



IDENTIFYING AREAS FOR PUBLIC HOUSING AUTHORITIES TO EXPAND PANDEMIC-RELATED RESOURCES

COVID-19 NEEDS-ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

MARCH 2021

CLPHA recognizes the urgent need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and has been working to best serve member public housing authorities (PHAs) during the current crisis and its associated economic effects. As the pandemic persists, PHA residents continue to be disproportionately affected by its consequences.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In order to identify and address COVID-19 needs and ongoing priorities for our PHA members, CLPHA conducted a survey in winter 2021. The survey received responses from 35 of our PHA members, who provided data organized by areas and population of need and expanded our current informal data collection efforts. CLPHA will use the results to drive priorities in seeking additional resources for PHAs and directing staff capacity in areas of PHA need as the U.S. continues to grapple with the pandemic.

Key findings include:

PHAs lack federal funding to fully meet the challenges created by the pandemic.

Before the pandemic, PHAs were already experiencing strained budgets due to years of chronic disinvestment. The pandemic created new challenges that increased new budgetary burdens. Those challenges included a dramatic need for: expanded staff; reaching vulnerable populations, especially seniors, with health care and services; and increasing internet access for residents.

The pandemic exacerbated the nation's digital divide.

Society was already moving to a more digital culture before the pandemic. That change of pace was dramatically accelerated once the pandemic began, which further left behind some the nation's most vulnerable individuals at a perilous time.

Many PHA residents found themselves without social connections, which can lead to life-threatening isolation. The lack of internet also endangered the health of many seniors without digital access as many health care visits went online.

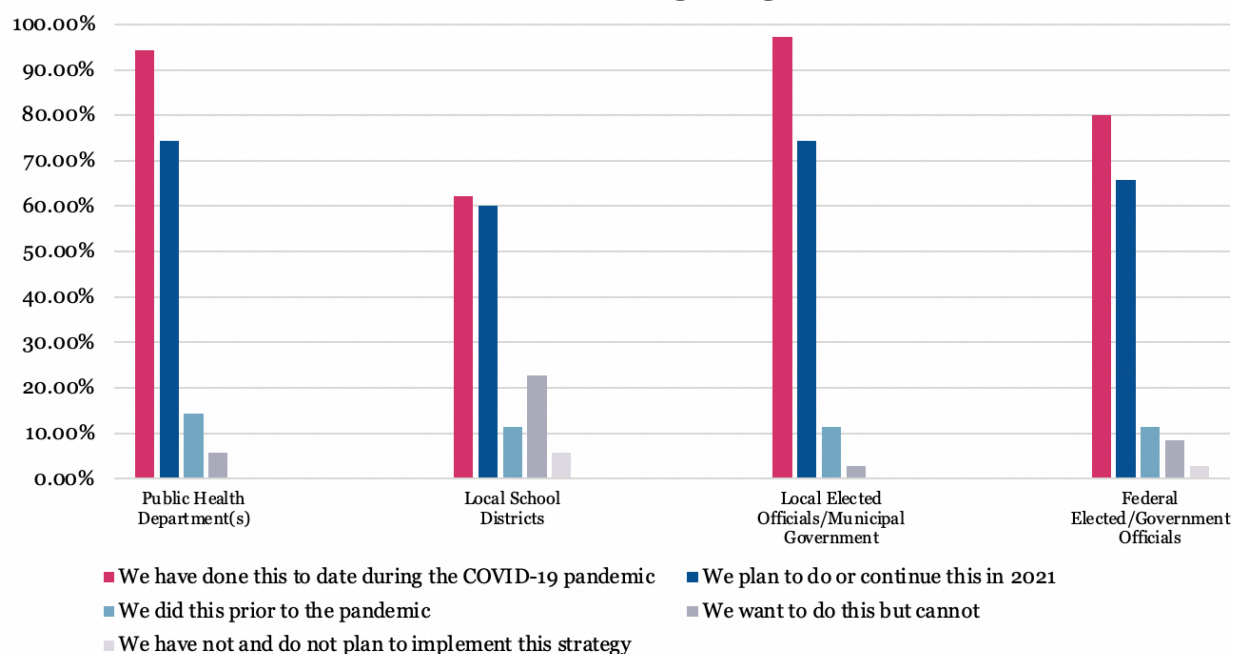
Access to remote education was also disrupted, which can cause students to perform worse academically and create challenges for healthy socioemotional development. This has been particularly problematic for households with multiple children competing for device access and bandwidth. Whether parents work remotely or their jobs remain on-site, they take on added stress when unable to monitor their children's remote learning or keep them up-to-date on school assignments.

