



Healthy Aging in Supportive Housing

Toolkit for service providers, developers & property managers



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I. Introduction: A Changing Tide

What is often referred to as the “invisible population,” (homeless and formerly homeless elders¹ age 50 and older), can no longer be overshadowed or overlooked. The population has grown significantly - nearly half all single homeless adults are over age 50. The median age of homelessness has risen steadily² and the trend shows no signs of reversing. Projections indicate that the number of vulnerable elders will in fact double by 2050.³ Many people living on the streets are aging and those who have experienced chronic homelessness have been prioritized for housing over the past decade. Further, elders currently in stable housing are at greater risk of homelessness than ever before.⁴

This population has a unique set of needs that distinguishes it from both the homeless and the general elderly populations. Aging adults who have been homeless experience chronic illnesses and geriatric conditions 15-20 years earlier than the general population and are more vulnerable when living unsheltered, subject to isolation, rapidly deteriorating health and premature mortality.⁵ The average life expectancy for an elder who has experienced homelessness is 63 years versus 80 years for those who have not.

Supportive housing, a proven intervention for meeting the unique and complex needs of formerly homeless individuals, is also experiencing a “graying” tenant population that calls for changes to the way that quality supportive housing is delivered. More elderly tenants now than ever before are living in supportive housing developments. About 40% of tenants are now over age 50 - tenants housed years ago have aged in place, and newly housed tenants come from a homeless population that has aged. It is no surprise given this changing tide that affordable and supportive housing developers and service programs across the nation are responding by designing and developing more projects and programs that specifically target aging and elderly adults.⁶ Supportive housing providers are finding that they must view quality housing through an aging lens and deliver solutions that meet these unique needs.

¹ Note: due to the unique characteristics of aging adults who have experienced homelessness, we are defining vulnerable elders as individuals who are age 50 and older, who have experienced homelessness. This population experiences premature geriatric conditions and complex health and mobility issues that are more reflective of people who are 65 and older.

² [2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress](#)

³ [Home to Stay: Quality Supportive Housing for Aging Tenants](#)

⁴ Goldberg, J., Lang, K., and Barrington, V. Justice in Aging, Special Report (2016). *How to Prevent and End Homelessness Among Older Adults*.

⁵ The average life expectancy of single homeless adults is 64 for males and 69 for females.

⁶ Supportive and affordable housing pipelines in NY, MA, OH, CA (just to name a few) show many new senior housing projects in development.



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As this population becomes increasingly visible, it is time to devote attention to solutions that meet the unique housing, health and social support needs of vulnerable elders. This toolkit provides key insights, resources and lessons learned that will equip supportive housing stakeholders to develop the solutions that work for their communities. The toolkit focuses on three populations of vulnerable elders that can be served effectively in supportive housing:

1. **Vulnerable elders** (age 50 and older) who have experienced homelessness and have recently secured housing
2. Vulnerable elders who have been living in supportive housing for several years and are **aging in place**
3. Vulnerable elders **living in institutional care** who could live more independently in supportive housing.

This toolkit is for those who want to develop housing solutions for vulnerable elders by creating, enhancing and delivering quality supportive housing. This guide will be especially useful for:

- **Supportive housing developers** that would like to rehabilitate or build new housing projects that effectively meet the needs of aging and elderly tenants.
- **Property managers** that would like to modify or enhance existing or new housing facilities and/or units to effectively meet the needs of aging and elderly tenants, and to plan for future modifications or enhancements as tenant needs change.
- **Service providers** that would like to better meet the complex health and housing stability needs of aging and older tenants in supportive housing.
- **Policy makers** who would like to develop upstream solutions to meeting the needs of this population

