



# Housing a COVID Response:

HOW ONE PUBLIC HOUSING AGENCY CONFRONTED A PANDEMIC



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# FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

During this global crisis, I often look for the silver lining. As I reflected about 2020, I am certain that the pandemic brought this agency closer together so we could protect our community against the virus. The bravery, perseverance, and dedication of the Providence Housing Authority (PHA) community heightened our position as Rhode Island's leading public housing agency. We planned for the worst-case scenarios so that we would be prepared for anything—and without precedent, established a COVID response playbook.

The PHA successfully connected housing and health in ways that it had never imagined. Our dynamic approach to offer necessary information, unique opportunities and responsive resources saved countless lives during this very difficult time.

The efforts outlined in this report would not be possible without the guidance and support from HUD, the PHA Board of Commissioners, the RI Department of Health, employee unions, PHARI and so many other partners who collaborated with us regularly during 2020.

Each and every PHA employee is so appreciated and should be commended because they were the backbone of the never-ending work. They faced danger and the unknown and their love for the people that we house served as our trusted compass.

The flexibility, trust and understanding from our residents were the key component of our successes. They shared their stories and concerns with us along the way—they let us into their hearts---so we could create innovative, safe ways to help each other.

Our COVID response teams (Food, Testing, Vaccinations, and Housing Preservation) have set industry standards and models in the state of Rhode Island. The PHA's highly effective operational approaches allow us to continue addressing the housing and social needs of some of the City's most vulnerable.

Enclosed in this report are highlights of the PHA's experiences during the development of the first four phases of the emergency operations plan. This plan was flexible and adapted to the ever changing internal and external environments that we faced during a pandemic.

As the PHA community proved that we could overcome and fight this unprecedented virus together, 2021 will prove to be just as challenging. Unfortunately, the impacts from COVID will be long lasting in our great City. That said, the PHA remains committed and passionate about healing our beloved community and knows that together we can.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.





# THE PHA'S PLAYBOOK:

## PHASE 1

Within days of the virus being reported in Rhode Island, the PHA began working on a phased emergency operations plan.

Office staff were asked to limit in-person interactions and meetings.

All PHA in-person events were cancelled and community spaces were closed.

Contracted with outside vendors to build capacity - providing security and increased efforts to disinfect high-touch surfaces, especially in our high rises.

Resident outreach, beginning with the most vulnerable included direct phone calls, emails, and mailed materials.

Staff began to work from home.

Cross-departmental task forces were formed to address topics such as External Vendors, Food Security, and Resident Outreach.

Piloted food distribution.

Residents were asked to limit visitors into the high rise buildings.

## PHASE 2

PHA protected its most vulnerable residents by limiting visitors at all elderly and disabled high-rises.

Required all staff, residents, and visitors to wear masks when at our developments or offices.

Implemented new protocols for on-site staff to self-certify health and take their temperature prior to working on-site.

Closure of PHA-owned basketball courts and playgrounds.

Established a COVID Hotline for residents/participants to self-report COVID diagnoses and be connected to services and supports needed.

Implemented mass messaging system for outreach.

Began on-site COVID testing at high-rise buildings.



# A PHASED APPROACH

## PHASE 3

PHA office staff return to newly configured office spaces.

Safety protocols put in place to allow capital projects like elevator modernization and sprinkler installation to resume along with partners such as the Census to safely interact with residents.

Safely hosted outdoor office hours for property management needs such as lease-ups.

Resident Service programming offered virtually including summer youth employment program, homeownership education, and overdose prevention work.

Implemented internal moratorium on evictions, suspended late notices and fees.

Emergency food delivery to high-rises exceeded 5,000 monthly shelf-stable food boxes.

On-site COVID testing continued at high rises and expands to include family developments.

## PHASE 4

Established a more regular free, on-site COVID-19 testing schedule for residents and began planning for vaccinations in early 2021.

Increased Housing Preservation program, assisting 110 households in accessing emergency rental assistance by December 2020.

