



# Healthy Aging in Supportive Housing

*Toolkit for service providers, developers & property managers*



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### VIII. Healthy Aging in Quality Supportive Housing: Property Management

Providing quality supportive housing for vulnerable adults requires accommodating and flexible property management practices that will meet short-term environmental needs and long-term needs that allow tenants to safely age in place. As this toolkit has illustrated, housing presents a unique challenge for the senior population with its higher prevalence of fixed income, physical disability and limited mobility. Some existing supportive housing requires only modest environmental modifications, but in a scattered-site model, significant rehabilitation is often needed to make buildings and units accessible.<sup>1</sup> Modest capital improvements may include: distinct entryways to apartments, ramps, accessible kitchens and bathrooms, grab bars, emergency communication and adaptive technologies. Adherence to Universal Design principles and the creation of dementia-friendly spaces are key examples of how providers are improving accessibility to help maintain independence.

#### ***Tenant centered property management***

Staff educates tenants on their rights and responsibilities as lease holders. Tenant assessments and feedback should inform needed unit modifications that go beyond the minimum ADA requirements. Vulnerable elders will likely need additional support with rental applications, unit leases and other housing paperwork. This may include special accommodations for the hearing impaired, the cognitively impaired and those with vision issues.

#### ***Accessible property management***

Tenants move into housing quickly when housing is accessible and available. Accessible housing accommodates varying backgrounds, cultural needs and physical accessibilities. Property managers should develop a clear process for tenants to request unit accommodations and ensure a fast turnaround when making these accommodations. Leading practices go further this, anticipating modifications outside of legal requirements to allow tenants to age safely and comfortably, and to prevent tenants from entering institutions.

#### ***Coordinated Property Management***

Coordinating across housing and service systems is of incredible importance for meeting the needs of vulnerable elders. When coordinating property management activities, property management staff works closely with service providers and landlords to ensure tenants sustain stable housing. This can include establishing a communication strategy for when tenants require accessibility adaptations or need modifications to facilitate in-home care and supports. This also involves having a clear emergency protocol that is communicated to

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<sup>1</sup> [Home to Stay: Quality Supportive Housing for Aging Tenants](#)



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all involved partners across systems, as well as to tenants. Emergency personnel should be able to easily access a list of tenants requiring mobility assistance in the event of an emergency. Property managers should also be aware of behavioral health crisis protocol and should have 24-hour access to crisis support for their residents.

### ***Integrated Property Management***

Independence and choice are paramount in supportive housing. When property management is integrated, tenants have a lease just like anyone else. Tenants are also able to choose from multiple housing units in the community if options are available. This can also be choice in unit configuration or color scheme. This can be particularly important for vulnerable elders who may benefit from visual features and cues that can help with memory loss issues.

### ***Sustainable Property Management***

Sustainable property management means that units are maintained and managed over time to meet the needs of tenants. This includes regular repairs and unit modifications as required by law and when possible, unit features that go beyond legal requirements to meet long-term needs. Unit sustainability requires a quick turnaround on unit modification requests and repairs. It also requires seeking and securing the funding to accommodate features, structural changes and equipment that may be funded by various sources.

### **Housing Unit Modifications**

Vulnerable elders entering supportive housing may need unit adaptations that differ from younger tenants due to mobility issues and early onset geriatric conditions. Tenants who have been aging in place find themselves in housing units that were designed to meet their needs at a time when their needs were less complex. Meeting needs that will vary over time requires making accommodations for the long term that continuously support tenants as they age.<sup>2</sup>

Property modifications include structural changes, the installation of special equipment and adjusting the location of items like furniture. Unit modifications promote independence and make living spaces safer and more secure. Examples of modifications for tenants with disabilities are:

- ***Structural changes:*** widening hallways and doorways, adding a first-floor bathroom, ramps, stair lifts

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/SeniorHousing\\_Ent.pdf](https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/SeniorHousing_Ent.pdf)



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- **Features, equipment and technology:** grab bars, handrails, removable shower heads, phones for hearing impaired, monitoring technology, monitoring and alert systems, brighter lighting, emergency lights, rugs/carpets fastened to floor, adjustable-height closet rods
- **Assistive devices:** bath/shower benches, walkers, canes, emergency pull chords and buttons, wheelchairs, Braille, magnification devices
- **Changing location/configuration:** moving furniture, raised furniture, raised toilet seats, lowered beds, lowered counter tops

Property managers in supportive housing often respond to ADA accommodations requests<sup>3</sup> as they arise, though, more proactive measures can be taken. Some developers and property managers employ Universal Design<sup>4</sup> elements that anticipate issues than may arise for tenants aging in place and provide for future home care needs.<sup>5</sup> The majority of existing supportive housing units does not have one or more of the five key elements of universal design that are beneficial for elders: no-step entry, single-floor living, wide doorways and hallways, accessible electric controls and switches and lever-style doors and faucets. Costs to make these upgrades can be rather prohibitive and resources vary by locality.

