



Housing

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Current Status/Trends

Access to safe and secure housing is a critical measure of overall health and a necessary precondition for any “stay at home” restriction to be effective. COVID-19 has exacerbated relatively low housing vacancy, shortage of housing stock, and uncertain employment prospects in a time of diminishing oil prices and state revenue shortfalls. Housing needs exist on a continuum and include both maintenance of existing housing circumstances as well as a variety of temporary, emergency, and transitional housing resources to address more vulnerable individuals and households. In 2019, there were 523 chronically homeless individuals in Anchorage.¹ Housing circumstances are inextricably linked to overall economic health, employment status, and opportunity for mobility through access to higher education. It is a major contributor to one’s sense of safety and security and influences a variety of social and environmental health indicators, including mental health, alcohol and substance use, and domestic violence.

Influence of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions in Anchorage

Current federal and state policy offers some protection against eviction, mortgage default, credit damage, and other forms of economic harm. Under the CARES act, eviction protections are set to expire July 25. This applies to all federally backed loans, including HUD, VA, Section 8, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, USDA rural development, etc. Impacts from COVID-19 on housing may not be fully realized until fall and winter months (2020-2021). As the municipality progresses into future phases of its reopening plan, expect vulnerabilities to emerge in more acute, emergency, and temporary housing contexts, as families on the fringe increasingly find themselves without the means to maintain their existing housing circumstances.

Relevant Responses from Elsewhere

Much of the federal response thus far has been driven by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Labor, which includes critical protections for workers that translate directly into housing. Examples include expanded unemployment benefits, flexibility in leave guidelines, and suspension of foreclosures and evictions until July 25. The medium and longer-term impacts of what happens after this period have not been considered and it will be important for the Municipality of Anchorage to monitor housing circumstances as we progress into subsequent phases of the municipal reopening plan. The US Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has authority to issue additional guidance on protections for elderly, pregnant, and disabled tenants. However, without additional federal support, state and local governments will continue to be stretched thin and this will undoubtedly have an impact on working families across the state.

Suggested Monitoring

- Shelter utilization, including by demographics such as age, gender, race, etc.
- Number of available shelter beds
- Positive COVID-19 cases detected among shelter users
- Available housing stock
- Applications for housing assistance
- Unemployment applications
- Utilization of housing assistance by special populations, such as elderly, pregnant, and disabled individuals

Recommendations

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- Leverage existing synergy between local and statewide housing and homelessness coalitions and regional housing authorities, including Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC) and Cook Inlet Housing Authority (CIHA) to access available federal and state relief dollars and assist in distributing them to vulnerable individuals and families.
- Create a single, municipal point of contact for housing-related questions and concerns. Citizens can call-in to a central number or access online, indicate their specific housing need and circumstance, and get connected to existing resources in our community. A brief determination of housing need form could be developed, collected electronically and/or over the phone, and responses tracked to inform ongoing municipal efforts.
- As weather warms and shelter overflows translate into homeless encampments, consider expansion of mobile street outreach clinics.ⁱⁱ Possible partnerships with UAA MEDEX program in the Division of Population Health Sciences and the Nursing School (UAA, College of Health).
- Consider rapid implementation of mobile sanitation stations in strategic locations in our community. Such stations could include handwashing and sanitation facilities, mobile shower units, and possible health screening stations.
- Support alternative shelter locations that allow for isolation and quarantine of individuals who are positive, or, symptomatic, for COVID-19.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Allocate emergency funds for rent subsidization, extend protection against evictions through the end of the calendar year 2020 at minimum, and address substandard housing conditions that could worsen existing health conditions and/or prevent citizens from safely sheltering in place should the need arise again.

Additional Support Available from UAA, if Requested

- Create a brief determination of housing need form.
- Implement housing stability assessment to understand changes in housing circumstances and identify emerging vulnerabilities.
- Host a series of town hall events to provide opportunities for community members to share their experiences with housing and contribute to solutions.

ⁱ Institute for Community Alliances. (2019). Alaska Communities Dashboard. Retrieved from: <https://icalliances.org/alaska-communities-dashboard/>

ⁱⁱ Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. (2020). COVID-19 Intervention Actions: Supporting Individuals Experiencing Homelessness. Retrieved from: <https://www.astho.org/COVID-19/Supporting-Individuals-Experiencing-Homelessness/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. (2020). COVID-19 Intervention Actions: Supporting Individuals Experiencing Homelessness. Retrieved from: <https://www.astho.org/COVID-19/Supporting-Individuals-Experiencing-Homelessness/>