Resident Services launched new programming virtually including workforce development for youth ages 17-24 and expands its Wellness Resource Center to include a mental health clinician.

Access to affordable housing increases, as the PHA is awarded 90 new Mainstream vouchers, more than doubling their existing program.

Holiday help is provided to residents through gifts for children, turkey baskets to residents, and COVID safety items for all in need.

Restarted community improvement projects, including Artist in Residence to develop a mural in Hartford Park.





# TESTING 1, 2, 3

## LEADING THE WAY

In May of 2020, the PHA became aware of a COVID-19 outbreak in Carroll Tower – which exclusively houses elderly residents. Because of the outbreak and the close living quarters, the DOH assigned the National Guard to perform mass testing for all residents living in the building. In conjunction with the PHA, the National Guard administered the first public housing mass testing clinic on May 19, 2020 on-site. The clinic took place outdoors and within three hours, 10 employees and 135 residents were tested for COVID-19.



*Carrie Bridges from the Lifespan Community Health Institute being interviewed by local news to raise awareness for the need to continue testing for COVID and the partnership between organizations.*



## LIFESPAN JOINS FIGHT

The participation rate and overwhelming success of the mass testing site at Carroll Tower allowed the PHA to connect with the Lifespan Community Health Institute for further on-site testing. On June 24, 2020, Lifespan and the PHA tested 131 residents in a 3.5-hour period at Dominica Manor on Atwells Avenue. From these experiences, both the PHA and Lifespan learned that testing is a more powerful emergency response strategy than ever planned, as it reduces the stigma associated with the virus, reduces the spread of COVID-19, saves lives, deepens our connection in the community beyond any customer service plan, elevates team building and improves our interdepartmental synergy.

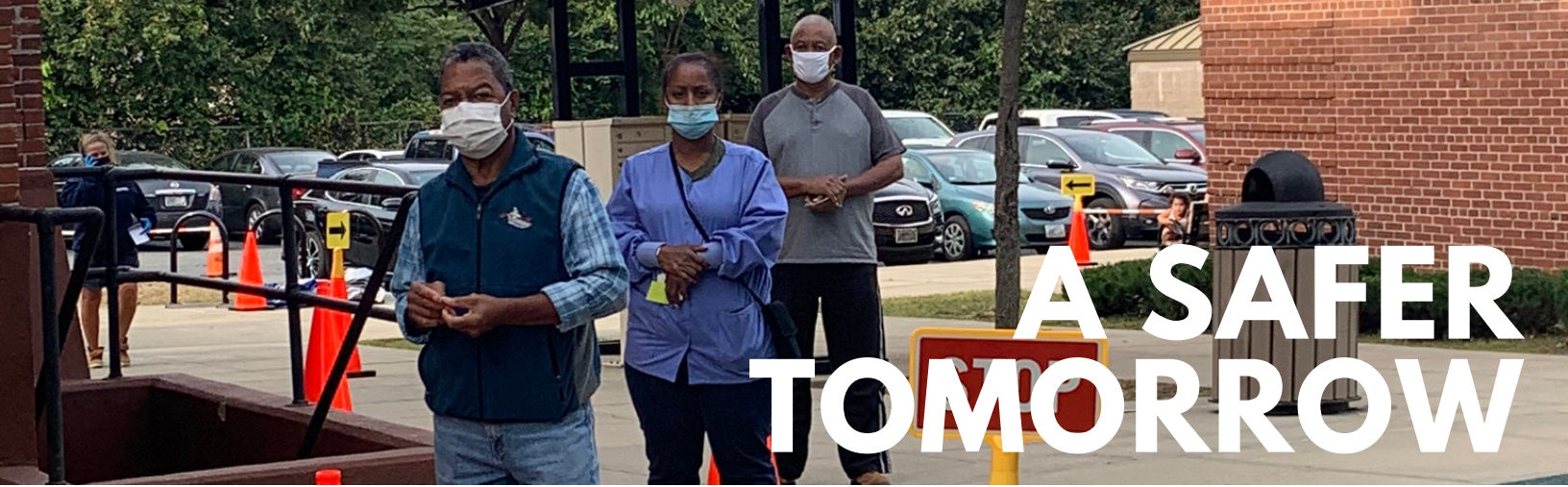
Throughout the following months, the Lifespan and PHA partnership blossomed into a well-oiled machine. By the end of November 2020, the PHA had hosted seventeen large scale testing events for residents and community members alike and had administered over 1,700 tests. The PHA was even able to host flu shot clinics at the testing sites where 407 flu vaccines were administered.



