

Summer 2018 Affordable Housing Experience Survey Report

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August 17, 2018



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Overview

This project consisted of two surveys, one focused on the experiences of residents living at properties with age minimums or ability restrictions (hereafter referred to as “older adults”), and the other at those living in general family housing. The surveys were developed within MaineHousing’s (MSHA) Communications and Planning Department with guidance from the Asset Management team. The survey findings, in combination with other factors, will help guide MaineHousing in its effort to designate certain properties as “Communities of Excellence” and award them accompanying benefits.

The criteria for participating in these surveys initially began with the requirement that residents be living in low-income housing tax credit buildings (LIHTCs) and using some type of subsidy (not paying market rent), though the project expanded to include other kinds of affordable housing such as USDA Rural Development (RD) properties when it became clear that the initial narrow parameters were limiting and were making recruitment very difficult. Additionally, all surveys were initially intended to be conducted face-to-face between the 2018 MSHA summer intern Research Surveyor and individual residents, but this also proved to be inefficient and unrealistic. A combination of in-person and two types of phone interviews was ultimately utilized.

Results and General Findings

The sample size for both surveys is quite small, though this is particularly so for the family survey. Many of the family survey respondents reside at the same property, which could skew results. However, it is striking to see how many of the graphs between the two surveys, when compared to each other, mimic one another. Even the most common age group for the family survey was 55-59, which is old enough to live in many older adult and assisted buildings. These are lengthy surveys: the family survey was 57 questions, and the older adult survey was 53. Therefore, only select results and trends will be discussed.

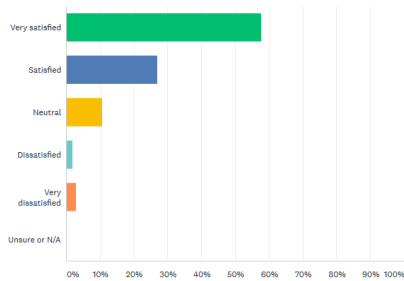
Overall, 126 surveys, 104 older adult and 22 family surveys, were conducted. Those living in older adult housing were overwhelmingly female (approximately 83%), single (approximately 90%), and white (approximately 98%). The most common age group for these participants was 75-79. Those living in family housing were also majority female (approximately 55%), single (approximately 86%), and white (approximately 95%). The most common amount of time older adult respondents had spent living in their current home was 1-3 years and was tied between 1-3 and 10 or more years for family survey respondents.

The results of this survey, as a whole, were positive. The majorities in both surveys were either satisfied or very satisfied with their homes and felt that their living situations were either fully or mostly meeting all their needs. Both survey majorities also felt that their homes were as large as they were expecting and that their bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms were appropriate and comfortable sizes, and that their homes and apartment building/common spaces were accessible enough for

them to utilize. Approximately 66% of older adults felt their home was usually a comfortable temperature, as did approximately 62% of people living in family housing.

Overall, how satisfied are you with your current home?

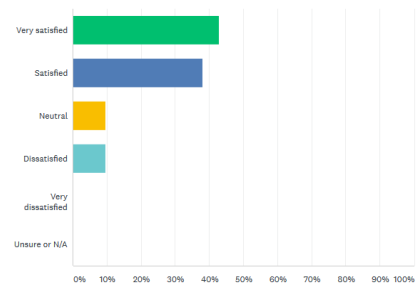
Answered: 104 Skipped: 0



Older adult

Overall, how satisfied are you with your current home?

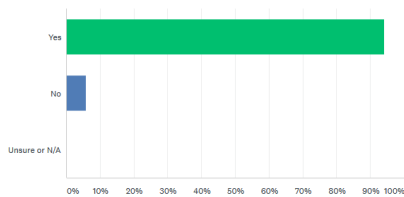
Answered: 21 Skipped: 1



Family

Is your current home accessible enough for you and/or household members to fully utilize it?

