Executive Summary

Home Forward’s Aging-in-Place Initiative
Planning for the Aging in Place of Current and Future Residents. A report by Portland State University’s Institute on Aging

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Executive Summary

This report was prepared on behalf of the Aging in Place Initiative of Home Forward. The Initiative sought to gather information about older persons currently residing in Home Forward’s public housing properties, from persons age 55 and older on the waitlist for housing, and from older adults in the Portland area. While local data were unavailable at the time of this report, we know that nationally, more than one-third (37 percent) of the approximately 5 million households receiving housing assistance from HUD are headed by persons age 62 and older. With this in mind, Home Forward must make decisions now about how to respond to the aging of both current residents and the local community.

The population of older persons has and will continue to increase in Multnomah County, and Oregon. While many older persons enjoy relative economic stability, a sizeable number are very poor and face housing instability and declining health. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the poverty rate among county residents age 65 and older is 10.9%, higher than the national average of 9%. A recent study of Multnomah County adults with incomes at or below 200% of poverty level found that 44% of those who had moved in the prior five years had done so to reduce housing costs.

Lessons about people age 55 and older who applied for public housing or the Section 8 program and are now waitlisted:

- They are diverse
  - They range in age from 55 to 96, just over half are female, and 42% identify as non-White or multi-racial
  - Over half live alone
  - One-fifth had been homeless in the prior 12 months

- They have very low incomes and are in poor health
  - 62% have annual household incomes of less than $10,000
  - Most describe their health as fair or poor
  - About 28% report receiving assistance with activities like shopping, getting around the city, household tasks, laundry, and food preparation
  - Over 40% reported food insecurity in the prior 30 days
  - 71% receive SNAP, or food assistance

- They have varied housing preferences, though most still want to move
  - Nearly 58% applied only to Home Forward, and over 90% are still interested in moving, with over one-fourth wanting to move in the next month
  - Fewer than half want to move into age-restricted housing (e.g., age 55 and older), but 44% indicated interest in housing with services such as housekeeping and meals
  - Preference for senior housing was statistically associated with living alone and with poor health, but not with age or gender
  - The public housing applicants differed from the Section 8 program applicants, with more public housing applicants reporting the lowest income, having been homeless, and food insecurity
In sum, these figures suggest that access to affordable housing is a pressing concern for many older persons, and that public housing (rather than Section 8) is especially attractive to persons who are the poorest and possibly most vulnerable.

Lessons from current Home Forward residents age 55 and older based on four focus group interviews with 25 persons:

- Most residents want to age in place for as long as possible, and many currently receive services from various agencies
- Most are not interested in living in age-restricted housing, though most do not want to live with children. Those who did like to have families with children, or an on-site day care facility where they might volunteer, identified as either African American or Asian
- Current residents have generally positive attitudes about Home Forward as a housing operator, though they had suggested changes as well. The main categories for improvement include
- Building changes: modifications to improve handicapped accessibility, safety (including emergency response within the apartment units), and to create a less institutional feeling
- Program-specific: more social and recreational activities, both on-site and off-site (e.g., trips). Activities should appeal to a wide range of ages and cultural preferences. Addressing the social environment (e.g., cliques, inappropriate visitors or activities such as drug use or prostitution)
- Services and Supports: Increased access to resident services, including weeknight and weekend hours; emergency response that does not require a 911 call; continued access to visiting nurses and social workers; training of resident services staff
- Management: Increase the stability and consistency of managers over time; managers need to listen and respond to older resident’s concerns
- Interest in on-site assisted living: Nearly all focus group participants liked the idea of converting one floor of their building to an assisted living residence where they could access health services and possibly move into if needed in the future

Lessons from Portland area residents age 55 and older based on four focus group interviews with 18 persons:

- About half were interested in age-restricted housing
- Most have positive impressions of Home Forward, but many were uncertain about the difference between this agency and others such as Northwest Pilot Project, HUD, and Aging and Disability Services
- Some have very negative impressions of Home Forward properties and residents, with comments made about crime, noise, and unkempt premises
- The importance of good management to alleviate problems was discussed
- African American participants described an interest in housing that accommodates extended family who might either provide care, or need care from their parent/grandparent
- Participants agreed that an on-site assisted living unit would be a good addition to a Home Forward property because it could prevent residents from moving to a nursing home
Lessons from a market study of the demand for affordable housing among low-income older persons:

The shortage in the supply of affordable housing is a major concern throughout our region. For this study a detailed market analysis of four areas found that, of those areas, only the Downtown region has an adequate number of affordable units. In rank order, the areas with the highest demand include New Columbia (less than 10% of low-income seniors now served), Gresham (17% of low-income seniors now served), and Lloyd District (about 25% of low-income seniors now served).

Key Implications

Demand for Affordable Housing Among Older persons: There is clearly an immediate need for affordable housing among low-income older persons, based on the demographics of Multnomah county, the survey of Home Forward’s waitlisted applicants age 55+, and the market analysis. Nearly 58% of waitlisted survey respondents are not on other affordable housing waitlists; this translates into 735 older persons who are seeking housing support from Home Forward. Over one-fourth of these respondents want to move in the next month, another sign of urgent need.

Building-Specific Implications: The physical appearance of buildings are perceived as institutional and not accommodating to the specific needs of frail older persons.

Supportive Service Implications: The housing and service needs of older persons on the waitlist for public housing and the Section 8 program is of concern, with individuals reporting poor health, food insecurity, and homelessness. Current Home Forward residents are interested in increased access to on-site supportive services, possibly an entire floor of licensed assisted living.

Older persons do not appear to have a strong preference for age-restricted housing: Those that expressed an interest in senior housing were more likely to be in poor health, providing further evidence of the need for supportive services like housekeeping, meals, and health monitoring. Waitlisted individuals who expressed a preference for senior housing are more likely to be in poor health, providing further evidence of the need for supportive services like housekeeping, meals, and health monitoring.

System-Level Implications: Combining housing and services for older persons requires system level changes and partnerships with experts in senior housing and with state agencies that fund health and community-based services (e.g., Medicaid, Oregon Project Independence).