mass.gov).

### Communication with Residents

For LHAs that do not have Resident Service Coordinators (RSCs) on staff, they might consider designating a staff member or two who could serve as point-people to coordinate with service providers and communicate with residents. LHAs should prioritize communicating with residents about the resources and opportunities described below, but also about what the LHA is doing during this crisis to protect and support residents through regular operations. Communication should be frequent and take many forms including robocalls (if available), flyers that are both slid under doors and posted above the lock on doors (for ease of reading), email, social media posts, and staff calls.

LHA communications can include public health updates from the Massachusetts Department of Health, notes on services changes, and frequent updates about any changes to LHA operations including, but not limited to:

- Office hours and how to contact LHA staff
- Changes to rent recertification and income redetermination
- Maintenance (LHAs should only be going into units for emergency work orders) and cleaning schedules
- Visitor policy

LHA can consider creating and distributing a flyer with resources and important phone numbers that residents may need during the stay-at-home advisory period.

One effective method to communicate with residents is to set up a broadcast messaging system. Residents would need to give LHA management their CURRENT contact information (email address, telephone numbers) so that LHA can send important information to every participating resident household. This is also a good time to get updated emergency contact information for residents and update release of information forms. Management can send numerous messages per day and on the spot if there is an emergency. Here are some resources on setting up broad based texting/calls.

- One Call Now: <https://www.onecallnow.com/>
- Callfire Inc.: <https://www.callfire.com/>; [support@callfire.com](mailto:support@callfire.com); 1-877-897-3473

DHCD recommends communicating with residents **at least twice a week** during this emergency. This is a good time to build email lists for resident contact, especially because email often stays up to date longer than phone numbers.

LHAs should also consider using social media, such as Facebook pages and groups, to communicate with residents and get feedback in an informal manner.

In addition to email blasts, socials media, and robo-calls and texts, LHAs should strongly consider check-in calls with individual residents, especially elderly and non-elderly disabled. Topics to address with the residents as part of a phone assessment to determine current needs, identify concerns, and assess the necessity of additional support include:

- Reviewing protocols to minimize risk
  - Social distancing
  - Hand washing
  - Cleaning
- Assuring residents that they will not lose their housing if they do test positive
- Assessing access to food, fluids, toiletries, garbage bags and cleaning supplies
- Ensuring adequate supply and refills for needed medications
- Determining access to a phone and technology (e.g., Skype, tablet, computer, internet access, etc.)
- Identifying any medical appointments that may need changing and assist resident in rescheduling
- Discussing supports, review emergency contacts, identify all formal and informal caregivers
- Discussing any need for community resources or emotional support
- Identifying and assist with concerns that residents are experiencing

### Coordinating with Other Service Providers

LHAs need to coordinate ongoing essential services that residents need like home health aides, ASAPs, medical care, etc. so that the management can minimize traffic through the building during the COVID-19 emergency while making sure all residents have access to the services they rely on.

LHAs should identify a staff person(s) responsible for coordinating with residents and service providers on how the property can be accessed and other means of providing the service should the need arise.

LHAs should create a visitor log with contact information for all visitors and vendors to enable accurate public health contact tracing should there be a need. While compliance might be low from an unattended visitor log, any information will be helpful to public health agencies. Request all visitors and vendors to use hand sanitizer when entering buildings, if LHA has adequate supplies

Work with the residents to contact any agencies that have staff regularly visiting them (e.g., contracted/per diem staffing agencies, attorneys, pharmacy delivery organizations, visiting provider staff, cleaning agencies, etc.) to determine if there are alternate means of delivering the service and discuss ways to minimize risk.

In addition to coordinating with other service providers who need to come to the property, being in touch with your city/town crisis response team and Local Board of Health can be a huge benefit in connecting to resources and local information.

### Food Insecurity

LHAs or the appropriate service provider should reach out to all residents on food security; residents who were not food insecure before may now become so due to income loss. To the degree that your LHA already has relationships in place for food distribution, work with your local department of health to determine safe food distribution practices. Many school systems are continuing to offer food to those who were on free or reduced breakfast/lunch with both pick-up and delivery options. Project Bread has set up a statewide resource for finding local food sources that an RSC can work with and give out to residents to call directly.