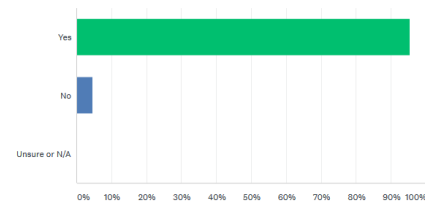
Answered: 101 Skipped: 3



Older adult

Is your current home accessible enough for you and/or household members to fully utilize it?

Answered: 22 Skipped: 0

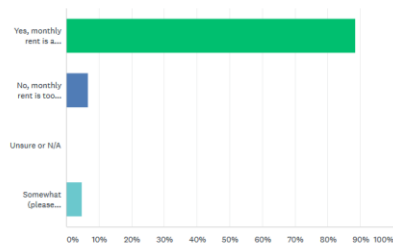


Family

Additionally, the vast majority of respondents in both surveys felt that their monthly rents were a realistic and comfortable amount for their household to pay, and they were not surprised by how much they were required to pay for rent. Approximately 67% of the older adult respondents were not required to pay separate utilities like electric, heating, or water utilities. Approximately 64% of respondents living in family housing paid a separate electric bill.

Regardless of how much you expected to pay before moving in, is your monthly rent realistic for you and/or household members to comfortably pay?

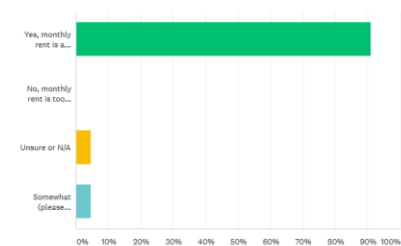
Answered: 104 Skipped: 0



Older adult

Regardless of how much you expected to pay before moving in, is your monthly rent realistic for you and/or household members to comfortably pay?

Answered: 22 Skipped: 0



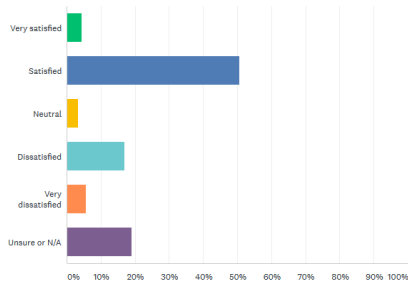
Family

Transportation received a somewhat less positive report from respondents, with just under half of family respondents and just over half of older adult respondents having reliable access to a car for them to drive (approximately 45% and 52%, respectively). Though the most common answer on both surveys was that respondents were satisfied with their access to public transportation, many of

these people were likely counting other forms of transportation which is more specialized and exclusive than the general city bus. Older adults, specifically, spoke frequently about using “Lynx” and Medicare transportation options. Additionally, many people who did have access to a car and were able to drive answered that they did not know if they were satisfied with their access to public transportation, as they had never taken it. When participants were asked if there is anything they wish they had access to or had more access to, a common response was that they would like more public transportation that was easier to use, came more frequently, and was more accessible.

Are you satisfied with your access to public transportation?

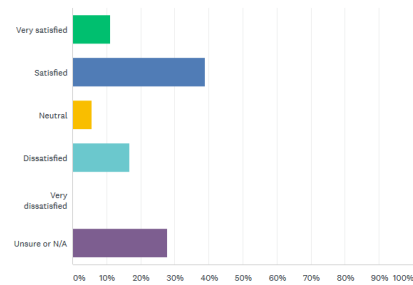
Answered: 89 Skipped: 15



Older adult

Are you satisfied with your access to public transportation?

