

MEMORANDUM



Joseph L. Smith, Chairman, Board of Commissioners Janet Abrahams, President / Chief Executive Officer

To: The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
 c/o Natawna Austin, Executive Secretary

From: Janet Abrahams, President and Chief Executive Officer

JA

Date: April 24, 2020

Re: City Council Bill 20-0194R Informational Hearing – Baltimore’s Strategic Response to the Wuhan
 Coronavirus

The Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) has received the letter from the City Council President, pursuant to City Council Bill 20-0194R, Informational Hearing – Baltimore’s Strategic Response to the Wuhan Corona Virus. In the Council President’s letter of April 13, 2020, for the purpose of addressing issues related to ongoing efforts to respond to the COVID-19 emergency in Baltimore City at a hearing of the City Council’s Health Committee, five questions were specifically raised to be addressed at the hearing about the ongoing efforts of certain City agencies and HABC in the following areas:

1. Is there a coordinated outreach plan for African Americans and the neighborhoods that have been most impacted by COVID-19, as well as neighborhoods with similar demographics?
2. Is there a coordinated plan for testing and tracing in the neighborhoods most impacted by the virus and those with similar demographics?
3. What is the plan for increasing access to food for those experiencing food insecurity in Baltimore, particularly in those heavily impacted areas?
4. What is the current situational need of our students for digital learning and what is needed to improve it?
5. What is the enforcement plan for COVID-19 regulations?

HABC provides federally funded housing programs and related services for Baltimore’s low-income households. Through our Public Housing and Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs, HABC serves approximately 43,000 residents, including some of the city’s most vulnerable populations such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, veterans and families with children. The majority of the residents served by HABC are African American (98% in Public Housing and 96% in HCV), and through the traditional public housing sites, scattered site public housing and HCV program, HABC supported residents live in every zip code in Baltimore City. While HABC’s primary mission is to create and provide affordable housing opportunities in sustainable neighborhoods for the people we serve, we have a variety of programs that address food insufficiency and the digital divide. HABC is not charged with public health, education, or public safety, though we welcome the opportunities to collaborate with other agencies in supporting these missions for the citizens of Baltimore City, including our residents.

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1. Coordinated Outreach Plan

Since March 16, 2020, HABC has undertaken a robust public service campaign to educate the general public, HABC public housing residents, HCV participants, HCV landlords, and staff about the ongoing emergency and HABC's response. These efforts have been designed to reach the residents and landlords of HABC's specific programs. HABC operates a closed-circuit information television system, "HABC-TV," which circulates information for residents, staff, and visitors. HABC-TV streams resource information related to operations and safety during the COVID-19 emergency

On April 21st, 2020, HABC launched the "Everyone is at Risk" public awareness campaign, which placed 250 signs on the properties to inform and educate residents about the importance of practicing social distancing at all times in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

In addition to the "Everyone is at Risk" yard signs, signs and other materials have been placed on HABC property, urging residents to practice social distancing, engage in frequent handwashing, and wear face masks, among other practices. HABC's outreach efforts are a part of our efforts to keep residents and staff safe and healthy by keeping them informed about directives and guidelines as provided by the CDC and state and local health departments.

From March 30 through April 20, 2020, Service Coordinators and other staff from our Office of Resident Services made over 5,500 wellness calls to check on the wellbeing of seniors and vulnerable residents at HABC developments, scattered site properties, Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) properties, and within the HCV program.

A listing of outreach and operational updates for staff, the general public, residents, landlords, and political leaders can be found on HABC's dedicated COVID-19 web page:

<https://www.habc.org/habc-information/habc-responds-covid-19-updates/>

While the notifications and information are posted to our website, this is just a central way to show all of our communications. Individual residents have received letters and notices directly through the mail about updates to HABC's operations and the ability of residents to complete interim rent adjustments due to loss of income at this time. We have embraced a strategy of communicating information directly to impacted residents as well as through our website, landlord portal, social media, yard signs, posters at developments, and phone recordings on our office lines.

2. Coordinated Testing and Tracing Plan

HABC is not a public health agency and therefore, does not have the capacity or expertise for testing and tracing. HABC welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with Baltimore City Department of Health, Maryland Department of Health and any other partners in order to ensure that HABC residents are included in testing and tracing opportunities in Baltimore City.

