

# Supporting Tenants During COVID-19 Using Technology Based Strategies

*Tips for Using Technology to Support Tenants in Supportive Housing*



Due to COVID-19, stay in place and social distancing protocols, supportive housing providers have been utilizing technology to stay connected and support tenants during this difficult time. In the context of remaining socially distant and preventing greater spread of COVID-19, supportive housing providers can use telephone, smart phone or other technology options to give the best possible support to their tenants. Technology can be used as a complement to face-to-face services, and also as a service on its own. Technology options can be especially useful for people with depression or suffering from distress, and when there are difficulties in physically meeting with tenants. The most important feature of any communication is the quality of the relationship between the tenant and the case manager. Tenant choice and public health concerns for staff and tenants need to be balanced as the world adapts to COVID-19.

## Addressing Technology Needs for Tenants:

STEP

1

### ASSESS ACCESS, NEED AND COMFORT USING TECHNOLOGY

For each tenant, understand:

- What technology does the tenant have already?
- Does the tenant have WIFI Access?
- What is their data plan?
- What makes the most sense, given their budget, needs and the agency's ability to support?
- How does the tenant use the technology they have?

Tenant choice should remain a primary driver of how services are delivered. What is the tenant's comfort level and preferences among the following options?

- Communicating over the phone
- Texting
- Email
- Using video conferencing / video calls
- Using the internet for online applications, accessing information, ordering supplies and groceries
- Using social media to stay connected to loved ones and support networks

STEP

2

### GET CLIENTS AND TENANTS CONNECTED

Based on your assessment of the above variables for your tenants, develop strategies to put technology solutions in the hands of your tenants. For instance:

**If the tenant does not have a cell phone...**

- Get them one!** See if you can purchase a phone through your funding streams or access cell phone donation services. The [Federal Communications Commission's program](#) may benefit your tenants.
- Match the phone to the tenant's comfort level.** While smartphones will provide more options for service delivery, they may be a barrier for some tenants in terms of their comfort and experience with using them. If cost is the barrier, your agency should consider ways to address that. Be sure to involve your tenant in the decision about what phone would work best for them.



- Consider data plans and connectivity.** Are they able to secure a smartphone with a data plan package? Make sure it includes unlimited data and minutes. Does a carrier have poor coverage in some parts of town? Go with ones that offer the best coverage for where your tenants live.

If a tenant has a cell phone, smart phone, tablet, computer, etc...

- Set up applications and software.** Ensure the software and applications you will be using to deliver remote services are set up and easily accessible via home screen or desktop shortcuts (i.e. video conferencing applications, email, etc.).
- Load contact information.** Ensure case managers and other support team staff are included as contacts within phone, text, email, and other applications and services.
- Add shortcuts to frequently accessed services.** Include links to websites, health care information, and resources for transportation, meals, and any other frequently accessed services directly to the home screen or desktop.
- Ensure phone set up meets accessibility needs.** For example, translation services, larger font sizes, volume controls and settings.
- Consider if current staff can be the IT support for your residents.** Some tenants will need help more frequently than others. Within current staffing and skill sets, consider how staff or tenants can support those who are less comfortable with technology and have more to learn and practice.

STEP

3

## CREATE A PLAN FOR ACCESSING SUPPORTIVE HOUSING AND HEALTH CARE SERVICES REMOTELY

Review with your tenant the preferred ways to communicate, including the frequency, methods, and what to do if an emergency arises. It may be helpful to review these over the phone and provide them in writing via email, text, or printed copy.

### Key questions for supportive housing services include:

- How do you want to receive information?
- What do you want to learn about communicating using other forms of technology?
- How do you want to communicate related to the following:
  - Maintenance issues
  - Neighbor or landlord issues
  - Income and benefits support
  - Healthcare needs
  - Food, transportation, supply needs
- What days or times are best to check-in?
- Who do you call in an emergency?