## OVER 5,000 TESTS

**PHA test sites returned positivity rates lower than that of the surrounding neighborhoods.**





# A SAFER TOMORROW

## DROPPING TEMPS

As the temperatures started dropping, PHA, the National Guard, and the Rhode Island Disaster Medical Assistance Team/Medical Reserve Corps (DMAT/MRC) brainstormed a new strategy to offer on site testing for residents which involved a new door to door model of testing and a new rapid response testing tool in PHA high rises. This new model was piloted successfully at Carroll Tower on December 12, 2020 and implemented successfully in all PHA developments throughout December and January. This new PHA model proved to be more efficient and to this day the PHA has tested almost 4,000 residents, community members and employees.

## TESTING TEAM

The PHA trained a dedicated group of staff members to lead their testing efforts from site set up to event management and even how to administer COVID rapid tests.



## DYNAMIC LEADERSHIP

Amid the PHA's testing efforts, Melissa Sanzaro (Executive Director, right) and Jacqueline Martinez (Associate Director of Property Management, left) worked with the Department of Health, Walgreens and CVS to coordinate and administer the newly approved vaccine to both residents and housing authority employees. Based on many factors, public health officials prioritized high-risk, public housing, elderly and disabled high-rises and buildings since their living environment was compared to congregate care settings such as nursing homes and long-term care facilities.



## TRAINING OTHERS

Because of the successful testing sites run by Lifespan and the PHA, other housing authorities visited during testing to learn about our model and how to adapt it to their specific locations. An early adopter of the PHA testing model was Central Falls Housing, who later worked with Lifespan to host their own test sites.



HUD's Regional Administrator David Tille conducted a site visit at Parenti Villa to learn more about the PHA testing process, which he touted as a successful best practice across the region.





# VACCINES: A NEW ROLE

## BUILDING ON TESTING

With the experience obtained during the previous testing efforts, PHA was confident that both clinic style vaccines and door to door vaccines would be successful. In addition to bringing the vaccine to the PHA, the PHA also partnered with DMAT/MRC to provide emergency medical assistance in the event that a resident or staff member had an immediate reaction to the vaccine. The first vaccination effort took place on January 29, 2021 at Carroll Tower using the door to door method. During the following weeks, the PHA held six more vaccination clinics at various sites and performed rapid COVID tests at all sites prior to vaccine administration.

In collaboration with both pharmacies and DMAT/MRC, the PHA will continue to roll out vaccinations to residents and staff over the next couple of months with the goal to vaccinate as many public housing residents as possible. Second doses of the vaccine will be administered exactly 21 days from the date of the first vaccine. In many cases, the second round of clinics will also create an opportunity for residents who missed out on the first round to receive their first dose as well.



*PHA's unique model included rapid Binax COVID testing prior to vaccination and observation post-vaccine by the State's Disaster Management Assistance Team/Medical Reserve Corps (DMAT).*

**1,260**  
**FULLY ADMINISTERED**  
**VACCINES (OVER 2,360 DOSES)**



**87.5%**

**ADMINISTERED TO RESIDENTS OF COLOR**



# MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS



## PHA COVID HOTLINE

Responding to a need for pandemic communication with residents, in April 2020, the Providence Housing Authority (PHA) set up a dedicated COVID hotline, encouraging tenants to call and confidentially self-report a COVID-positive diagnosis, so the virus' spread and the needs of our residents could be monitored within our public housing developments. Staffed by a Resident Service Coordinator, the PHA coordinated services and referrals to those in need while helping to protect other tenants and staff from being exposed to the virus. The decision to implement this hotline was based on creating an environment of trust and understanding during this unprecedented pandemic that had people fearing for their lives.

