

More than ever, seniors need affordable housing

By MYUNG J. LEE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | AUG 18, 2020 AT 5:00 AM



(ANNE-CHRISTINE POUJOULAT/AFP via Getty Images)

You can tell a lot about the health of a society — economically, politically, even morally — by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. By that measure, and especially in the way we treat older adults, America is in trouble.

The coronavirus pandemic has cast a harsh light on how susceptible older Americans are when a crisis hits. As of this writing, [more than 60,000 nursing-home residents and workers have died](#). That's more than all the [American lives lost in two decades of fighting in Vietnam](#).

We are an aging nation. By the year 2035, for the first time in our history, America will have more people 65 and over than children under the age of 18. And today, according to the National Council on Aging, more than 25 million Americans over 60 are "economically insecure," living at or below 250% of the federal poverty level. Those dire numbers raise pressing questions.

But the most fundamental question of all is also arguably the most urgent: Where is the safe, affordable housing for this aging population?

I am the CEO of an organization that helps people restore their lives and their place in society after personal setbacks. In pursuit of our mission, Volunteers of America-Greater New York provides support services temporary shelters, and permanent homes for our neighbors who are most in need. And yet, increasingly, we see our permanent supportive housing and single room occupancy residences becoming de facto retirement communities. This phenomenon is due in large part to the lack of affordable homes, especially for older adults, in the communities we serve.

The [lack of affordable housing in America is hardly news, but most experts agree that the problem is growing worse](#). Just how acute the housing shortage is was made clear when we opened the application process for a brand new senior supportive housing residence in the Bronx. The residence includes 37 units reserved for chronically homeless seniors; the remaining 85 units are for people age 62 and over considered very-low-income and low-income. For those 85 units, we received more than 20,000 applications.

This perfect storm of an aging population and a severe lack of affordable housing includes another alarming element: American seniors are suffering economically. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, older Americans were the only demographic for whom poverty rates increased from 2017 to 2018 while poverty fell among people 18 to 64 and 18 and under.

Additionally, as the nonprofit National Institute on Retirement Security (NIRS) points out, very few people today can rely on the sort of pensions that assured countless Americans a comfortable — or at least a secure — retirement in the past. Few people are putting enough money into their 401(k)s — if they have that savings option at work to begin with. For people aged 55 to 64, the median savings in a 401(k) plan today is only around \$15,000.

In fact, even that chillingly low number is misleading, because in many traditionally poorer groups — Hispanic, Black, unmarried, and non-college-educated Americans — [“the typical working-age family or individual has no savings at all in retirement accounts,”](#) according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute.

Congress and the House of Representatives have taken action that could make a distinct impact on this problem to help seniors secure or retain affordable housing. Among other legislation, the House passed H.R. 2, “The Moving Forward Act,” which includes \$100 billion for affordable housing.

By 2060, nearly a quarter of Americans will be 65 and older. We have to act now, with resolve and foresight, to ensure that those tens of millions of men and women enjoy the security and dignity of a safe, affordable home in their final years. We call on the Senate to advance House bills that will provide overdue funding to address this growing problem.

Lee is president and CEO Volunteers of America-Greater New York.

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