FINDINGS

While PHA staff are clearly working to support residents as much as possible through wellness checks, virtual inspections, and care kits filled with personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies, this health crisis has disproportionately affected residents in assisted households. PHA residents are well-represented in the groups most severely impacted by the COVID-19 virus, namely older adults, people of color, people of color experiencing health disparities, and individuals with multiple comorbidities. Furthermore, since many residents live in multifamily buildings it may be difficult to effectively social distance or quarantine when needed.

Throughout the year, PHAs have sought help from multiple partners to implement pandemic response and resident support efforts. 91% of PHA respondents collaborated with public health departments, 97% with their local governments, and 80% with federal elected or government officials. In supporting resident youth, over half of PHAs have already or plan to collaborate with local school districts regarding COVID-19.

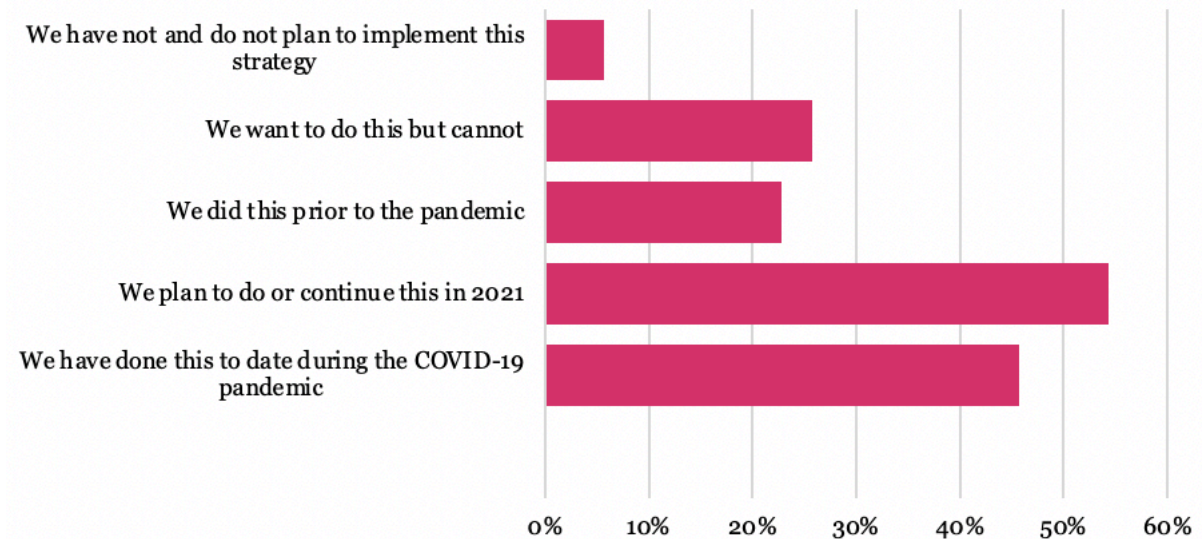
Collaborative Partners Regarding COVID-19



As shelter-at-home continues, the need for digital connectivity is more crucial than ever before: like most Americans, low-income PHA residents need device and internet access for critical functions such as maintaining social connections, utilizing telehealth appointments, and attending school remotely. As the number of Americans with access to quality internet and new technology continues to increase, the digital divide continues to grow wider. While many higher-income households are continually adopting new technologies, groups without access to stable broadband and devices able to handle current versions of software continue to lag behind. Over half of PHAs who completed the survey plan to provide broadband access to their residents, and almost half have already provided device access to their residents. About half of PHAs plan to facilitate or will continue facilitating on-site learning pods for students, while 35% want to do this but cannot.

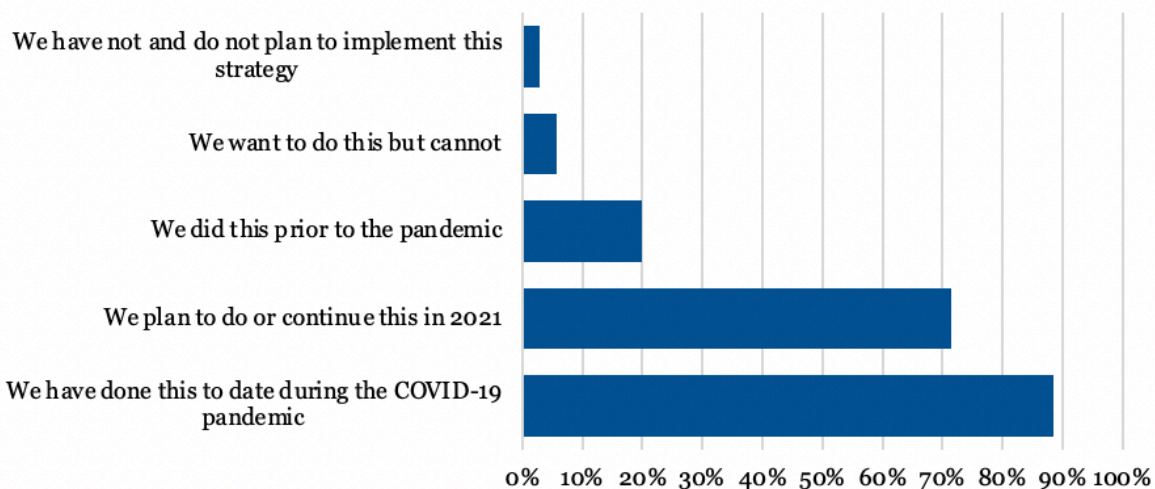
Communicating with residents has also been a challenge this year because of this technological disparity. When residents do not have access to basic internet, it is difficult for PHA staff to reach and get responses from some residents or communicate about public health measures such as testing and mask usage.