**In January 2021 alone, the PHA Hotline team made 805 calls to residents for referrals, COVID test results, and support.**

## A GUIDING FORCE



During the Governor's Stay-At-Home order, the PHA worried it would lose touch with its residents but the 18 member Resident Advisory Board quickly stepped into their roles as community leaders - becoming the PHA's eyes and ears, as well as sounding board - in those early days. Members attended weekly calls and eventually all of them even learned Zoom so the group could regularly convene to share, brainstorm, and problem solve with PHA staff members.

## WELL CHECKS

One of the PHA's initial efforts was to reach out to check in - providing connections to resources, updating contact information, and making sure everyone knew that the PHA was still there even if it was closed to the public. Efforts continue through the pandemic with 92% of public housing tenants and 75% of Section 8 participants reached by PHA staff members conducting well checks.

**Mass Messaging: the PHA also invested in a service allowing the organization to call, text, and email seamlessly during the pandemic.**

*"I do appreciate you calling me and asking me if I needed any type of assistance with anything given this virus and everything going around... I appreciate your help and appreciate the fact that Providence Housing is reaching out. I think I'm ok but it's a great thing." ~ Ms. B, Section 8*



# OPERATING

*To Protect the*

## THE NEW PHA NORM

The PHA implemented safety protocols such as temperature checks, daily health screening surveys, mask wearing and other safety protocols to operate safely. Offices were moved and reconfigured to safely operate and staff were offered regular opportunities to test and later to be vaccinated.



## MANAGING FACILITIES

Throughout the pandemic, Facilities Management did not stop working hard for the PHA residents. They triaged work orders to focus primarily on health, safety, and emergency orders and our team worked within vacant units to allow for new move-ins and on exterior projects. Whenever entering a unit, the PHA screened for COVID and wore the appropriate PPE. The PHA is now in the process of creating a plan to "catch up" on remaining work orders.

## SERVING THE PUBLIC

Providing responsive and respectful service is a goal of the PHA and the organization relied heavily on its in-person interactions to serve the public. When stay-at-home orders were issued in RI, the PHA had to find new, creative, and safe ways to provide quality customer service. In adapting, the PHA installed secure drop-boxes at locations across the City. Employees worked via phone, email, and video conferencing - showing vacant units through video and providing photo tours, walking participants through how to photograph and email documents. Resident Services and Property Management hosted outdoor pop-up events to safely conduct in-person re-certification meetings with tenants or to provide services. They also attended events where they could interact with their residents safely and strove to best serve them through the pandemic.





# SAFELY

## *Most Vulnerable*



## LIMITING VISITORS

### *New Policy Enacted*

From the onset, the PHA prohibited nonessential visitors at its high rise buildings, while still allowing for medical care, well-checks, and food deliveries. This policy also influenced how the PHA worked with partners serving residents on-site and assisted in limited the spread of the virus throughout the buildings.

## SECURITY

### *Safe Spaces*

Knowing that there should be limitations on access to high rise buildings, and that our staff was already stretched thin, the PHA hired an outside security company to work overnight at its high rise developments, building its capacity during the pandemic. This assistance allowed the PHA security team to return to work and focus their efforts on regular patrols, testing, vaccinations, and capital projects.

## CONGREGATE CARE

### *A New Definition*

Defined as "residential care setting that provide housing, meals, personal care services, and/or supportive services to one or more adults," congregate care is usually thought of as assisted living or nursing home facilities. From early on in the pandemic, the PHA advocated for its high rise developments to be considered a similar risk to Congregate Care settings. Once the RI Department of Health began considering public housing as Congregate Care settings, PHA high rise residents were able to receive priority testing and vaccinations.

## DISINFECTING

### *Clean Spaces*

The PHA contracted with PuroClean to disinfect all high touch surfaces at its high rises twice a day while it built its staff capacity.





