

April 2, 2020

Emailed to adam@scjustice.org

Adam Protheroe
South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center
PO Box 7187
Columbia, South Carolina 29202

Dear Attorney Protheroe:

I hope this letter finds you, your family members, and staff safe and in good health during these uncertain times. On behalf of Columbia Housing's Board of Commissioners and staff, we'd like to thank South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, South Carolina Legal Services, One80 Place Legal Services, Homeless No More, and the Midlands Area Consortium for the Homeless for your leadership in ensuring protections for Low-Income Families during this COVID-19 pandemic. I'd like to share with you the actions we've taken to minimize the spread of COVID-19 in our Columbia Housing communities and the measures we've implemented to ensure that our families maintain stable housing. **The safety and well-being of our 16,000+ residents and 100+ staff are among our highest priorities.**

In February 2020, we dedicated a page on our website to communicate with our families and the general public about all of Columbia Housing's relevant *News & Information* in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A synopsis of virtual and written communications to our residents, program participants, and landlords is summarized below.

- **1,600 letters** mailed to our **Public Housing Families**
- **4,000 letters** mailed to our **Housing Choice Voucher Program Families**
- **2,000 letters** mailed to our **Housing Choice Voucher Program Landlords**
- **26 COVID-19 e-blast messages** sent to our **9,714 website subscribers and social media followers**
- **150 COVID-19 signs and posters displayed** throughout our portfolio (administrative offices, high-rises, central office, community rooms, etc.,)

This is a difficult time for us all and Columbia Housing wants to assure the public that we have been extremely thoughtful in the planning and implementation of our actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our COVID-19 Response Timeline (<https://www.columbiahousingsc.org/covid-19-response>) of action steps is listed below. We will continue to update our action steps in accordance with recommendations from local, state and national public health officials.

MARCH

- **03.31.2020:** [Columbia Housing adjusting to serve the public in amid COVID-19 pandemic](#)

- **03.31.2020:** Spoke with staff in the Washington, DC offices of Senator Tim Scott, Senator Lindsey Graham and Congressman Jim Clyburn regarding regulatory and statutory administrative waivers request from the United States Department of Housing & Urban Development.
- **03.26.2020:** [Open Letter](#) to Columbia Housing's Program Participants and Residents!
- **03.26.2020:** Columbia Housing closes in compliance with [Emergency Stay at Home Order](#) by the City of Columbia.
- **03.26.2020:** Columbia Housing [Senior Facilities to be "Deep Cleaned"](#) Tomorrow.
- **03.25.2020:** Columbia Housing [Waives Policy to Expedite Reduction in Rent](#) for Residents Who've Lost Income. *updated release*
- **03.25.2020:** Columbia Housing [Waives Policy to Expedite Reduction in Rent](#) for Residents Who've Lost Income
- **03.25.2020:** Senior Facilities to be ["Deep Cleaned"](#) Friday, March 27, 2020
- **03.25.2020:** Issued ["Rent Reduction" Procedure](#) for residents experiencing a change in income as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.
- **03.25.2020:** Received notice from HUD COVID-19 Disaster Relief that Columbia Housing's Statutory and Regulatory Relief Waivers were being held for processing pending Congressional guidance.
- **03.24.2020:** [Letter to Mayor Benjamin](#) and members of Columbia City Council with updates on Columbia Housing's COVID-19 actions.
- **03.24.2020:** Executive Committee's approval to proceed with securing immediate [Statutory Relief](#) from our Congressional Delegation on administrative requirements that create an immediate threat to our staff and the residents we serve and is in direct opposition to the guidelines set forth to minimize the spread of COVID-19.
- **03.24.2020:** Submitted [Federal Regulatory Waiver Request](#) to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development to postpone specific requirements that we feel we will not be able to comply with unless we violate the guidelines set forth to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus.
- **03.23.2020:** Spoke with staff in the South Carolina offices of Senator Tim Scott, Senator Lindsey Graham and Congressman Jim Clyburn regarding regulatory and statutory administrative waivers request from the United States Department of Housing & Urban Development.
- **03.19.2020:** [Letter to Housing Choice Voucher Participants and Landlords](#)
- **03.19.2020:** [Food and/or Meal Distribution Guidelines](#)
- **03.19.2020:** [Information for CH's Housing Choice Voucher Participants](#)
- **03.18.2020:** [Housing Choice Voucher Participants - Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- **03.18.2020:** Implemented staggered work schedules and teleworking options for staff
- **03.18.2020:** Restricted Public Access to Property Mgmt Offices & Community Rooms
- **03.17.2020:** [Visitation Protocols for Senior High Rise Communities](#)
- **03.17.2020:** [Public Housing Residents - Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- **03.17.2020:** [Public Housing Rent, Maintenance and Public Health Directives](#)
- **03.17.2020:** [Letter to Public Housing Residents](#)
- **03.17.2020:** [COVID-19 Senior High-Rise Community Meetings](#): