

Housing in Delaware for the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Population

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Abstract

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) encounter numerous barriers in attempting to access housing. Those barriers – financial, physical, and cultural in nature – have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency and the related, or co-occurring, shifts that have characterized the housing market in the United States, and Delaware specifically, over these last three years. In this brief introductory research report, we examine the system of housing supports and their availability to individuals with IDD through a subset of those served by the state’s Division of Developmental Disabilities Services through interviews with representatives across the housing support system. Our findings fall into four areas of work: scale and scope; housing availability; housing assistance; and housing supports. We find that: the estimated scale of the housing crisis (in terms of homelessness and insecurity) affecting this population is much greater than the general population, but in line with other national estimates for individuals with IDD; there is limited available housing that is accessible to individuals with IDD available in the state; there is limited assistance available for navigating the housing that might be available; and that there are too few options for providing more supports for individuals living, or trying to live, independently. We conclude with a few suggested recommendations that could provide more reliable data and tracking of need and a call for research that connects housing for individuals with IDD into the growing body of research looking at the relationship between access to housing and health.

Background

Issues related to housing – including availability, costs, and access to adequate supports – have been greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health emergency. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau published a report on Housing insecurity and the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that as of December 2020, 11 million renter and homeowner households were experiencing difficulty keeping up with housing payments. As of March 2021, the 11 million households doubled, emphasizing the impact of the pandemic on housing stability.¹ The urgency around housing access and stability has not disappeared since the peak of the pandemic. While the height of the pandemic came with increased funding for housing supports and holds on evictions, as the pandemic relief funds and eviction moratoriums end, more people are being put into a position to experience new or prolonged housing instability. Nationally, housing affordability has steadily decreased since 2019, with rents increasing by 12% and home prices rising an additional 20.6% from March 2021 to March 2022 alone.² The rapid rise in rent and home prices is being accompanied by a record level of housing shortages, exacerbating the stresses on an already fragile system and drawing continued attention to the importance of increased efforts to support housing stability.²

These broader shifts in housing have exacerbated already existing inconsistencies and inequities in our housing system, especially for those populations consistently at risk for housing insecurity and homelessness. Marginalized groups such as communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by the effects of COVID-19 on the housing market, with Black and Hispanic households more than twice as likely to be behind on rent or mortgage payments.²

Among those populations impacted by these housing market forces are individuals with disabilities – a population that already faces a complex mixture of lack of accessibility to consistent housing as a result of physical, financial, and cultural barriers. Malcolm Harrison and Cathy Davis write that people with a disability are disproportionately less likely to find suitable housing – housing encompassing adequate costs, accommodations, and nearby resources.³ For an individual with a disability, then, seeking out *accessible* home options in an already strained housing market means confronting both financial and physical barriers simultaneously. Aging housing stock and rental units that are historically inaccessible combine with new housing that has not been designed for accessibility and may be disconnected from reliable community amenities and services. Therefore, often the housing environment itself can hinder factors such as self-management and can aggravate an individual's condition.³

Most individuals with disabilities, and especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, are supported by Medicaid for access to their service supports, which effectively locks many of these individuals into situations of financial poverty, foreclosing on access to available housing options. For instance, 70% of Native Hawaiian, 67% of Hispanic, 63% of people who are under 18, and 59% of people living in a metro area who are enrolled in Medicaid are living in inadequate or unaffordable homes.⁴

Further, individuals with disabilities, especially those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), face the additional barrier of significant and persistent bias in society, which can manifest itself in an unwillingness by some to rent or sell to an individual with IDD, by preventing access to all amenities at a housing or apartment complex beyond the specifically designated “accessible” housing unit, or by creating hostile environments within the communities where these individuals live.

While according to The Americans with Disabilities Act, it is illegal to refuse to rent a property to an individual solely based on their disability status, landlords can refuse to rent based on credit history, income level, and prior evictions, all of which put people in the disability community at a disadvantage.⁵

While the features of this broader problem are well known anecdotally, it is not well understood in terms of its scope or scale, or in the specific ways in which it operates, which inhibits effective policy to be developed to address these ongoing and persistent barriers.

The research outlined in this paper looks at the ways in which the current housing crisis is manifesting itself within the IDD community in Delaware in an effort to ground our discussions in more empirical observations. It is also a way to begin disentangling – or, at least, highlighting the entanglements – of the ways in which our terminology, e.g., housing, can obscure the more complicated features of housing, housing security, and housing supports that are all in play, but in different ways. The informational interviews conducted for this work provide some sense of the system that will need to be contended with as we move forward. Our hope is to find a way past anecdote to inform and support data-informed approaches to housing that also stay grounded in a commitment to equity in the face of complexity.