# SUPPORTING

## FOOD INSECURITY

The agency activated staff members across departments to form a Food Task Force and food distribution operation. The Authority's warehouse was largely cleared and re-purposed for a new food boxing operation which prepared boxes for their monthly delivery and safe distribution. Boxes of shelf-stable food and supplies for those in need (using the USDA's Senior Box program as a model) began being delivered to our high-rise buildings. The goal was to meet the majority of a single tenant's nutritional needs on a monthly basis.

**Over 6,700 boxes** were given from March through January.

The PHA also worked with partners such as Family Service's Be Safe Plus program, the City Council and Elisha Project, RI Community Food Bank, Meals on Wheels and Centro de Innovación Mujer Latina, and the City's Sodexo youth meal programs to create safe meal delivery models for these special programs beyond just its high rise sites.

**Emergency Food boxes continue to be available into 2021 for residents in crisis.**

## PHA GRATITUDE

Special thanks to funders of our Emergency Food Programs including: the City of Providence CDBG, Amica Foundation, United Way of Rhode Island, Rhode Island Foundation, & numerous individual donors, as well as to our partners at the RI Community Food Bank.



## DISTRIBUTING PPE

The PHA utilized its food distribution and COVID testing events to provide critically needed personal protective equipment (PPE) and supplies to residents. When contactless in-person delivery was unavailable, the PHA mailed packages to its residents - making sure that its residents had access to clean masks, hand sanitizer and other supplies.

**In 2020, the PHA distributed 25,490 masks into the community.**





# OUR COMMUNITY

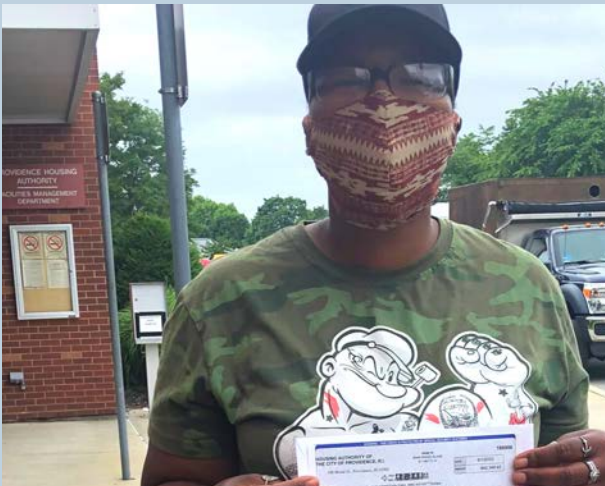
## THE FRONT LINES

Prior to the pandemic, the PHA had a Community Health Worker (CHW) staffing its various developments providing essential programs and services to meet resident healthcare needs. When the pandemic hit, this valuable staff member was redeployed to focus on COVID outreach, testing, and vaccination - critical to supporting the PHA's prevention tactics. Funding for this program is provided in partnership with the **Central Providence Health Equity Zone** and provides education, training, and professional development opportunities along with valuable on-the-job experiences.

## COVID COPING

With funding from the Rhode Island Foundation, the PHA hired a full-time mental health expert who is a licensed clinical social worker, to complement our existing substance abuse and trauma specialists. The team quickly identified acute situations that required a comprehensive approach, and created a Critical Response Team across specialty areas to provide inclusive Action Plans for clients in need.

## SUPPORTS FOR ESSENTIAL WORK



Candia was a 27-year-old single mom to four boys when she entered the PHA's Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program. She had no income and was out of work but had always dreamed of owning a home. Shortly after joining FSS, Candia was hired at the U.S. Postal Service where she continues as an essential worker delivering mail.

During the pandemic, she thought about quitting her now dangerous front-line job to be home for her children who were distance learning. The Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) program - and the thought of being so close to her goal of having enough saved to buy a home - helped keep her going.