Answered: 18 Skipped: 4



Family

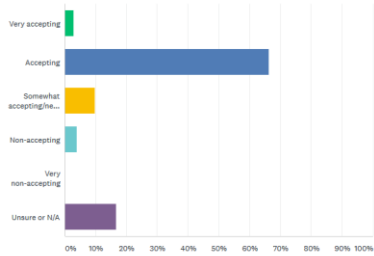
People also worried about their access to services, which could be helped with better public transportation. About 81% of older adult respondents and about 77% of family respondents reported that a grocery or convenience store was a satisfactory/manageable distance from their home. Pharmacies, personal physicians, and emergency services (counted if they were near enough to respond quickly to a 911 call) were also given high marks by many respondents in both surveys for being a satisfactory/manageable distance from home. Overall, access to services was another frequent topic of conversation, and it was sometimes given as a reason that respondents would want to move from their current home.

The vast majority of people in both surveys indicated that they feel safe in their homes, and the majority also feel safe in their neighborhoods and communities. Older adult respondents felt that their neighbors and community were accepting or very accepting of various people and circumstances like race, religion, and sexuality (approximately 69%), whereas only 50% of family respondents felt that this was the case. Older adults may see less diversity on a daily basis than younger people who are more likely to be in the workforce and may go into the community more frequently, meaning that older adults may have less exposure to both diversity and discrimination. It

is also possible that there is a generational difference between older adults and younger people in what is considered to be accepting or discriminatory behavior.

Do you feel that your current neighbors and community are accepting of various people and circumstances? (e.g., race/ethnicity, religion, gender/sexuality, socioeconomic status/class)

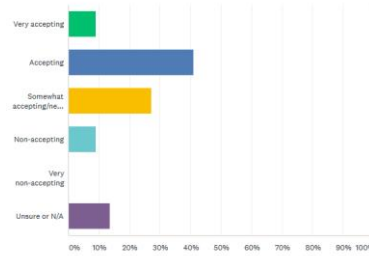
Answered: 101 Skipped: 3



Older adults

Do you feel that your current neighbors and community are accepting of various people and circumstances? (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, religion, gender/sexuality, socioeconomic status/class, etc.)

Answered: 22 Skipped: 0

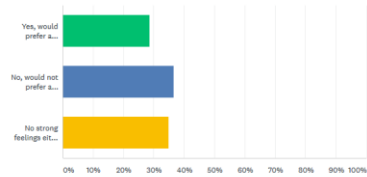


Family

Respondents to the family survey who indicated that they were not currently using a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) were more likely to say that they would prefer to have an HCV than were the corresponding older adult respondents

Would you prefer to have a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) if it meant finding your own apartment to rent, instead of living in a building or unit designated specifically for lower-income renters?

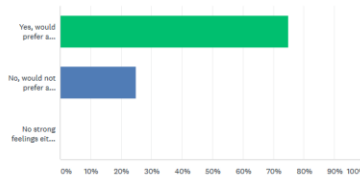
Answered: 63 Skipped: 41



Older adult

Would you prefer to have a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) if it meant finding your own apartment to rent, instead of living in a building or unit designated specifically for lower-income renters?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 10

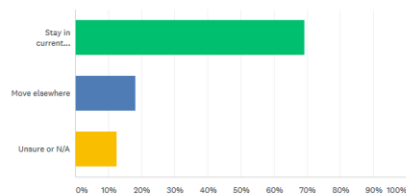


Family

The majority of both the older adult and family survey respondents wanted to remain in their current community as opposed to moving elsewhere.

If, in future, you had a choice between staying in your current community and moving elsewhere, which would you choose?

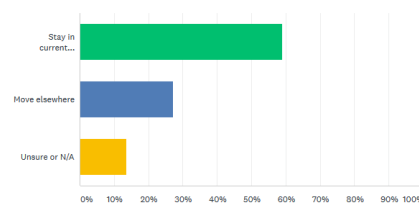
Answered: 104 Skipped: 0



Older adult

If, in future, you had a choice between staying in your current community and moving elsewhere, which would you choose?

Answered: 22 Skipped: 0



Family

RSCs and Staff

This project generally required a certain amount of work from a management organization employee, often a Resident Service Coordinator (RSC) or property manager of some kind, from notifying the residents to generating interest. MSHA's Research Surveyor observed a fair amount of

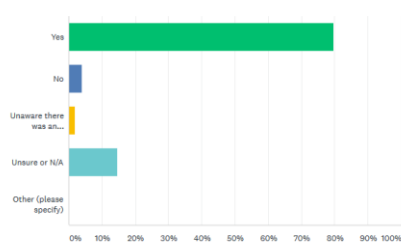
turnover in RSC positions, including a number of very new RSCs, some empty positions, RSCs set to retire soon, and one instance of the RSC retiring in the middle of the surveying process. RSC programs began primarily to help people living in multifamily housing remain independent (“Service Coordinator Program”). RSCs may help residents access programs, resources, and services that can help them. More recently RSCs have been working directly in a hands-on manner with residents to help them with aging in place, being independent, and other issues they might be facing. Throughout the 1990s, both the number of RSCs at different types of properties and the sources of funding for RSCs expanded (“History of Service Coordination”).

In speaking with RSCs through the summer of 2018, it seems that it is a relatively variable job in terms of duties. Some RSCs seemed to be bringing substantial numbers of programs to their properties, and some spent much of their time “lending an ear” to their residents, which appeared to be a taxing job at times. It seemed that some properties were disinterested in programming, but sentiments that came up multiple times throughout the survey process were that the RSCs “try” or “they would bring in programming if people wanted them to.” Conversely, many residents brought up the desire to have more access to programming and activities, though it is likely that there is a correlation between those who agreed to participate in this survey and those who are active and engaged generally and who might want more activities.

There was a notable discrepancy between older adult respondents and family respondents in terms of RSC recognition. Approximately 36% of family respondents indicated they had met or had personal contact with their RSC, whereas nearly 80% of older adult respondents had done so. This might be due to the fact that RSCs initially worked primarily with older adults (“History of Service Coordination”). Additionally, older adults may need more assistance from their RSCs, and they may have more time to socialize with them if they spend more time at their property.

Have you met with or had personal contact with your resident service coordinator (RSC)?

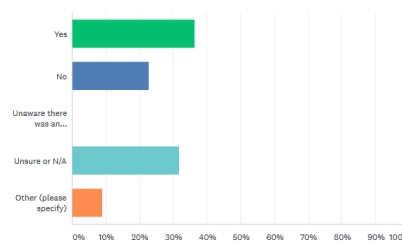
Answered: 103 Skipped: 1



Older adult

Have you met with or had personal contact with your resident service coordinator (RSC)?

Answered: 22 Skipped: 0



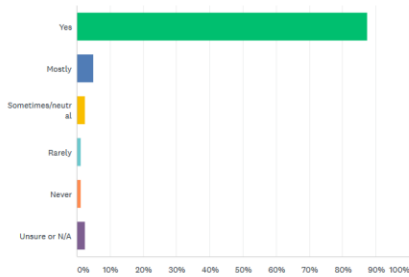
Family

However, if respondents indicated that they did know their RSC, they overwhelmingly said they were available, helpful, and reasonable in both surveys. This result, while positive, should be taken with a grain of salt. RSCs who allowed the interviews to take place may be disproportionately involved and capable, willing to go above and beyond for their residents, meaning that they may be more popular amongst residents than the average RSC. Additionally, as RSCs were primarily responsible for recruiting residents to participate, it would have been possible for them to recruit those residents with whom they had a close, positive relationship. As was aforementioned, RSCs

would sometimes also be present for interviews or be within earshot, which could have influenced the responses.

Is the resident service coordinator (RSC) here available, helpful, and reasonable?

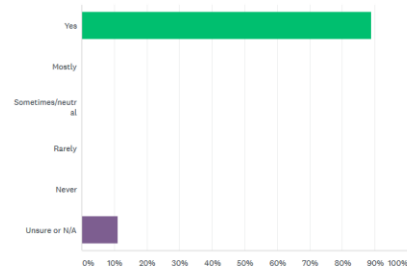
Answered: 80 Skipped: 24



Older adult

Is the resident service coordinator (RSC) here available, helpful, and reasonable?

