

# Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 on People Experiencing Poverty

Health and Communications

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Amid an ever-changing COVID-19 crisis, the communities that have historically been segregated by income and race are struggling. The effects of systemic racism and poverty, reduced economic mobility, and the high cost of medical care are compounding inequities.

To reduce the spread of COVID-19, social determinants of health--correlates of poverty--must be examined and addressed. While the broader economic and societal elements that have impacted segregated communities are deeply entrenched and will not be corrected without structural change, states and localities are introducing some innovations to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 in particularly hard-hit communities.

Governor Whitmer has already taken many important steps to address critical issues for those in poverty, including expanding food assistance and simplifying access to WIC and many other state programs that provide critical supports for energy and cash assistance. In addition, by Executive Order the Governor has suspended work requirements for those needing food assistance, suspended work requirements for those receiving cash assistance, restored water to those who have had it shut off, and temporarily halted evictions for those who cannot pay rent.

This brief provides some case examples of other strategies that could be considered. These examples are being undertaken with a focus on the critical health care needs of those in poverty and to provide access to communications for many without adequate access to information technology. We are more than happy to provide more depth on any of these or explore any specific additional issues that would be helpful.

## People with disease or disability

People with disease or disability living in poverty are among the most vulnerable populations. Those with developmental disabilities, those dependent on electricity-based medical devices, and those with physical disabilities have particular challenges.

Resources for persons with developmental disabilities are communal in nature, relying on a safety net of educational, employment, and social supports. Social distancing for this population presents significant challenges that are further compounded by poverty. Philanthropic partners can make a substantial contribution to this population, but the response needs to be both collaborative and swift.

People who use electricity and battery-dependent assistive medical devices and are living in poverty have varying levels of need. While access to water and utilities is essential for everyone, they are particularly important for this population. Keeping life-saving medication temperature-controlled or staying connected to oxygen or home-based dialysis equipment requires essential utilities like water and electricity. Moratoriums on utility shutoffs are one strategy to support this population, but additional steps are needed.

Mobility challenges for persons with physical disabilities in poverty make it more challenging to navigate existing systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing when you may need a caregiver or rely on systems like food delivery services that are overburdened by stay at home orders leaves this population at particular risk.

## Examples of innovation

For individuals with developmental disabilities:

- Chicago, Illinois -- The Arc of Illinois is now accepting applications for time-limited demonstration projects to assist providers in filling gaps in services that people with developmental disabilities (and their families) are experiencing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. <https://www.thearcofil.org/illinois-council-on-developmental-disabilities-icdd-funding-opportunities/>
- Iowa submitted an 1135 waiver to, among other things, allow flexibility in staff for intermediate care facilities serving those with developmental disabilities. [https://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/DHS\\_COVID19\\_MedicaidResponse.pdf?031720202307](https://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/DHS_COVID19_MedicaidResponse.pdf?031720202307)

For individuals without essential utilities:

- Maryland issued an executive order to prohibit shut-offs and the accrual of late fees over utility services for certain consumers. <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Executive-Order-Prohibit-Termination-of-Residential.pdf>
- In Wisconsin, the Public Service Commission directed water, electric, and natural gas utilities to cease disconnecting residential services for nonpayment until the state public health emergency has been lifted and to reconnect previously disconnected utility customers. <http://apps.psc.wi.gov/vs2017/NewsReleases/default.aspx>

For individuals with physical disabilities:

- Iowa requested an 1135 federal waiver to, among many other things, provide home-delivered meals for Medicaid non-waiver members who are home-bound; provide home-delivered meals for waiver members where the waiver does not have meals as an allowable service, and allow additional flexibility for home- and community-based service (HCBS) providers. [https://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/DHS\\_COVID19\\_MedicaidResponse.pdf?031720202307](https://dhs.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/DHS_COVID19_MedicaidResponse.pdf?031720202307)

## Access to communication

While online efforts are critical to social distancing, some Americans are excluded. COVID-19 reveals the need for online access.

Some corporate partners are expanding efforts to support low-income families. For example, Comcast is expanding its \$9.95 essential internet service for low-income families offering 60 days of free internet.

<https://corporate.comcast.com/covid-19>

Other communities are creating 'Lot hot spots' that allow social distancing, providing free access to Wi-Fi in their parking lots. Access to the internet can enable Wi-Fi calling on devices with limited minutes or no cell service and access to the internet for online unemployment applications. Internet access also supports the evolving telehealth response.

The other compounding issue is access to a device. Seattle is working to expand its existing infrastructure for free and discounted devices in addition to providing low-cost internet for residents. The good news is that efforts to keep people on the payroll and off unemployment are taking the form of state-coordinated job search resources. The California resource is highlighted below.

## Examples of innovation

- Cleveland, Ohio -- Libraries are closing during the coronavirus crisis, but they are offering free Wi-Fi in their parking lots and working on more online options. <https://www.cleveland.com/news/2020/03/need-free-wifi-during-coronavirus-crisis-libraries-offer-internet-in-parking-lots.html>
- Seattle, Washington -- Free and discounted devices are available via a network of programs and partnerships. <https://www.seattle.gov/tech/services/free-and-discounted-devices>
- Global IT company donates computers to families who can't afford them during COVID-19 pandemic. <https://q13fox.com/2020/03/30/global-it-company-donates-computers-to-families-who-cant-afford-them-during-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Sacramento, California -- Workers displaced by COVID-19 in California can find jobs online. <https://onwardca.org/>