Candia is not unlike so many of the PHA's residents and participants - who loyally serve on the front-lines. The PHA is proud we have many residents who are essential workers in the medical fields, in the service industries, and many even work with us as PHA employees. They are the true heroes of the pandemic and we support their essential work.

**The PHA issued its largest FSS payout in history - \$42,000 - during the pandemic.**

# PROVIDING LIGHT IN DARK TIMES



190

## VICTIMS OF CRIME SUPPORTED

The PHA's Victims of Crime Coordinator in the Wellness Resource Center served over 190 victims of crime throughout the year, with increased reports of violence and requests for help throughout the pandemic.

### A STORY OF RECOVERY & RENEWAL:

#### *Programming Reaches Residents Despite Pandemic*

From the very beginning, L's husband controlled her; her life was wrapped up in his - a tangled mess of finances, friends, and housing that kept her bound. When emotional and financial violence didn't work, he resorted to physical violence. Their best times were when she was high or drunk, using these substances to numb the pain.

Her partner sold drugs regularly and used even more often. Each call to the police by a neighbor, the PHA Wellness team reached out. But L wasn't ready. The PHA team wasn't pushy but they continued to offer resources, to lend an ear, and tried to get her to participate in free programs like mindful coloring to get her out of her unit and away from the abuse. And they were there when she was finally ready to get help.

When he went to jail for a brief stay on robbery charges, L reached out and worked with the PHA to create an exit plan if the abuse continued. This time, she would be ready. And he did return. This time, he assaulted her, was arrested, and spent time away. This gave L the chance she needed to break away. Before his release, the PHA Wellness team had already worked to move L to a new apartment thanks to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). She hadn't yet got sober but she was safe. Funding from the Victims Compensation Fund

then came, helping L untangle her finances from her partner, paying back rent owed to the PHA and helping her avoid eviction. She slowly began to move away from substance use first with drugs and later from her alcohol dependency by attending support groups and programming for domestic violence victims.

Enter COVID and the start of a pandemic. There were no more in person support groups, no more in-person check ins, none of the typical supports were there for L to continue getting the help she needed. As service providers quickly adapted to this new way of operating, so too did L. She took digital literacy programming and received a tablet through the PHA's Wellness Resource Center so she could connect digitally to online support groups both for survivors of violence and also for substance abuse.

She has begun participating in neighborhood groups and taking on volunteer work. Her move - and the continued support from the PHA - have brought her closer to her family and given her a new purpose.

Her new goal is to become a certified peer counseling for others facing domestic violence and substance abuse and despite the stress and isolation the pandemic has caused, she says the PHA never gave up on her. They were there and continue to be there for her. That support is what has driven her and continues to drive her forward.



# BRIGHTENING FUTURES



## YOUTH INTERNSHIPS

### *Project-based learning*

The PHA regularly hosts youth from the City's summer employment program providing on-site training and work experiences. During the pandemic, the PHA had to adapt its in-person program to one that was offered online. The six week program served fifteen youth and focused on career exploration and entrepreneurship. Participating youth completed soft skills training in topics such as social media etiquette and general communications, as well as a strengths-based analysis with a Gallup consultant. The program, with support from the Providence Rotary Foundation, also provided participants with their own Chromebooks so they could access the program and then continue to access education and employment opportunities once the program ended.



## RETURNING HOME

### *Former Resident Gives Back*

Former resident Mithcell Tiah coordinated with the PHA to provide our youth with backpacks, school supplies, and holiday gifts. Mitchell wasn't the only one in the giving spirit. Thousands of dollars in donations to the PHA's nonprofit affiliate, the **Providence Community Opportunity Corporation (PCOC)**, provided children at our family developments with special gifts during the holiday that were delivered safely using our food and testing model.

## ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

### *Creative Placemaking*

The PHA partnered with the City of Providence to hire our first ever artist in residence, former resident Angela Gonzalez (AGONZA) to paint murals at two buildings in Hartford Park framing the new tot lot playground at the development. AGONZA was able to safely engage residents in her planning process.