Provided Broadband Access to Residents (and/or Subsidized Cost)

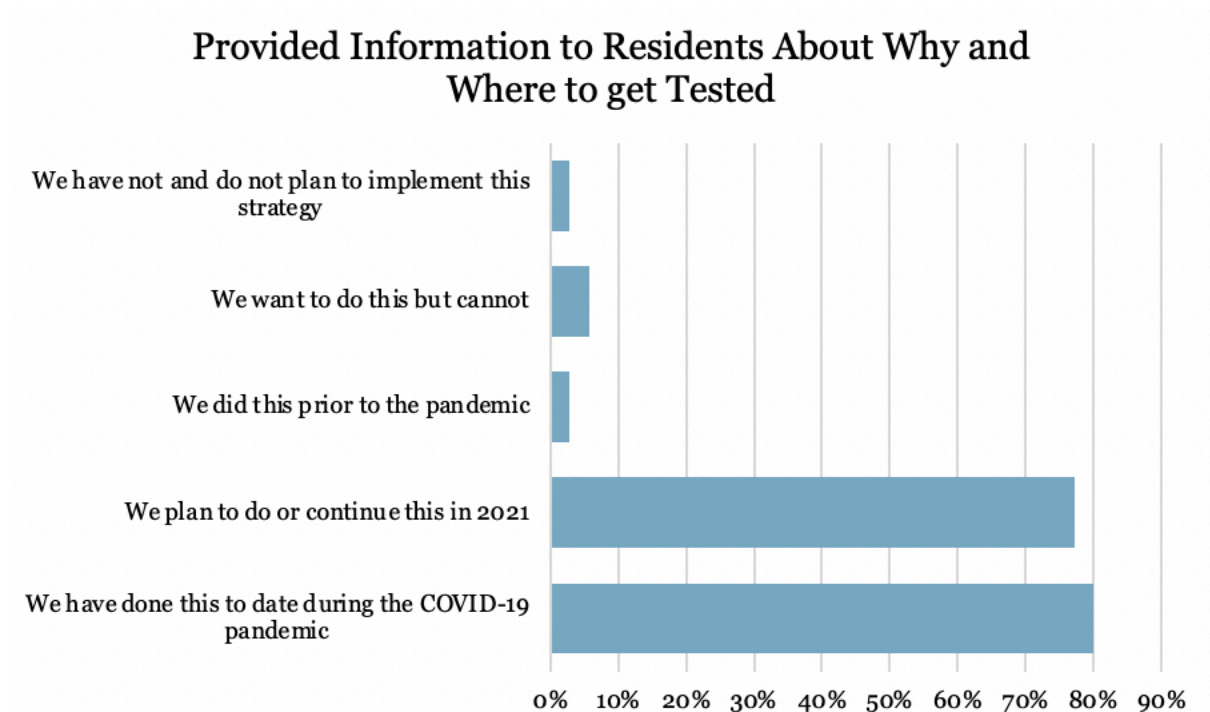


Ensuring health and safety is even more challenging in a PHA setting, given that PHA residents often represent populations most severely affected by COVID-19 and the difficulty of practicing social distancing in PHAs' multifamily communities. Most PHAs said they are trying to overcome these factors by providing toiletry and pantry items to their residents, and almost all respondents facilitated a meal delivery service or other form of food access to their residents. Further, a handful of PHAs changed their in-person unit inspections to either a virtual or self-certification process to ensure the safety of both residents and staff. Most PHAs also provided masks and PPE to their staff and residents.

Facilitated a Meal Delivery Service and Other Forms of Food Access (e.g. Coordination with Free and Reduced School Lunches)



Though a significant number of PHAs wanted to but could not provide access to telehealth appointments, most PHAs provided residents with information on why and where to get tested. 64% of PHAs offer on-site testing, and 88% characterized local access to COVID-19 testing sites as either somewhat accessible or very accessible. As vaccinations continue, most PHAs are working with their local health departments to provide on-site vaccinations at their properties and are educating their residents about eligibility for and access to the vaccine.