Answered: 9 Skipped: 13

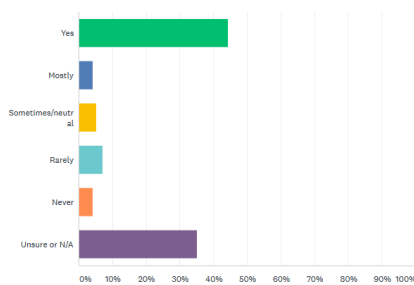


Family

It is also likely that RSCs were sometimes counted as landlords, and that other employees were counted as RSCs if they had duties similar to those of an RSC. Many respondents, especially in family housing, were unsure as to what an RSC was, and needed prompting or a name of an RSC known by the interviewer. Likewise, many respondents did not know their landlord and may have counted entire organizations, RSCs, or other employees as their landlord.

Is your landlord available, helpful, and reasonable?

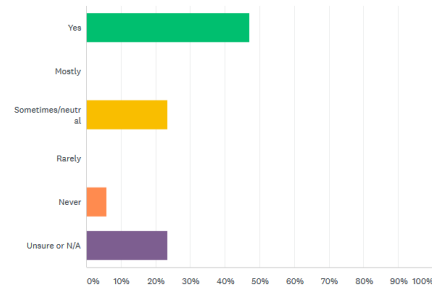
Answered: 97 Skipped: 7



Older adult

Is your landlord available, helpful, and reasonable?

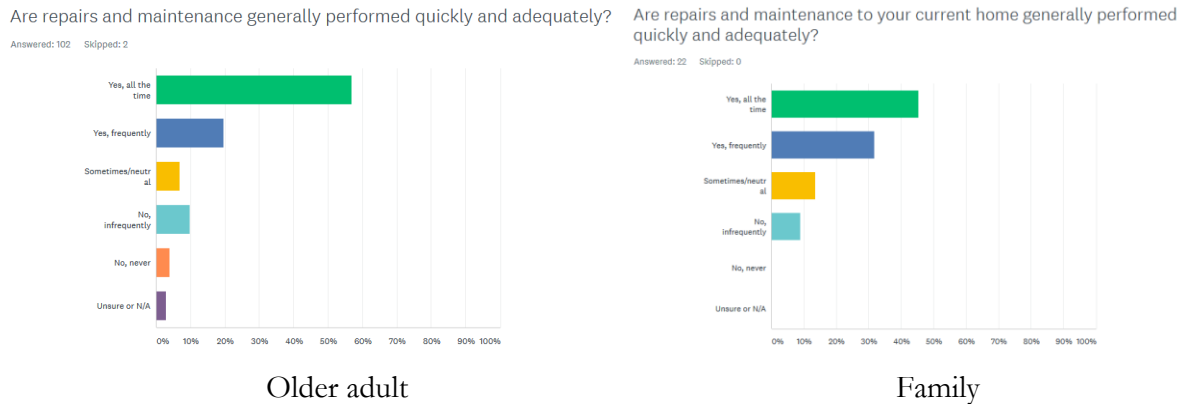
Answered: 17 Skipped: 5



Family

Maintenance was occasionally mentioned as a problem by respondents, but the majority of respondents on both surveys indicated that the maintenance was usually performed quickly and adequately. A topic that arose a few times in conversation was that the maintenance workers

themselves were good, but they were splitting their time between multiple properties and more maintenance staff would be a welcome addition.