**Paying for unit modifications:** Unit modifications can be cost prohibitive for property managers, especially if modifications include expensive equipment, appliances or renovation. Medicaid can help finance certain accessibility modifications in many states, though funding them in this way can only happen if there are no other sources of funds to cover them. Other sources vary by state and locality and include Consolidated Plan funds, State Housing Finance Agency programs, Veterans Administration programs, Vocational Rehabilitation Programs and State Assistive Technology programs.<sup>6</sup> There are also local grants and publically-funded programs that can pay for adaptations like unit modifications.

### **Resources:**

- [Locate your area's Center for Independent Living](#)
- [National Resource Center on Supportive Housing & Home Modifications](#)
- [State Assistive Technology Programs](#)
- [Home Modification Resource Guide](#)
- [The Center for Aging Services Technology](#)
- [Principles of Universal Design](#)

<sup>3</sup> Federal law requires reasonable unit modifications from both private and federally-assisted rental housing for tenants with disabilities. Landlords participating in the Housing Choice Voucher program and not required to pay for unit modifications, but they must permit them.

<sup>4</sup> A detailed overview of Universal Design is provided in the next section.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.methlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/SeniorHousing\\_Ent.pdf](https://www.methlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/SeniorHousing_Ent.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [Housing Capacity Building Initiative for Community Living: Reasonable Modifications Under Fair Housing Laws and Potential Funding Sources](#)



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- [Local Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Sources for Home/Unit Modifications](#)
- [Home Improvement Structural Alterations](#) Program (funds some modifications for veterans)
- [Wells Fargo Housing Foundation](#) (funding for supportive housing providers that target adults with disabilities)

### Physical Supports for Geriatric Conditions

#### ***Preventing Falls***

Older tenants in supportive housing are prone to falling at younger ages and falls are the leading cause of injury for this population. This can lead to hospital stays and serious health conditions. Project and unit design features and intentional furnishings can help prevent falls as tenants age. These include installing grab bars in bathrooms and elsewhere in the unit, installing ample lighting in the unit and in common areas, ensuring there are no tripping hazards in furnishings such as low stools and tables, and considering built-in furniture that could be used as support.<sup>7</sup>The CDC also recommends a number of health and wellness practices to prevent falls, including having regular eye exams, evaluating medications for side-effects, and promoting exercise for balance.<sup>8</sup>

The Cathedral Square Corporation in Vermont recently piloted a model for better coordinating on-site health services to help aging residents stay independent, a program called Support and Services at Home (SASH). In its first year alone, the SASH program helped reduce falls by 22 percent and hospital admissions by 19 percent. Those outcomes translated into an estimated \$40 million in healthcare savings, mostly from Medicare.<sup>9</sup>

[Click here to access CSH project profile on Mercy Housing Lakefront](#)

#### ***Adaptations for cognitive impairment and dementia***

Intentional design features or modifications can be made to a housing project's physical environment and in units to lessen the challenges of dementia. The use of color has been particularly effective in helping tenants navigate their environment and remember concepts over details, reinforcing spatial memory. Woodside Place, an assisted-living community in Pennsylvania, incorporated the use of different colors for resident units that matched staff uniform colors, which were easier for residents to remember. Resident

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<sup>7</sup>[http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs-housing\\_americas\\_older\\_adults\\_2014-ch4.pdf](http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs-housing_americas_older_adults_2014-ch4.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>[http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs-housing\\_americas\\_older\\_adults\\_2014-ch4.pdf](http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/jchs-housing_americas_older_adults_2014-ch4.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>[http://www.leadingage.org/uploadedFiles/Content/About/CAST/Newsroom/Cathedral\\_Square\\_Corporation\\_Cast\\_Study.pdf](http://www.leadingage.org/uploadedFiles/Content/About/CAST/Newsroom/Cathedral_Square_Corporation_Cast_Study.pdf)



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hallways are themed with themed art installations that serve as environmental landmarks and visual cues.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Adapted from: How subtle, clever architectural decisions can help people living with dementia.

<http://www.upworthy.com/how-subtle-clever-architectural-decisions-can-help-people-living-with-dementia?c=upw1>