Housing and Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities

For the disability community, accessibility is both a common and complex refrain. As we know from housing and health research more generally, housing has a direct impact on health outcomes.⁶ The situation is no different for those with disabilities. The ways that a property accommodates an individual with a disability impacts their health outcomes. Research dating back to the time of the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have demonstrated how housing adaptations have positive effects on the ability of people with disabilities to live independently.⁷ For example, modifications such as walk-in showers, handrails, and lowered kitchen counters can enhance daily activities and mobility for people with IDD. Additionally, the significance of modifications that foster social inclusion, such as creating shared meal spaces or communal areas for socializing is large. By increasing accessibility and inclusivity, housing adaptations can improve the quality of life and independence for people with IDD, allowing them to more fully participate in their communities.⁷ More recent research has expanded the notion of the home to include the importance of the “home environment,” or the social and physical contexts that shape the quality of life in the home, and its role in well-being for individuals with disabilities.⁸

We also know that individuals with disabilities aren't only disabled, but are often over-representative of other historically marginalized groups, especially when it comes to housing. The application of an intersectional lens both highlights, and complicates, the challenges that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities face when it comes to securing stable housing, avoiding or emerging from homelessness, or accessing housing in an environment that can provide access to overall health and well-being. That is, when considering housing and health outcomes we need to be mindful not only of disabilities, but also of, for example, the individual's race, gender, and income, as important factors shaping both experience and what may be “accessible” for an individual.⁹ For instance: according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people who are Black are more likely to have a disability, with a rate of 25% compared to the 20% disability rate for Non-Hispanic Whites.¹⁰ We also know that individuals who are Black make up 39% of people experiencing homelessness and more than 50% of homeless families with children.¹¹ In asking questions, then, of access to housing for a Black individual who also has disabilities, we cannot choose between data sets, but instead, must grapple with the intersection and overlap of these factors.

Focusing specifically on intellectual and developmental disabilities, the association between IDD and poverty has been established in the literature and more recent research has found that IDD is both a risk factor for homelessness and an additional barrier for those experiencing homelessness.¹²

In Delaware, a few state entities directly handle the housing assistance process, specific to the disability community. There are five housing authorities in the state of Delaware: the Delaware State Housing Authority, the Wilmington Housing Authority, the New Castle County Housing Authority, the Dover Housing Authority, and the Newark Housing Authority. The housing authorities exist, as the Delaware State Housing Authority states, “to efficiently provide, and assist others to provide, quality, affordable housing opportunities and appropriate supportive services to low- and moderate-income Delawareans.”¹³ This responsibility includes the management of state and federal assistance programs to homeowners and renters. For rental assistance programs, federal programs such as 811 Rental Assistance and Mainstream Vouchers are applied for by the housing authorities and distributed to those needing housing supports. The

State Rental Assistance Program (SRAP) and other state-run assistance programs are allocated based on state funds. The housing authorities' main responsibilities are to provide financial backing, management, and organization.

Ultimately, the system mainly relies on voucher programs to support the housing needs of individuals in the state. For the distribution of vouchers and rental assistance for the developmental disabilities community, individuals within the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services' Division of Developmental Disabilities Services (DDDS) manage the distribution of the available vouchers to the individuals being served by the division. Community Navigators, who provide targeted case management to many of the individuals served by DDDS, directly communicate with, assist, and work with individuals served by the division and their families. In relation to housing, these individuals are responsible for adding individuals to housing waitlists, locating available and affordable housing, finding solutions for those experiencing housing instability or homelessness, and communicating this information with individuals at DDDS. Individuals who are able to obtain a voucher, sometimes working with their case manager, are then tasked with finding units that fit their needs and have availability. Details related to obtaining housing with a voucher are outlined in the findings.

Methodology

This study aims to establish a better understanding of the housing landscape in Delaware and the systems that exist in the state to assist individuals with IDD in navigating the housing system. We conducted a small set of exploratory, semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in three areas of the housing ecosystem:

1. A representative from the Delaware State Housing Authority;
2. A representative of Housing Alliance Delaware;
3. A supervisor in case management within the Division of Developmental Disabilities Services; and
4. Six county-wide case management supervisors overseeing targeted case management to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities that include assistance in identifying community housing resources.

These eight interviews provided additional insights and an understanding of how access to housing resources for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities works from policy to practice. Based on this information, we outline some sense of how the housing system of supports works for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from the interviews have been placed into four categories: scope and scale, housing availability, housing assistance, and housing supports (table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Findings: Scope and Scale of Housing Insecurity Impacting Individuals with IDD in Delaware

Scope	Housing Availability	Housing Assistance	Housing Supports
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Homelessness: 1.6%-5%	Resource Allocation	Closed Waitlists	Supports in Independent Living Preparedness
Housing Instability: 8%	Environmental Factors	Years Long Waitlists	Transitional Housing with Supports
	Limited Housing Infrastructure and Development	Lack of Housing Options	Support Built into New Developments

All of the county-wide case supervisors were asked to provide estimates of homelessness and housing insecurity experienced on a routine basis for all clients they serve. While there was variation based on location/county and specific subsets of individuals being served, all reported numbers within a range of 1.6%-5% experiencing homelessness and between 8 and 15% experiencing housing insecurity at any given time. Housing insecurity in the context of the interviews was taken to mean an individual is currently housed, but the stability of this housing is now, or may be in the future, at risk due to financial, safety, or personal concerns. These numbers reflect homeless and housing insecurity experienced by individuals currently receiving services from the Division and do not reflect the total, estimated number of individuals with IDD in the state. While these numbers appear extraordinary, they are in line with data available nationally for individuals with IDD.

