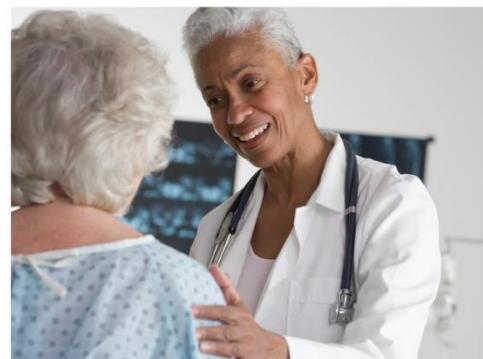




Healthy Aging in Supportive Housing

Toolkit for service providers, developers & property managers



September 2016



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IX. Healthy Aging in Quality Supportive Housing: Project Design

Project design and administration is the process of planning and leading the supportive housing project, including key decisions about physical structure, team members and funding. This generally refers to new single-site or scattered site housing projects, though it can also involve remodeled housing developments.

Whether the supportive housing project is a new or remodeled one, the design of it is a comprehensive process that requires considerations for how tenant needs may change over time, and how environmental and physical features and service programs can work together to meet tenant needs in every stage of his/her life. New projects should also pay special attention to considerations of quality when designing the project. The project should aim to meet the needs of vulnerable elders by ensuring that the new project or remodel is tenant centered, accessible, coordinated, integrated and sustainable.

Tenant Centered Project Design

Tenant centered project design involves feedback and participation in the planning and design process, and a commitment from project stakeholders to ensure that tenants are able to thrive in the housing. This requires an understanding of the unique needs of vulnerable elders mentioned above. Involving input from this population when designing a project can include holding focus groups, having representatives from the population involved in project planning, surveying the population and hosting facilitated meetings to solicit community feedback.

Involving various housing project stakeholders in the project design process will lead to better understanding of short and long-term needs of staff, service partners and most importantly, the tenants. Housing that targets seniors should also consider connecting with other supportive housing providers or project developers that serve the same target population to build anticipated future tenant needs into the project design.

Accessible Project Design

An accessible project is affordable to tenants, is physically accessible in an accessible location and accommodates the special needs of tenants. Though there are not often many choices as to the location of a single- or scattered-site housing development, the project site, building and units can be designed in a way that makes them more accessible to vulnerable elders.





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The project may require some specific design considerations. For example, as health is such a large need area for vulnerable elders, having no health clinics, hospitals or health centers nearby could hinder access to these needed services. A project may find that it would best serve tenants to build an on-site medical and/or mental health clinic operated by the housing project team and partners or, for example, to provide the space for a partner agency such as a Federally Qualified Health Center to operate a full-service or satellite clinic.

On-site healthcare

One approach to design, mentioned above, would be to build a space for a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) into the supportive housing project and contract with a FQHC to operate a full-service or satellite clinic in the space. Often, most new tenants are already connected to health care and will not transfer to the on-site FQHC. Planning for this approach must therefore include a careful assessment of demand for health care services in the community, and due diligence around legal and funding restrictions that such a model may bring.

Other possible on-site amenities to consider that may require build-out

New housing projects might consider multi-use areas, rooms or spaces on site, depending on the size of the site, funding, zoning restrictions and other various factors. Many single-site housing projects, especially newer projects, are going beyond housing units only. In the design of a housing project that serves vulnerable elders, consider the following amenities:

- **On-site community or senior centers:** These could be great spaces for on-site service delivery through partnership with a community senior center. Alternatively, the space could act as a community center for various populations in the community, which could increase social opportunities for vulnerable residents who tend to isolate.
- **Fitness rooms:** the site might consider these to promote health and wellness, though it is advisable to seek advice from projects that have incorporated fitness centers or gyms to ensure that tenants will use these spaces.
- **Communal kitchens:** Communal kitchens are a great amenity to promote tenant socialization and can serve as spaces for tenants to host friends and family, host resident events or to serve as a space for cooking meals for residents who are not able to do so, and to host cooking classes to support residents who are able to cook.
- **Outdoor spaces:** outdoor spaces should be planned carefully to ensure they are accessible for tenants with mobility issues. Designated outdoor smoking areas are strategies that can be built into design to prevent tenants from smoking in their



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rooms, if housing rules require them to not do so. Outdoor spaces can also include recreational spaces, gardens, small parks and patios.

- **Learning/technology centers:** Vulnerable elders may not have their own technology devices or the internet. A learning center or computer lab could provide the means for tenants to communicate with friends and family retrieve information and learn how to use technology.
- **On-site retail:** Some housing projects are multi-use and include ground-floor retail space. This space could be used in a number of different ways from renting it to an external business or launching a social enterprise that benefits vulnerable elders (e.g. café with social activities, convenience store, a restaurant that could make meals for residents, etc.).

Plan project near transportation lines

Some communities offer financial incentives for developing projects along transportation lines. According to several supportive housing providers profiled in this toolkit, the lack of transportation is a barrier to accessing many services and community amenities and can lead to missed appointments and isolation. Anticipating this need during the design process can bring more options than managing the problem as it arises.