Project Bread: Hunger and Food Resources During COVID-19

<http://www.projectbread.org/news-and-events/news/covid-19-hunger-food.html>

Food Hotline: 1-800-645-8333

Monday - Friday: 8am - 7pm

Saturday: 10am - 2pm

Counselors can assist callers in 160 languages and there is a dedicated line to assist the hearing-impaired at TTY: 1-800-377-1292

RSCs should also continue to work with current food providers, including food pantries, congregate meal providers, and Meals on Wheels, to ensure that these vital nutritional supports can continue in a manner that maintains social distancing practices. Such practices may include opening food pantries by appointment or otherwise limiting crowding, replacing congregate meals with take away options, or leaving the “Meals on Wheels” at the door rather than entering a unit. If family members are bringing food to residents, they should practice social distancing and perhaps leave the food with LHA staff to deliver to residents doors. RSCs may also reach out to their local Councils on Aging through their city/town contact information or through Massachusetts Councils on Aging at: <http://www.mcoaonline.com>.

Here are other creative ideas to consider, some of which LHAs are already conducting:

- ⇒ Identify local food resources and contact information for residents.
- ⇒ Conduct tenant survey for food-related questions to determine need and priority (i.e., dietary restrictions, food allergies, where household typically purchases / receives food, etc.). Once this data is collected create a triage system to prioritize emergency cases (i.e., residents with no consistent food options available; lack of transportation; language barriers, physical mobility limitations; fear of stigma; personal income limitation and/or “choosing” other necessities over food).
- ⇒ Distribute food weekly via staff and local partner agencies.
- ⇒ Partner with a local grocery store that will allow the use of an EBT card with a release form signed by the resident in order for LHA staff or partners to shop on behalf of elderly or otherwise at-risk residents. In addition, see if you can set up an account at the grocery store to directly bill the LHA with residents reimbursing the LHA by check at a later date (residents can pay LHA and LHA can

pay grocery store).

- ⇒ Collaborate with local school system to make a family development a site for brown bag pick up. The school system may also be able to tap into teachers or other educational professionals who are willing to volunteer time to help with food distribution.

### Decreasing Social Isolation & Bullying

While we are all practicing social distancing, it is essential to maintain other kinds of contact with residents, in family developments as well as senior and disabled buildings. This contact can include daily or weekly calls, video conference calls, social media posts, and texts. Reaching out by phone or text to every household will provide needed support and an opportunity for residents, particularly those living alone or who are elderly, to talk with another person. This will also provide the RSC with a sense of what other needs may need to be addressed.

Here are other creative ideas to consider. Note that many of these rely on internet access, which some residents, especially the elderly, may not have. Individual phone calls, along with working with resident associations to set up phone trees so that residents can check on each other, will be critical for these residents.

LHA's can consider having administrative staff who are working remotely and have capacity take the lead on some of these resident engagement projects.

#### Web Based / Virtual Interaction:

- ⇒ Streaming resources: If you already have a Facebook account for your LHA, here are the [instructions for setting up a live stream](#). For YouTube, see this [instructional video](#). You just set up a webcam and stream your content at a scheduled time.
- ⇒ Hold community events via Facebook or other social media platform.
- ⇒ Support a virtual coffee hour with a rotation among the residents to host.
- ⇒ Post YouTube videos for families of fun and inexpensive recipes and activities.
- ⇒ Connect with local gyms, YMCAs, senior centers to share free online exercise classes.
- ⇒ Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/> is a nonprofit offering free classes for youth in kindergarten through twelfth grade.
- ⇒ Google Arts & Culture has hundreds of [online museum tours](#).
- ⇒ Keep the brain active with [online games](#).
- ⇒ From 3:00 - 5:00pm ET every day, the Cincinnati Zoo will be offering virtual tours through [their Facebook page](#).
- ⇒ Suggest a movie or show that everyone can watch on television or Netflix, and then have a conference call the next day at a scheduled time to discuss. There's a Netflix sharing option called [Netflix Party](#) that works well for this, but requires each participant to have a computer.

#### Personal Interaction Ideas:

- ⇒ The Public Housing Training Program has a Peer Connector program. The Peer Connectors are paid a stipend to call other residents to provide a friendly hello and a listening ear. The Public

Housing Training Program is actively recruiting. If you are interested in having a Peer Connector reach out to your residents or have residents who are interested in becoming a Peer Connector, contact Sarah Brynes at [SarahB@macdc.org](mailto:SarahB@macdc.org).

