



RESEARCH BULLETIN

Housing as the Base for Care and Support: Older people's housing experiences during Covid-19

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Older people's homes are always important for their safety, security and wellbeing. Fundamental to the home achieving those ideals is the provision of care and support to assist ageing in place. The home's ability to support older people was especially critical when there were higher levels of restriction in level 4 (lockdown) and level 3 restrictions associated with Covid-19. The home-based bubble became the first line of protection and defence against getting the virus, and as such was essential to people's ability to physically distance, quarantine or isolate as required, as well as allow them to continue to give and receive care and support. The need for a warm, safe home was also highlighted at this time.

This bulletin draws out key themes from interviews with fifteen community organisations and housing providers in eight locations providing essential services during Covid-19 lockdown. It is an exploratory qualitative study not intended to provide representative data but to identify issues which may resonate with housing providers working with seniors. The organisations include a range of information, advocacy, social services and housing providers, located in metropolitan, larger provincial and small provincial areas.

The project is part of Component C – Affordability and the Meaning of Home in the Affordable Housing for Generations research programme and had two related aims: (1) to identify the range of senior's housing-related experiences over level 4 and level 3 that came to the notice of organisations that work closely with older people in their communities; and (2) to use that information to assist in the design of an in-depth study with seniors to record the variety of their housing-related experiences during lockdown and since.

Key points

Organisations reported that the main issues for the older people they engaged with during level 4 and level 3 were:

- Food security
- Accessing home-based care services
- Accessing information in the digital world
- Coping in different living environments

Both community organisations and housing providers noted that the lockdown gave them a better understanding of seniors in their communities who need support, and the services available to provide support. Community organisations have developed new ways of communicating with seniors and expanded existing channels. Housing providers have developed new management and tenancy support practices, or re-designed existing practices as a response to residents' needs during lockdown and since.

Why focus on the home as the base for care?

The interviews focused on seniors living independently in private housing in their communities. Seniors living in aged residential care were not within the scope of the interviews. Enabling people to continue to live in their homes and communities as they age relies on the use of the home to enable support from family and others, as well the site where care services, such as personal care, housework, gardening services and meals, are provided. The effective provision of in-home care and support has psychosocial benefits for seniors, such as improved wellbeing and independence. Efficacy depends on housing characteristics such as dwelling size and design, dwelling condition and housing security.¹

The home is not only the base for receiving care and support. The home also enables older people to support others on a temporary or on-going basis. Older people's homes can provide a stable base for kin that is a focal point for support and sharing resources, as well as offering accommodation.

Food security

Organisations noted that a major, and in some places, the most common issue for seniors, was difficulty in accessing food during lockdown and level 3. Organisations continued to receive enquiries about accessing food in level 2. From the start of lockdown, organisations were instrumental in either directly assisting seniors to access food or referring them to other agencies that could provide food.

Many seniors do not buy food in bulk, due to budget constraints or lack of storage facilities. Consequently, they have little food in reserve to tide them over difficult times. Two organisations pointed out that the timing of lockdown, in the week between pension payments placed additional stress on those seniors with limited funds to spend on food. Difficulty in accessing food was exacerbated for those with no family available to drop off supplies, or who were not able to shop online. Even if online shopping was possible, there were long delivery delays, in some instances up to 10-12 days. Those seniors reliant on others to provide cooked food faced additional difficulties in accessing food during lockdown.

There's a tendency for them to say 'I'll be alright for a few days', they don't like to be a burden so you have to drill down, ask, 'do you have enough to eat for dinner tonight?'

Struggling to access food was especially an issue for seniors living alone. Although those aged 70 and older were permitted to leave home to buy food during levels 4 and 3, official Covid-19 messaging strongly urged them to stay at home. Many seniors were reluctant to go out, feeling a mix of anxiety about risk but also wanting to 'obey the rules.' Several organisations questioned whether the valid concern for seniors' safety nevertheless made seniors feel dependent.