### Key questions for health care services include:

- Are you insured? What type of insurance? What is your health plan? Do you have a contact there, such as a service coordinator or other regular support?
- Who is your primary care physician or provider? Are you working with a health center for primary care services or for other specialty services?
- Who are your specialty care providers? Do you have specialty Behavioral Health services, clinical care, psychiatry, or case management?
- What telehealth options do they offer? Do you wish to take advantage of these options? What assistance do you need to take advantage of these options?
- Who is your regular pharmacy? Do they have delivery or telehealth options? How can we help you access those?
- When is/was your next appointment for these services? What medications are you taking and more importantly, when will you run out of medication? Do you need a follow-up appointment sooner, due to medications running out?



STEP

4

## REVISIT AND ADJUST PLAN REGULARLY

Recognize there may be a learning curve in delivering remote services through technology. Supportive housing providers need to build in regular adjustments to these plans with tenants as they try new strategies. Be transparent with your tenant about this change (why, who, how) and your willingness to adjust to make it work. Ask for regular feedback on any challenges tenants are having and talk through solutions.

# Technology Strategies in the Supportive Housing Process

The following **Supportive Housing Process Steps** identify technology strategies for delivering key services.

STEP

1

## OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

- Ensure prospective tenants have phones with notifications activated to receive texts and other emergency notifications.
- Ask prospective tenants to share location information with staff so that they can find them quickly.

STEP

2

## HOUSING SEARCH AND LOCATION

- Use virtual tours to show tenants apartments, either through apartment websites, by live-streaming or recording your own videos.
- Use google street maps to show tenants around the neighborhood.

STEP

3

## LEASE UP AND MOVE-IN

- Ask furniture providers to send images of options to you and your tenant.
- Conduct Housing Quality inspections virtually – ask for videos and images from the landlord to gauge the condition of the unit.
- Use electronic or digital signatures.
- Explore electronic payment options for tenants.
- Consider payee options to reduce exposure of your tenant.

STEP

4

## SUPPORT IN THE FIRST 30 DAYS

- Encourage tenants to sign up for neighborhood and community newsletters.
- Anticipate increased support to complete online applications for benefits and services.

STEP

5

## TENANCY SUSTAINING SERVICES

- Ask tenants to show you around their apartment through video conferencing or texting images.
- Set up automatic text reminders to pay rent, take medication, etc. Tenants may also need assistance with online banking.
- Employ a quick screening tool to assess tenant needs and triage for potential in-person visits.



# What About HIPAA?

It is important to remember that the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) covers health care services and that supportive housing can be considered a 'covered entity' with health care providers when they are both serving the same individuals. If a significant portion of your supportive housing tenants are served by a particular health care provider or system, you may want to consider developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or business associates agreement to facilitate communication between your agency and these health care providers to coordinate care. When a small number of persons are shared between organizations, a simple consent or release of information for those individuals will suffice.

For HIPAA covered entities, the U.S. Health and Human Services Office of Civil Rights (OCR) is temporarily permitting the use of remote communication products that allows only the intended parties to participate in the communication ([read notification here](#)) such as Apple FaceTime, Skype, or Zoom.

While using these temporary communication products, consider the following items to help maintain confidentiality:

- Do not save clients' names and phone numbers in your cell phone contacts.
- Once the FaceTime is complete, delete it from your history list.
- Conduct virtual visits in a private space.
- Texting protected health information (PHI) still remains prohibited.

## Tips and Additional Resources

The field of supportive housing providers using technology to directly or indirectly facilitate support and care for your residents is rapidly evolving.

Additional guidance can be found at the following sites:

1. Pathways Vermont [Guidance on Telephonic Case Management](#)
2. Seattle/King County's [Healthier Here Resources](#)
3. Center for Connected Health Policy's [Implementation Resource Guide](#)
4. National Consortium of Telehealth Resource Centers [Telehealth Fact Sheet](#)

The field of telehealth is rapidly evolving. While many people will benefit from this shift, others will need specific resources or supports to benefit from the shift and still others will not make the shift and will still need face-to-face contacts. The supportive housing field has always prioritized resident choice and creative ways to address the needs of their residents. The shift to telehealth and using technology to support residents will be no different.