Discussion on Methodology and Design

As was previously mentioned, the initial participant requirements were overly restricting and were adjusted to allow for more people to participate. The timeline for this project, from the end of May through mid-August 2018, was short for recruiting and conducting the interviews, and the majority of management organizations were slow to agree to and solidify plans for the survey-interviews. The amount of time spent creating the survey also cut into time that would otherwise have been spent surveying, and beginning recruitment earlier could make the process more efficient. It seems likely that the lack of enthusiasm amongst management organizations was due to a number of factors including finding the right contact, summer vacations, and fears that residents would complain or give negative answers to surveys which could, in turn, result in negative consequences for the organization. A few organizations refused outright to participate, and many never responded to follow-up contact. Certain management employees agreed to hang up notices for residents about the project including the Research Surveyor’s number for residents to call, but no calls were ever received. It cannot be verified whether these residents were ever informed or encouraged to participate.

Barriers to recruiting residents to participate included the length of the surveys, which were generally advertised as being up to 20-25 minutes, but realistically could and did range from between 9 and 50 minutes depending on the participant’s level of enthusiasm for additional information and anecdotes. Participation often also required residents to be proactive in signing up, calling, or seeking out the Research Surveyor for “walk-in” interviews onsite. There was no external incentive for participating. Concerns about anonymity, privacy, and retribution from management organizations and loss of benefits could also hinder in recruiting residents to participate. At times, an RSC or other employee was in the room or within earshot during interviews, which could influence responses.

In terms of the more technical aspects of the process, the initial stages of recruitment were slowed by the necessity to research and compile lists of contacts for the management organizations. MSHA’s Multi-Family Database is not fully updated or exhaustive, and a list of property RSCs could not be located. Additionally, the tablet used to collect the surveys was prone to glitches, often refreshing surveys midway resulting in data loss. The tablet did not have an accurate touchscreen,

and combined with a persistent autocorrect feature, not all data collected were accurate. Some data were reentered later on a desktop computer, but there remain spelling errors in many property names. Due to the slowness, accuracy issues, and cellular hotspot signal weakness, as well as the Research Surveyor needing to use personal cellular data when MSHA's floater cell phone was checked out to other people, paper surveys were often used and reentered online at a later time. Another challenge was the questions in the survey itself. There are notes on the individual questions with recommendations in Appendix 1 on page 15 of this report.

Recommendations for Future Surveys on Residential Experience

Looking ahead, this project will need more time to get through a more significant number of participants. Recruitment should begin in advance of the time allotted for surveying, though not too far ahead that participants will forget their appointments. Planning ahead will also allow the interviewer to arrange the interviews in an efficient manner in terms of geography and driving. Speaking with RSCs is useful because they are often closely and personally connected to their residents, but they only have control of the certain properties that are in their portfolios. If possible, speaking first with someone at the management organization above the RSCs might be helpful in getting contacts for all the organization's RSCs and maximizing contacts at each management organization. This helps to combat the issue of calling the receptionist multiple times and asking to be passed off to whoever is in charge of particular properties, as there is often no list of what properties are in individual RSCs' portfolios. This was a voluntary survey and was framed as such, and management organizations and participants were told they could request copies if a report is produced.

If possible, it is best to have participants sign up for individual time slots of 20-25 minutes. This prevents long wait times as well as situations where waiting participants are within earshot of the person taking the survey. Keeping the surveys as private and anonymous as possible may lead to the most honest responses, as participants are not concerned of what others might think of them after hearing their answers. A note asking participants to sign up one after another on the signup sheet, if possible, will result in the most efficient use of the interviewer's time. Having a generic notice explaining the project for RSCs to distribute to residents eases the burden on the RSCs and allows potential participants to have a consistent expectation for the survey process. Some organizations did request copies for themselves and/or their residents to look over prior to agreeing to interviews, which was acceptable.

When conducting phone interviews, if the RSC or other contact employee is amenable, collecting phone numbers and the interviewer calling residents prevents one person from taking the survey multiple times. It also allows the interviewer to know if the contact employee has honored the request to inform residents of the survey. Having participants indicate exact dates and times may be helpful in successfully reaching them for phone interviews.