¹ Bridge, C., Phibbs, P., Kendig, H., Mathews, M. and Bartlett, H. (2006) *The costs and benefits of using private housing as the 'home base' for care for older people: a systematic literature review* AHURI Positioning Paper No. 94, Melbourne, Australia: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited.

Access to care services

Organisations received a considerable number of queries about care services from seniors, as the provision of home-based care such as personal cares and housework was disrupted during Level 4. Some care providers struggled to maintain staff numbers because they had to stand down workers who were over 70 or workers with health conditions that made them vulnerable to Covid-19. Care providers stopped or reduced care activities which were deemed non-essential such as housework. For some seniors, the disruption of home-based care services affected their access to food as they relied on their carer to shop for them.

Organisations reported that some seniors were anxious about a lack of carer PPE or that carers might be re-using PPE across multiple clients. This was associated with some seniors worried about possible infection from carers moving between several clients during the day. There was also concern about interacting with new carers who did not know the person's routine, needs and preferences. An added difficulty was the mixed messages seniors reported receiving when they sought clarification about the use of PPE and hygiene practices. Consequently some seniors provided masks to their carers, while others chose not to have carers come into their home.

Quite a few different stories were getting reported back to us, people in need of care and not getting it, it was a massive breakdown in communication, there just needed to be clear guidelines about PPE.

In addition, organisations reported difficulties experienced by seniors who had previously not needed care, but who became new clients shortly before lockdown or during the higher levels of restriction. Organisations reported assessments for care being delayed, and seniors returning home from hospital, without care services or needed home modifications in place.

Access to information and the digital world

Organisations emphasised the need for clear, concise messages in formats that were easy to read for those with visual or cognitive impairment, and ensuring that messages from different organisations were consistent. This was particularly important because of restrictions on face-to-face contacts.

This was strange, because in other emergencies like earthquakes, we talk to people directly. This time some channels were down and we couldn't talk face-to-face.

Much of the official information about Covid-19 and information about services was distributed online. Yet the older population is among the least digitally engaged.² Housing service providers noted that a lack of connectivity was a major impediment to seniors receiving needed information, as well as accessing services. It meant that they could not organise food delivery or pay bills. Older tenants who did not have automatic payments or did not use internet banking suddenly found they could not pay their rent. Seniors who could not pay their bills online were worried that their utilities would be cut off.

² Digital Inclusion Research Group (2017) *Digital New Zealanders: The Pulse of our Nation*. A report to MBIE and DIA

Organisations were alert to the possibility of financial abuse or scams, noting that if seniors trusted others to conduct financial transactions for them during the lockdown or subsequently, it potentially exposes them to risk.

They don't have computers, they don't have internet banking to get food, a lot are operating with cheques, they don't have debit cards. People are stranded.

Those issues were exacerbated by many community newspapers not operating in Level 4 and in Level 3. Seniors are known to use community newspapers as one of their main sources of information. Consequently, telephone contacts increased significantly, with organisations ringing seniors in their communities. While this was appreciated by many, it was also observed that being contacted multiple times by different organisations resulted in confusion and some mixed messages.

Living situations

Seniors were living in a variety of situations during lockdown. Some left their own home to stay with other family members, others stayed in their homes and were joined by people, while many seniors continued to live alone during lockdown. There were also seniors in urgent need of housing who had to be housed for lockdown.

Staying with family. Leaving one's home to stay with family was chosen by some so that they could give and receive companionship and support. However, staying with others was difficult where households included essential workers. Sometimes in that situation, older family members went to another household where they would not be put at potential risk of infection from an essential worker. There were also instances where essential workers asked to be stood down from work so that they would not put seniors living with them at risk.

Others moving in with seniors. There were many examples of seniors providing shelter and support for others. One example was where a parent and children moved in with grandparents, leaving the other parent, an essential worker, in the family home. This was done to enable the essential worker to continue in their role without potentially exposing the family to infection.

Families stressed over housing has been a trend in recent years anyway but it was really apparent over lockdown.

There were grandparents looking after grandchildren during lockdown, as they wanted to ensure their grandchildren had space and were safe. Younger relatives moved in with their seniors, because they were living in inadequate housing, in temporary accommodation such as caravans and mobile homes, or had returned from overseas just before lockdown and were without accommodation.