- ⇒ Distribute games, puzzles, coloring books and journals.
- ⇒ Create a poster contest, potentially with a theme like “what home means to me” and ask kids to make a poster and tape it to their front window so that LHA staff can walk by to judge them and offer prizes. Photos of the posters can be put on the LHA website.
- ⇒ Host a dance contest by asking kids to submit a video of them dancing. Everyone can submit themselves dancing to one particular song, like Justin Timberlake's "Can't Stop the Feeling". Winning dances can be posted to the LHA website with prizes. All submissions would need to come with guardian/parental permission.
- ⇒ Ask senior residents to paint rocks or Easter eggs to be hidden for the kids to find. LHA staff would need to make sure senior residents have the supplies they need, pick up the rocks and then hide them for the kids to find. Each rock can get numbered and the child who finds the rock can make a card or picture to give to the resident who painted the rock. LHA staff would know by the number on the rock which resident it was who painted it. Of course, the rock hunt would need to be done in compliance with social distancing efforts.
- ⇒ Host a weekly trivia contest and if someone gets all the answers right for Monday through Friday, they win a prize. Potentially residents could have an hour time window in which to call in their answers and speak to an LHA staff person, or they could email their answers.
- ⇒ Consider ways to make intergenerational connections among properties, for example high schoolers may still be looking for service opportunities to meet this year's required volunteer hours and connecting them as pen-pals or video-conference buddies may work.
- ⇒ Post on the municipal Facebook page a request for people to send cards and letters to residents. These could go to the LHA's main office and then slid under residents' doors.
- ⇒ If an LHA is working with a local senior center talk about setting up a buddy program with local high schools (both teachers and students) and/or faith-based groups. The buddies would call the senior and/or video chat with them and potentially do activities together over video like playing cards. This requires a partner who can set it up for the LHA.
- ⇒ Plan a time when everyone goes to their window or door and waves, sings or claps to their neighbors from their door. Could organize times for this, just to see that everyone has a time to get up and get dressed and see everyone from afar, and also know your neighbor is doing ok.
- ⇒ Set up a joint meeting with other public officials in your community (i.e., police, fire, board of health, etc.) to highlight your resident's needs and identify potential solutions and resources. For example, sheriff departments offer the free “Are You OK” Program. A representative will call each day at a designated time and simply ask “are you ok?” if no response, the protocol escalates, and eventually results in an emergency dispatch.

### Bullying:

Unfortunately, in times of communal stress bullying of individual residents or of a household may increase, particularly as people are concerned about their own safety. Despite the difficult circumstances it is imperative that LHAs stay on top of the situation and be on the lookout for instances of bullying and address them. LHAs may consider, in addition to resources below, posting materials discouraging bullying, especially reporting on neighbors who allegedly have Coronavirus and are violating quarantine. Here are some resources on how to do so:

SeniorHomes.com article on identifying bullying and strategies to address it:  
<https://www.seniorhomes.com/bullying-in-senior-living-communities/>

National Center for Assisted Living, Bullying Among Seniors (and Not the High School Kind), A Prevention and Surveillance Resource for Assisted Living Providers:  
<https://www.ahcancal.org/ncal/operations/Documents/Bullying%20Among%20Seniors.pdf>

Right at Home article on combatting bullying:  
<https://www.rightathome.net/blog/seniors-bullying-seniors>

## Resources

This is a non-exhaustive list of potentially helpful resources to access.

DHCD COVID-19 Communication and Guidance:  
<https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-dhcd-website>

MA DPH COVID-19 Communications:  
<https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

National Council on Aging list of resources for food, medications, elder care locator, etc.:  
<https://www.ncoa.org/covid-19-resources-for-older-adults/>

EMPath compiled a list of resources to assist vulnerable families and individuals in Massachusetts:  
<https://www.empathways.org/covid19resources>

Center for Disease Control Tips and Tools for Coping: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/index.asp>

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Network of Care is an online resource for finding behavioral health and social services across the state: <https://massachusetts.networkofcare.org/mh/index.aspx>

AARP: Multiple articles and links to resources for how to fight social isolation with seniors:  
<https://www.aarp.org/caregiving/?intcmp=GLBNAV-PL-CAR>

National Disaster Distress Hotline: Call 1-800-985-5990 for immediate support 24/7 for emotional support and crisis counseling for anyone experiencing distress or other mental health concerns. Calls and texts (text TalkWithUs to 66746) are answered by trained counselors who will listen to concerns, explore coping and other available supports, and offer referrals to community resources for follow-up care and support.

CVS Pharmacy Deliveries: CVS offers home delivery for some medication orders. Controlled substances and medications requiring refrigeration cannot be delivered. Sign up online at [www.CVS.com](http://www.CVS.com). Free delivery is being offered until May 10, 2020 according to CVS's website.

Housing and Consumer Education Centers are run by the Regional Administering Agencies across the Commonwealth and distribute RAFT and support for people with housing needs.  
<https://www.masshousinginfo.org/>