Developers can plan sites near transportation lines when possible, or work with the community to determine the feasibility of extending transportation service to the location of the housing site (altered bus/tram route).

Build a transportation program or service into the plan

When there are no transportation options within a few hundred feet, the project could consider building a transportation program into site and service program operations. This could include:

- Partnering with local agencies to create a public transportation stop at the residence site (bus, tram, subway, etc.)
- Securing dedicated vehicles such as vans managed by property management (single site) or the service team (scattered site)
- Considering innovative partnerships: use of special education school buses, collaboration with Uber or Lyft (use of taxi vouchers for these services for on demand senior transport, or explore a grant opportunity)
- Maximizing the existing resources in the community (see Services section above).

Unit design for accessibility

Accessible unit design is configuring units and including features that meet tenant needs in the long term. This includes structural accommodations like wide hallways and doors,



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larger size rooms and bathrooms, storage closets for scooters and no-step entry ways. Features include grab bars, lowered counter tops, adjustable-height closet rods, emergency pull chords, adjustable-height furniture and raised toilet seats. The use of Universal Design features in housing is a best practice for serving populations of any age, including vulnerable elders – though, it should be noted that vulnerable elders require some accommodations that are not specifically mentioned in Universal Design resources. See the Sustainable Project Design section below.

Resources:

- [CSH Resource Guide for Developing and Operating Supportive Housing](#)

Coordinated Project Design

In coordinated supportive housing projects, the housing partners (developer, property manager and services providers/partners) work collaboratively to ensure that all housing and service operations are coordinated with clear communication and written agreements when needed. When designing a project for vulnerable elders, it is crucial to consider the many different healthcare system partners that will need to be engaged to effectively serve tenants as they age. It is also important to consider the way the physical environment can facilitate or hinder independent and safe living. Involving key stakeholders in the project development team with intentional efforts to coordinate design will result in a project that better meets the needs of vulnerable elders. This includes involving members of the tenant population, service partners, and property management staff. Including peer organizations that have developed similar housing projects will help mitigate risks and can bring new insights and ideas to your project, whether it's single- or scattered-site.

Integrated Project Design

Integrated projects meet or exceed community standards and housing and community partners collaborate throughout the project design process.

Sustainable Project Design

Designing sustainable projects means that the project will remain financially viable in the long-term and can remain affordable. This also means, for the aging population, that the building and units can accommodate the unique needs of vulnerable elders now, as well as their changing needs as they age in place.

Some developers have employed **Universal Design** principles into their developments as a way to anticipate aging in place and accommodate increasing needs for in-home care and



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physical supports. *Universal Design*¹ provides a comprehensive framework for addressing housing accommodations by using features and products that make homes safer and more comfortable, that promote independence and that are flexible to allow for changing physical configurations when needed. Some units may need to abide by ADA guidelines and others may simply need to have built-in adaptability in the case that tenants require accommodations. In addition, universal design aims to increase health and social participation.² Required elements of universal design standards include barrier-free or adaptable showers; extra-wide stairs, hallways, and doors to accommodate those in wheelchairs, reachable switches and outlets, a fully accessible bathroom on the ground floor of the building, step-free entranceways, rocker-panel light switches, non-slip floor areas, installation of kitchen sink/drainpipes/countertops at a lower height and lever-style handles.³

There are also unique physical unit features that developers often overlook when designing a project for vulnerable elders. One common need among vulnerable elders is a space to charge mobility equipment like scooters. As residential units for seniors can often be small, there is also the need to store mobility equipment. **Potiker City Heights Residence**⁴, an affordable and supportive housing project in San Diego, California, used lessons learned from a previous housing project to incorporate features that meet these unique needs. The project built storage closets into resident hallways that had raised electrical outlets for charging scooters. This gave residents a place to store and charge their scooters so they would not use up space in their units. Other lessons learned included:

- Residents worry about their safety in the event of an emergency. Developing a comprehensive emergency evacuation plan in case of emergencies. This includes ensuring that emergency professionals know which residents/units require special assistance during evacuation.
- Many vulnerable elders rely on electricity for mobility equipment, in-home care equipment, communications, medications, etc. Residents worry about power outages and how that might impact their lives. Housing projects that have generators can minimize these fears and provide a way for residents to have power after an emergency or natural disaster.
- Units with full-size refrigerators better accommodate vulnerable elders who receive meal deliveries. This population often keeps several days' worth of frozen meals stored in their kitchens after acquiring these meals or having them delivered. The small refrigerators provided in many supportive housing units are not large enough

¹ The Seven Principles of Universal Design are outlined here: <http://nhi.org/online/issues/148/housingforall.html>

² Habitat for Humanity pilots universal design principles: <http://www.buffalo.edu/news/releases/2016/07/016.html>

³ http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs-housing_americas_older_adults_2014-ch4.pdf

⁴ <http://www.cityheightssquare.com/>



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to accommodate multiple frozen meals, drinks and in some cases, medications as well.

Resources:

- [Universal Design Principles](#)