1. The Scope: Based on conversations with the six Community Navigator Supervisors, an estimate of those experiencing homelessness and housing instability was established. On average, at any given point, between 2-5% of service recipients are experiencing homelessness and between 8 and 15% are experiencing housing instability. If validated, these rates would far exceed measures for homeless and housing insecurity generally, but would match those of other at-risk populations, such as those individuals who are on the Sex Offender Registry in Delaware.¹⁴

2. Housing Availability: A main takeaway from the interviews was the limited infrastructure that exists to accommodate the housing needs of all people living with a developmental disability in Delaware. Further, the resources that are available are concentrated in more populated counties such as New Castle County and Kent County. This leaves those living in Sussex County without many resources and forces them to relocate, often away from family, to where there is availability. In addition to the scarcity of housing, the location of available housing is also a concern. Community Navigator Supervisors consistently pointed to the environmental components of the available housing as reasons why service recipients turn down housing. Issues such as crime, violence, drug abuse, and physical and emotional abuse were cited as reasons service recipients chose to turn down available housing in specific areas.

3. Housing Assistance: Apart from the lack of housing infrastructure, we found that the housing assistance programs in Delaware are not efficient. As of March 2022, the DE State Housing Authority closed its rental assistance waitlist. For those already on a waitlist, it takes years to be given a voucher. Further, for those who do have a voucher, the lack of infrastructure from the previous finding impacts the individual’s success. With a lack of rental units available, even

those with vouchers struggle to find stable housing, often having a voucher expire before housing is found.

4. Housing Supports: This category of findings encompasses support for individuals through the entire process of finding housing. Based on the interviews with participants, it was found that for individuals who may even be able to afford housing independently, there is a lack of training, information given, and support to help them transition to independent living. Beyond this initial support, for those who are temporarily or chronically experiencing homelessness or housing instability, it was identified that specific transitional housing that would provide temporary housing along with residential support for those who needed it, was lacking. Finally, participants identified the need for residential support within new housing infrastructure that was developed in order to best accommodate those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Recommendations

While the research here is quite preliminary, it does suggest some immediate options for action that include opportunities to begin making corrections while we learn more about the scale, scope, and impact of housing insecurity and homelessness on the IDD service population in Delaware. Here, we offer three areas to pursue while this conversation grows.

Better Data Tracking Within DDDS

Homelessness and housing insecurity with the population served by DDDS is persistent and ongoing. Efforts, not surprisingly, are focused on the pressing and immediate need of the individual or family being served. And while some data is tracked internal to both the division and the division's targeted case management entity, the Columbus Organization, an effort to systematize this data could create an opportunity for better tracking. Tracking could elucidate more about the need, but also about what works (or doesn't) and help to bring effort and investment in best practices or identification of gaps in the system.

Incomplete Pictures

Tracking data on housing insecurity and homelessness provides an incomplete picture at best. We also need a better, consistent, and reliable source of information on housing needs more broadly. This broader housing needs survey would provide a more complete picture of housing – actual built infrastructure – needed to allow a growing population of those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as those with other physical disabilities, acquired disabilities, or those seeking to age in place as their physical abilities change, to live in homes and communities across the state. Such an effort presents us with the opportunity to be both comprehensive and proactive, identifying key demographic shifts already underway and expected that will shape the future of needs for community life in Delaware. More importantly, this housing need must be situated within, not exist separate from, our larger efforts to study, anticipate, and invest in meeting our state's housing needs. Simply tracking needs related to housing insecurity and homelessness for this with intellectual and developmental disabilities without this companion effort would be akin to creating a hospital with only an emergency department – and then building a separate emergency department for those with IDD.

More Research Needed

We also need more research on the connections between housing and health outcomes for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Despite a growing body of research within this area, there is scant attention to including individuals with IDD in this effort that seeks to see housing as a core component of the social determinants of health. There is a critical need to address the historical exclusion and invisibility of individuals with IDD from these larger research efforts. Doing so would reaffirm that the intellectual and developmental disabilities an individual may have are not/only the challenges one may face in the pursuit of good health. It may shed light on options and opportunities to overcome systemic barriers to a healthy life. And, critically, it ensures that we see individuals with IDD with the same gaze as others – challenged by a lack of access to a consistent home or home life, but also able to thrive when given access to the same supportive home environment that we already know supports the health outcomes of others.

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