Conclusion

The overall results of this survey were a positive sign for affordable housing properties in the State of Maine. Though there were reports of inept management, gossip amongst residents, and an inadequate public transportation system, the most basic needs, such as comfortable temperatures, helpful RSCs, and satisfactory homes of many respondents were being met. There is definite room for improvement, and many more interview-surveys will need to be conducted to gather a more

comprehensive and representative picture; however, this first round of surveys was a positive step in the right direction. Many participants and management organization employees alike thanked the Research Surveyor and MSHA for conducting the interviews and said that it was a beneficial activity for MaineHousing to listen to what the residents of affordable housing have to say. Despite the sometimes trying logistics of setting up the interviews and working with management organizations, this type of resident experience survey is a valuable and important method for MSHA to stay in touch with the needs of the population it serves and to continue to better the state of affordable housing in Maine.

Works Cited

“History of Service Coordination.” *American Association of Service Coordinators*,

www.servicecoordinator.org/page/SCHistory.

“Service Coordinator Program.” *HUD.gov / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban*

Development (HUD), www.hud.gov/program_offices/housing/mfh/scp/scphome.

Appendix 1

Notes on Individual Survey Questions

One continuous challenge was conducting the surveys and recording participants' answers. Based on the recommendation of a test respondent, a paper copy of the survey was sometimes offered to participants to read along with the researcher during the survey. Not all participants were given the chance to read along and none of those with the offer ever did look at their paper copy. This meant that there was variation in how the survey was delivered as well as how respondents answered the questions. This required the Research Surveyor to interpret anecdotes and vocalized thoughts as consistently and accurately as possible, but much was still left to interpretation.

Generally, the Research Surveyor tried to consistently word questions in understandable terms while still being conversational for the sake of the respondent's level of comfort. As many of the respondents were hard of hearing, deaf, living in assisted living facilities, and older and experiencing issues with cognition and memory, there were a variety of comprehension styles and levels for which had to be accommodated. The Research Surveyor used her own judgement when it seemed that participants were not understanding the true meaning of questions and therefore sometimes did not record answers for certain questions, even if the participants attempted to answer.

Additionally, for questions with long lists of answers to check off, it quickly became apparent that it would be time-inefficient and awkward to read every answer. In the following notes for individual questions, it will be noted which choices were commonly listed as possible responses to participants. This means that just because certain checklist answers have zero or very few responses, they were not necessarily dissatisfactory and may instead have been omitted as options from most surveys. The following notes are about individual survey questions which the Research Surveyor felt had evolved and should be noted if the survey were to be continued by another interviewer at another time for the sake of consistency and accuracy. Questions which are not mentioned have no special instructions. Though these notes are on individual questions on the older adult survey, they remain practically identical for the family survey as well.

Older Adult and Assisted Living Survey

4. "What is your relationship status?"

Note: The answer "unmarried" is inclusive of those people who are divorced and widowed. If this survey was ever to be reworked, those should, perhaps, be made into separate responses for specificity's sake and "unmarried" should become "single." The answer "in an unregistered cohabiting relationship" refers to those living with a sexual or romantic partner (dating) without that relationship being legally recognized through marriage or domestic partnership.

9. "Has receiving assistance and living in your current home helped you to accomplish or work towards any of the following? Check all that apply."

Note: This question was usually simplified to, "Has living here helped you to..." followed by at least some of the four following choices (with appropriate tense changes):

1. "Putting more money into your savings," (which was usually phrased as "saving money")
2. "Improving your quality of life"
3. "Improving access to quality medical care or to other necessary services"
4. "Improving your mental or physical health"

19. Is your current building/apartment complex accessible enough for you and/or household members to fully utilize it?

Note: If the units were individual buildings/there was no apartment building, this question would be asked as, "Are the common areas and common/community buildings accessible?"

24. "How do you feel about the location of the RSC's office?"

Note: If the RSC did not have an office onsite, the answer was normally recorded as, "Unsure or N/A".

25. "Is your landlord available, helpful, and reasonable?"

