

## CASE STUDIES: Homelessness Prevention

### Building the Capacity of the Aging Network to Preserve Homes for People at Risk of Homelessness

#### AgeOptions

Oak Park, IL

[www.ageoptions.org](http://www.ageoptions.org)

*USAging highlights successful programs and partnerships to provide inspiration for AAAs and other community-based organizations to advance their work in homelessness prevention. Find more case studies at [www.usaging.org/research](http://www.usaging.org/research).*

In response to rising housing instability and homelessness among older adults in its planning and service area (PSA), **AgeOptions**, the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) in suburban Cook County, IL created a multi-faceted **Home Preservation Program**. The goals of this program are to help older adults remain in their homes and smooth the integration of recently homeless older adults into the Aging Network's support system. To that end, AgeOptions is building the local Aging Network's capacity to provide housing-related supportive services with grants, targeted funding, training and technical assistance, and partnership development.

Through the Home Preservation Program, **AgeOptions provides grants to embed full-time housing specialists at local Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) and other provider partners of the AAA**. These team members focus on assisting individuals with varied housing issues who need help finding affordable housing, maintaining tenancy, preventing or mitigating evictions, addressing homelessness and accessing comprehensive benefits screening. Housing specialists also cultivate working relationships with affordable housing and homeless services providers within their areas.

Other aspects of the Home Preservation Program include:

- **Meeting regularly with the county sheriff's office**, which administers evictions. An outcome of these meetings is that wrap-around community supports, such as care coordination and access to local resources, can be offered to affected older adults.
- **Funding legal assistance agencies** to prevent evictions. This includes strengthening referrals and engaging in appropriate data sharing with Home Preservation grantees.
- **Educating and training Aging Network professionals** about homelessness and resources available in community development corporations (CDCs) and other housing agencies. The quarterly AgeOptions "office hour" sessions provide an informal forum for housing specialists to discuss issues and receive assistance.
- **Super-charging the AAA's relationship with the local homeless Continuum of Care (CoC)**—a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding designed to promote community-wide commitment to the goal of ending homelessness. AgeOptions meets regularly with the CoC to coordinate homelessness prevention and response in the region.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

AgeOptions and its grantees had to proactively learn about the homeless system and its unique terminology and educate housing and homelessness providers about aging services by translating concepts into their terms. The Home Preservation grantees also encountered challenges with recruiting knowledgeable candidates in a tight labor market.

To encourage innovation and responsiveness to local priorities, AgeOptions gave the grantees considerable latitude in how to expand and enhance their existing housing supports and build agency capacity. Mandatory monthly meetings enabled the grantees to share innovations, promising practices, challenges and lessons learned with each other.

When it began the program, AgeOptions categorized the services as information and referral/assistance (I&R/A). Over time, grantees found that addressing housing instability required a higher level of intensity and follow-up support. Now AgeOptions and its community partners use options counseling coding, which allows for more staff time to develop person-centered action plans to assist an individual in finding or staying in their own home.

## Outcomes and Sustainability

The program has increased the capacity of local agencies to respond to the wide spectrum of local housing issues with dedicated housing specialists. Coordination and referrals between Aging Network providers and the homeless services system, sheriff's office and legal assistance agencies have improved.

AgeOptions used American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for the program, which is unfortunately a time-limited resource. Accordingly, AgeOptions is exploring ways to sustain the most impactful parts of the program through Older Americans Act funding and other sources.

## Advice for AAAs

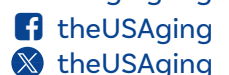
- **Build strong connections with local CoCs.** AAAs should anticipate discussions about how homelessness can look different among older adults than is recognized in the federal definition, which in turn affects resource allocation. Understanding and learning what programs and funding will apply in each situation will allow for greater opportunity to assist.
- **Develop data-sharing processes and agreements to facilitate tracking referrals, coordination between organizations and reporting.** Attention is needed to both protect individuals' privacy and confidentiality and provide the information each agency needs for community, funder and board buy-in.
- **Engage partners and potential future funders to better understand local issues, leverage existing resources to maximize impact and set a pathway for sustainability early in the process.** Entities that tend to have their own separate funding include CDCs, legal assistance providers, CoCs and community action agencies.

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Leaders in Aging Well at Home

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