Unfortunately, staff have been spread thin throughout the pandemic and PHAs have found it is difficult to maintain the same levels of staff efficiency while working from home. Despite challenges created by PHA employees working from home and having to socially distance from residents, PHAs have been extremely proactive in serving their residents, especially those most at-risk.

The four main challenges that PHAs face as a result of the pandemic are:

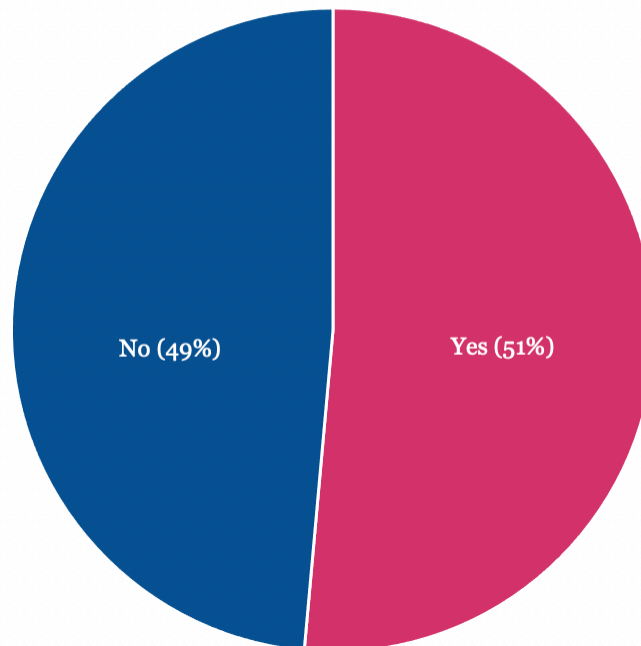
- Supporting residents with emotional needs
- Having insufficient funds to address issues created or exacerbated by the pandemic
- Residents lacking internet access
- Having too few staff available to focus on COVID-specific initiatives.

For example, 40% of all PHAs want to facilitate childcare access for their residents but cannot due to factors like these. Regardless of these challenges, resident feedback for all PHAs was

generally extremely positive and demonstrated that residents were understanding of PHAs limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of what PHAs were able to provide for their residents was due to financial help from outside sources. 85% of PHAs secured emergency response grants or donations related to COVID-19. PHAs are in need of additional resources, as almost half of those surveyed have experienced pandemic costs that cannot be covered by the CARES Act or FEMA, and 68% of PHAs have not or do not plan to seek FEMA reimbursement. While the supplemental funds provided through the CARES Act were a critical resource for PHAs, HUD's restrictions on uses of the funds meant that PHAs could not use the funds to help with rent arrears accumulated during the pandemic. Additional flexibility of funding between programs would have been beneficial not only to PHAs, but to their residents as well.

Are you experiencing any pandemic costs that cannot be covered by CARES or FEMA?



CONCLUSION

This survey indicates and supports anecdotal evidence that PHAs are addressing to the best of their abilities their residents' needs that were created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. PHAs are working diligently with partners such as schools and health departments to most effectively and efficiently use the resources available to them.

But housing authorities are somewhat stymied in these efforts by limited funds. Increased federal funding for PHAs would help them better engage in cross-sector collaboration and expand the programs and services they seek to offer residents during the pandemic and overcome challenges to meeting resident needs. *PHAs' efforts to bridge these service gaps are crucial given that PHA residents represent some of the populations most severely affected not only by the virus itself, but also by its associated economic fallout.*

Additionally, flexible federal funding would help PHAs to provide internet access and devices to residents, offer meal delivery service or food access programs, better connect residents with health resources like COVID-19 testing and vaccination, and/or facilitate access to childcare for residents to ensure they are able to maintain employment. CLPHA will continue to advocate for the allocation of more federal funds so that our PHA members can continue to meet their residents' pandemic-related needs in their communities.

ABOUT CLPHA

The Council of Large Public Housing Authorities is a national non-profit organization that works to preserve and improve public and affordable housing through advocacy, research, policy analysis and public education. CLPHA's 70 members represent virtually every major metropolitan area in the country. Together they manage 40 percent of the nation's public housing program; administer more than a quarter of the Housing Choice Voucher program; and operate a wide array of other housing programs. Learn more at clpha.org and on Twitter [@CLPHA](https://twitter.com/CLPHA).

ABOUT THE HOUSING IS INITIATIVE

The *Housing Is* Initiative, led by the Council of Large Public Housing Authorities, helps build a future where sectors work together to improve life outcomes. Housing stability is a critical first step to improve life outcomes for low-income children, families, and seniors; CLPHA's *Housing Is* Initiative is based on the premise that sectors can better meet needs when they work together. *Housing Is* establishes, broadens, and deepens efforts to align affordable housing, education, and health systems to produce positive, long-term results. Learn more at housingis.org and on Twitter [@housing_is](https://twitter.com/housing_is).