## SANTA'S ELVES

### *Education & Prevention*

The PHA was awarded several RI Department of Health mini-grants to help Crush COVID within our family developments. Santa provided the PHA elves with assistance preparing special kits for over 1,000 youth in our developments. Kits included masks, fun crafts, soaps and sanitizers, as well as mental health resources for youth to combat social isolation.

# HOUSING PRESERVATION



## FINDING SAFE HARBOR

With the passage of the CARES Act, many tenants across the country found relief as a rental eviction moratorium was put in place. A new moratorium for nonpayment was eventually put in place by the Center for Disease Control but for many tenants, rental payments were out of reach, even with reduced, income-based payments from living in PHA developments. Even after the CARES Act moratorium on evictions was lifted, the PHA continued its COVID policy of waiving late fees and not pursuing evictions for nonpayment. Then it went a step further.

To ensure that when COVID was over, tenants were not facing large bills for back-rent owed, the PHA Property Management and Resident Service staff members took a team approach. They reached out, offering employment and training support to those who were unemployed or underemployed, updated income certifications to adjust rents as needed, and helped tenants with applications for rental assistance through Rhode Island's Safe Harbor Rental Assistance program.

**\$142,750**  
in rental assistance received

*The PHA worked with tenants to submit and receive approval for 110 applications to the State's Safe Harbor rental assistance program being administered by the United Way of RI.*



# NEW OPPORTUNITIES

## 90 NEW VOUCHERS

In 2019, the PHA was awarded 50 Mainstream Vouchers (MSV) to serve nonelderly disabled households, especially those leaving institutional settings or experiencing homelessness. The CARES Act provided an additional 15 vouchers in response to the COVID crisis. Considering the critical housing need, the PHA applied for and was awarded an additional 75 of these vouchers to meet the increased demands brought about by the pandemic.

## INCENTIVES & AID

Marcos (inset) became a new land-lord with the PHA in November of 2020, when COVID-19 cases were still very prominent throughout the City. He had been a nurse for more than six years and recently invested in real estate.

Marcos said he had “heard negative reviews about the program’s tenants...” but he shares that “when [voucher holder] came to me, I saw he was a good person. Always trying to help and provide.” Our dedicated Accessing Home AmeriCorps Coordinator and Leased Housing team worked to provide assistance to both the voucher holder and Marcos to make sure the lease up process went smoothly. Because of this assistance, the move-in process went swiftly helping Marcos move the tenant in and begin collecting rent on his investment. The PHA also thanked Marcos for joining the Section 8 program as a landlord with a \$500 cash incentive.

He shares that “having a good communication with your tenant and making sure you get feedback from your tenants will help make ends meet.”



**An investment from Blue Cross Blue Shield RI's Blue Angel Health Grants allowed the PHA to provide critical support services as participants first received vouchers or looked to move during 2020. Over 85 households benefitted from this intensive case management. In addition, the program provided 26 landlords with one-on-one technical assistance, over 75 with online education, and 23 with financial incentives to help connect landlords to PHA voucher holders.**

# COUNTING ON THE PHA

*Who We Serve*

## PUBLIC HOUSING

**961**

Elderly residents living in public housing (18% of total population)

**1,145**

Disabled residents living in public housing (21% of total population)

**71%**

Public housing population identifying as Hispanic (3,898 residents)

**23%**

Public housing population identifying as Black or African American (1,234 residents)

**35%**

Public housing population under the age of 18 (almost 2,000 people)



## SECTION 8 HOUSING

**612**

Elderly residents served by vouchers (11% of total population)

**1300**

Disabled residents served by vouchers (23% of total population)

**51%**

Section 8 residents identifying as Hispanic (2,875 people)

**28%**

Section 8 residents identifying as Black or African American (1,600 people)

**39%**

Section 8 population under the age of 18 (almost 2,200 people)



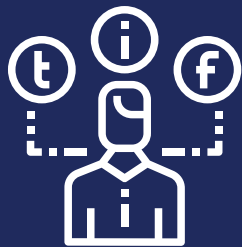




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