While additional people living in the senior's home can have benefits, organisations also reported crowding and noise. Homes with enough space for residents to enjoy some quiet and private time away from others were appreciated. In a few instances, tensions, financial stress, and harm due to declining mental health, drug abuse or family violence were reported.

Living alone during lockdown was common. Many seniors reported they wished to remain in their own familiar surroundings, maintaining their independence while staying in regular

contact with family and friends through phone calls or online. Organisations observed that those who were already connected with friends, family and neighbours tended to cope well, although even those seniors with frequent contacts during lockdown reported feeling disconnected, as the nature of contact was very different, being constrained through physical distancing. Organisations noted that some seniors living alone experienced loneliness, especially those with little or no existing connections with family or neighbours. They also noticed depression emerging due to lack of contact. Boredom during lockdown was also observed.

There was a delicate balance between older people maintaining their own independence and accepting help. Some seniors were reluctant to have any contact with family members, as they were worried about being put at risk. On the other hand, some families expected community organisations to take over the care and support of their elders.

We have to be really mindful not to disempower whānau to look after their own, we have to make sure that relationship stays intact.

Without housing. Some organisations supported seniors already living in emergency or transitional housing prior to lockdown, or who moved into emergency housing during lockdown. Their homeless circumstances differed, from arrangements for sharing accommodation breaking down, to difficulties in accessing a new tenancy when moving from one location to another.

Provider innovation

Community organisations and housing providers have been proactive in contacting seniors in lockdown to ensure they were managing and to refer them to services if required. Community organisations found a few older people unconnected to services, or with unaddressed long-standing needs, such as living in cold housing or without adequate clothing and household items.

There are some really creative learnings over this period about support and resilience.

Many examples of new or expanded processes emerged over lockdown to support seniors. These included community organisations:

- Increasing their contact with and the range of information provided to seniors and referring them to the services and supports they needed. New ways of communicating were developed and existing channels expanded. These included visiting (with appropriate distancing observed), regular phone calls, bulk texting, newsletters, hand-delivery of information and Facebook messaging.
- Delivering goods including medication, personal care products, groceries, hand sanitiser and firewood.
- Delivering cooked and frozen meals.
- Making arrangements for seniors reliant on cash or cheque to pay for food.
- Helping seniors who needed 'top ups' to their mobile phone so that they could stay connected.
- Arranging transport to enable seniors to reach essential services such as health services.
- Providing information and advice to younger relatives seeking support for their seniors.

- Matching police-vetted volunteers to seniors as a key contact and support.
- Setting up a volunteer database to continue connecting with seniors after lockdown.

Housing providers:

- Updated their emergency management plans and business continuity plans to include pandemic planning and protocols for keeping staff safe.
- Were key conduits of information to residents about the pandemic and accessing services. They provided information through phone calls, newsletters and other printed materials.
- Visited residents, while observing appropriate distancing and safety protocols.
- Provided bins outside seniors' front door so that drop-offs for residents could be safely made.
- Developed safe processes for new tenants to take-up rentals during level 3 and after.
- Introduced processes for managing difficulties in paying rent.
- Supported tenants who were stressed.
- Managed essential repairs in levels 4 and 3.
- Suspended property inspections, which were deemed non-essential during lockdown and level 3.
- Managed isolation of residents where it was required.
- Dealt with any resident's non-compliance with Covid-19 restrictions that threatened other residents' 'quiet enjoyment' of their home.

It's actually nice phoning our older tenants and it's something I would like to continue that communication ... now we are looking at the ways we communicate with all our tenants.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the community organisations and housing providers who generously contributed their insights for this Bulletin.

Talking with older people about their housing

The conversations with community organisations and housing providers reported in this Bulletin have assisted in the design of a study to record the variety of housing experiences of older people during lockdown and since. If you wish to find out more about participating in that study, contact Bev James (see below). All interviews are anonymised and reported at the thematic level only.

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