Note: It is likely that many people have differing ideas of what constitutes a landlord, and it is very possible that resident service coordinators (RSCs), public housing authority employees, and others were often counted as landlords and considered when this question was answered.

29. "How much rent do you feel would be a realistic price for you/this household?"

Note: This was one of the least popular questions, with 40 blank answers as of 9:30am on August 16, 2018. Some of the answers received do not actually give figures, and merely say that the price being paid is appropriate or is not appropriate (which is essentially a repetition of the question directly above it on the survey). Some of the respondents to the blank answers of this question also relayed that the price being paid is or is not satisfactory, but this "non-answer answer" was not always recorded. This question seemed to confuse or make many respondents uncomfortable, likely because it was too personal. It was often orally presented as, "If you were to give a ballpark estimate for a household like yours, what would you feel is a realistic and comfortable rent?" in an attempt to make it more theoretical.

31. "Are there any additional costs associated with your current living situation?"

Note: Extremely common answers to this question were not the examples of storage or parking (which were almost never given as additional expenses), but rather "cable," "TV," and "phone."

33. "Is there adequate parking for you/household members at your building/apartment complex?"

Note: If respondents had answered in the previous question that they didn't have access to a car/do not drive, this question would be asked as, "If you did want to park a car here, would there be adequate parking for you?"

35. "Do you use public transportation?"

Note: The affirmative answer would be checked if the participant had ever taken public transportation in the area. The validity of the responses to any of the public transportation questions is up for debate, as many people seemed to count types of transportation provided by Medicare or other services which are not free and open to anyone.

37. "Which organizations and services do you feel are a satisfactory/manageable distance from your current home? Check all that apply."

Note: This question would often be simplified to, "I have a list of services and organizations, and if you could tell me if they're a manageable distance or they're too far away from your home," and the following answers would usually be listed:

1. Grocery/convenience store(s)
2. Retail shops (like clothing stores--Walmart wasn't usually counted)
3. Pharmacies
4. Emergency services (if the ambulances come quickly, that would be counted)
5. Your physician

Occasionally, the following answers would also be listed:

6. Current job(s)
7. Gyms/fitness centers, wellness programs (usually shortened to gyms or fitness centers)
8. Necessary medical specialists

38. "Are you receiving supportive care services? Check all that apply."

Note: Examples given to participants would often be some combination of "Delivered meals, housework, or nursing."

41. "Do you feel that your current neighbors and community are age-friendly?"

Note: This question would often be clarified as "Both at your building and in your town/city, are people accepting of all ages? Older people, children, and people in the middle?" if participants looked confused. All questions about neighbor and community acceptance levels were marked as "Accepting" if participants said, "Oh, I think so" and "I think so, I've never heard of any problems with it." If they responded that it never comes up and people don't know, it would be scored as "Unsure or N/A."

44. "Would you prefer to have a Section 8 HCV if it meant finding your own apartment to rent, instead of living in a building or unit designated specifically for lower-income renters?"

Note: This question was simplified to, "Would you prefer to have a Section 8 HCV (if you did qualify for it)?"

48. Does anyone in this household belong to any service organizations, clubs, or community groups either affiliated with or independent from the property where you currently live? Check all that apply.

Note: Participants frequently cut off this questions prior to the "affiliated with this property" portion, and almost none of them answered that they are part of a property-related group.

50. "Is there a tenant-based organization at your current property? Are you a member?"

Note: This is a question very likely to be misunderstood by participants. A follow-up rephrasing might be, "Is there a group of residents who gets together to do anything in particular?" If the response is that there's a group that plays bingo, that would be listed as "Other" and then explained in the below comment. Often, respondents would say there are sometimes meetings with the management organization but no formal membership. If they answered that they frequently attend those meetings it could be marked as, "Yes, a tenant-based organization and yes, a member."

51. "Does the property where you live bring in any programs for residents? What programs?"

Note: Blood pressure is often another good example of programming to mention.