

Housing Is Critical to Our Community's Health

By the Community Council Affordable Housing Implementation Task Force Subcommittee on Public Outreach & Education

Stay home, stay healthy. We hear that over and over as we navigate the COVID-19 pandemic. But what if you can't stay home in order to stay healthy? What if you are struggling to pay rent and you're on the verge of losing your home? For the health of our region, we need to come together as a community to make the *stay home, stay healthy* mandate a reality for everyone.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic crisis, our region was already facing a housing crisis. In 2018 and 2019, Community Council facilitated a community-led study on affordable housing. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a housing unit is considered "affordable" when housing costs do not exceed 30% of pre-tax income. The Community Council Affordable Housing Study found that over 40% of households that pay rent or a mortgage in our region (Columbia and Walla Walla counties and the Milton-Freewater area) paid more than 30% of their pre-tax income on housing, leaving them cost-burdened. A larger proportion of low-income households experienced this cost burden than wealthier households.

The COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis are worsening our already existing housing crisis. Many households in our region were already living in homes they couldn't afford. Now add the stress of job or income loss that prevents them from paying rent or a mortgage, buying food, and accessing health care. Many residents live paycheck to paycheck and have jobs that can't be done remotely. So the loss of income and in some cases, employer-provided health insurance, is devastating. For example, [a nationwide poll conducted in May](#) found that 58% of respondents were concerned that the coronavirus outbreak would impact their ability to cover their housing costs. And 46% reported that they have had to make at least one financial sacrifice since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak to make sure they could stay in their homes. Sacrifices included cutting back on healthy food, stopping retirement savings, and/or accumulating added debt to help cover their housing costs.

Renters are particularly vulnerable in this crisis. According to a survey conducted by the Federal Reserve last month, 23% of renters had experienced job loss or reduced hours, compared to 17% of homeowners. Before the pandemic hit, the Community Council study found that rental vacancy rates in Walla Walla County were 1.7%, and an even lower-- 0.5%-- for studio and one-bedroom units, which were among the lowest rates in Washington State. Low rental vacancy rates mean that renters are competing for a small supply of housing, which helps to drive prices up. That kind of housing squeeze hits those with limited resources most severely, and may leave them struggling to find a home in which to "shelter in place". Those now depending on unemployment insurance, those who cannot do their jobs because they need to stay home to protect their own health and community health, those with large healthcare bills, and others without savings and other resources could now be at risk of debt (or unmanageable debt) or homelessness. How does one who has no home "shelter in place"?

Affordable homes directly underpin our community's health and well-being. When people are not housed or housed in unsafe, overcrowded, or unstable conditions, the virus spreads more easily throughout the community. Coronavirus and the ways it spreads through human interactions has shown us how we're all interconnected. When one of us is vulnerable to the coronavirus, we're all vulnerable to the coronavirus. If we have healthy, stable homes where everyone can safely "shelter in place", we will have a healthier community.

While the coronavirus has triggered an unprecedented crisis, it also presents us with unique opportunities to prioritize the health and security of everyone in our region. The Affordable Housing Implementation Task Force, a group of volunteers from throughout our region, is advocating for a variety of strategies to create more affordable housing here. Though we began our work before the pandemic struck, we believe that the COVID-19 crisis highlights just how important safe and affordable homes are to our community's well-being. Indeed, the nationwide poll conducted in May found that 86% of respondents thought that preventing evictions and homelessness during the coronavirus outbreak should be considered just as urgent as healthcare assistance. Safe, affordable homes and health go hand-in-hand. The current crisis teaches us that we need to do a better job of creating safe and affordable homes so that everyone can stay healthy.

To find out more about Community Council and the Affordable Housing Study Implementation Task Force, contact Rachel at relfenbein@wwcommunitycouncil.org.