3. Increased Access to Food Plan

Even before the current COVID-19 emergency, HABC has recognized the food insecurity that some residents face. Some of the existing programs, coordinated through the Office of Resident Services, include the USDA Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), My Groceries To-Go, and Eating Together. HABC staff and our partners in these programs have modified how the programs are conducted in light of COVID-19, changing from congregate

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feeding to delivery of food directly to residents, and also increasing the amount of food distributed at one time in order to minimize contact with vulnerable populations. These efforts have resulted in distributing 4,500 meals to nearly 575 residents between March 30 and April 20, 2020.

HABC plans to continue these programs and our collaboration with community partners and increase access to food through new partnerships in direct response to COVID-19, including the programs near our residents that are run by the Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks and the Baltimore City School System. We have been working on two initiatives specifically designed to impact food security in response to COVID-19:

Baltimore City Emergency Food Working Group – Direct Food Distribution

Since March 9, 2020, HABC staff have been working with the Baltimore City Emergency Food Working Group, which has been key in standing up coordinated efforts to ensure that food is available to food insecure residents in Baltimore. Through partnerships with the City's Department of Planning, Department of Housing and Community Development, and the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success, HABC has been able to ensure that public housing sites are incorporated into food programs such as the mobile meal program, and grab-and-go meals at HABC sites during Baltimore City Public School's rescheduled spring break period, and ultimately through receiving deliveries this week of emergency food boxes from the Maryland Food Bank as a part of the city-wide emergency food initiative. HABC staff will distribute 5,000 emergency food boxes, which are designed to provide basic nutrition to 20,000 people for a week, to all public housing family developments over the next week.

Baltimore City Emergency Food Working Group – Aging Emergency Food Insecurity Subgroup

HABC has been working with the Baltimore City Health Department Division of Aging and a variety of partners to ensure that senior residents in privately managed buildings that were once public housing also have increased access to food. It is our understanding that in addition to the programs that had previously been serving these buildings, through these efforts, the Salvation Army and the Baltimore City Department of Transportation will begin to distribute food to these vulnerable populations on Monday April 27th. HABC will continue to work with our private management partners and all stakeholders to ensure safe access to needed resources during this emergency.

4. Digital Learning

While HABC is not an educational agency, we share the concerns related to the digital divide in Baltimore and its impact on low income communities. As an example of HABC's efforts to combat the digital divide among HABC residents, federal funding enabled HABC to partner with T-Mobile to provide 500 tablet computers across several sites in the summer of 2018, and they came preloaded with 2 years of paid internet service, at the housing authority's expense. Households were selected because they had current active participants in one of HABC's workforce development programs, and while that was not meant to target students, the residual benefit of this program was to families that also had school aged children who could use the tablets for accessing learning opportunities. HABC remains willing to engage in other partnerships to be part of a collaborative solution to bridge this divide.

5. COVID-19 Regulations Enforcement Plan

While HABC is not an enforcement agency, we have altered our work and procedures to comply with COVID-19 regulations from the City of Baltimore, the State of Maryland, and the federal government. Day-to-day staffing and operations have been changed and continue to be updated as guidance has changed throughout this emergency. HABC transitioned to a remote working plan starting on March 16, 2020, in order to ensure the safety and health of both staff and residents. Critical health and safety functions are being performed by staff with the

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proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and in accordance with social distancing guidelines. These arrangements have been modified as the guidance from the federal CDC and Baltimore City Health Department has been updated. As a public housing authority, subject to the direction and funding of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), HABC continues to follow HUD guidance on how to comply with all federal guidelines while prioritizing the health and safety of residents and staff.

In conclusion, HABC will continue to use its federal funding to serve the residents of Baltimore by providing affordable housing opportunities to those with the lowest incomes. Through the efforts of our staff and in partnership with other nonprofit organizations, the City of Baltimore, the State of Maryland, and private sector partners, we will continue to prioritize the wellbeing of our residents and staff during this uncertain time. We look forward to the opportunity to continue working with all of our partners towards the best outcomes for the residents of all the communities we serve.