

The Roommates Project: Achieving Wellbeing for Older Adults through Roommate Matching, Housing, and Wraparound Supports

Background

For many older adults, low and/or fixed income results in a range of unmet basic needs. Inflation and the recent expiration of many pandemic benefits have intensified these chronic challenges, with many seniors suddenly losing up to several hundred dollars per month of public benefits. Evidence suggests that these cuts will adversely affect quality of life and health for low-income seniors. Political and budgetary constraints limit the likelihood such benefits will be restored, making strategies to help these seniors manage the costs of living especially important. Housing is the largest portion of living costs for most low-income seniors. The City of Chicago—along with other cities nationwide—has limited affordable housing and resources to increase affordable, single-person housing to meet the needs of their aging populations. Long waiting lists for affordable senior housing exist throughout Chicago and most communities across the country.

An additional challenge is that most housing on Chicago's South Side and older U.S. cities was built when household units were larger, resulting in a housing stock that largely consists of large apartments and houses. This means the \$1,000-\$1,200 per month cost of a 1-bedroom or studio apartment is not much less than the \$1,300-\$1,600 per month cost of a 2- or 3-bedroom unit. We estimate that many low-income seniors could save more than \$500/month by sharing a unit with another person, and potentially \$1,000 per month if utilities and other costs are considered. Additional benefits of successful roommate pairing also potentially include enhanced companionship and social support. Successful pairings can be supported by leveraging established relationships with older adults and dedicated support structures before and after roommates are identified.

Proposal

This project aims to catalyze a pilot initiative that addresses the need for affordable housing and companionship among older adults on Chicago's South Side through roommate matching. Roommates could open up new sources of housing for seniors while providing them with large economic benefits and companionship, allowing them to age successfully in place for as long as they are able. The long-term aims of this project are to establish and study the implementation of a program to help seniors with unmet social needs find roommates with whom they can share housing costs, and to study its effects on unmet basic needs and health outcomes.

Target Population

We will target participants in a University of Chicago Medicine complex care program called the Comprehensive Care Physician (CCP) Program founded by Dr. Meltzer. CCP defragments care for patients who are at increased risk of hospitalization and who also often experience complex social needs, including housing and financial needs. About half of CCP patients report substantial rates of unmet basic needs, including housing, transportation, food, public benefits, and other financial-related needs. The Comprehensive Care, Community, and Culture Program (C4P) was designed for a subset of more socially vulnerable patients on Medicare and Medicaid, who are more likely to be medically underserved before CCP enrollment and may benefit from a version of CCP that adds systematic screening for unmet social needs, access to a community health worker (CHW), and a community arts and culture program to identify and address unmet social need and empower patients. C4P is being evaluated in a randomized controlled trial. This program and its benefits create an opportunity to identify patients with unmet housing needs, leverage our CHW and clinical team's established relationships, and use opportunities that come from assisted living programs to facilitate engagement in the proposed roommate program. We will target to support five to 10 roommate pairings of 10 to 20 C4P seniors in one to two buildings over the proposed six-month pilot period.

Project Accomplishments and Next Steps

Project accomplishments to date include:

- Hosted roundtable discussions with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and people with lived experience to learn more about the topics related to this project. Produced four summary products to share with others in the field.

- Wrote white papers addressing the challenges for older adults, developers and property managers, policymakers, and service providers and how such a program could help alleviate challenges for each group.
- Launched C4P housing specialist pilot to better understand housing needs of older South Side residents and support them in addressing their housing needs.

Next steps for the Roommates Project include:

- Identify community partners to develop a structured program to help older adults in C4P explore their interest in living with a roommate and support them in successfully matching and sharing an apartment with one or more roommate.
- Implement a pilot and perform an initial evaluation of the structured roommate protocol developed with older adults in C4P and community partner programs.

About Health Lab

The University of Chicago Health Lab works closely with government and nonprofit partners to identify, rigorously evaluate, and help scale programs and policies that improve health outcomes, particularly for low-income urban residents. Health Lab's housing portfolio is focused on improving housing and health outcomes for people with complex needs, particularly those who experience chronic homelessness, a designation that requires both an extended experience of homelessness and a disability. Through the [Road Map Initiative](#), Health Lab merged and analyzed data across different sectors to learn more about people who cycle at high rates between homeless services, Cook County Jail, and hospitals in Chicago with the goal of understanding targeted interventions among service providers that could better support this population.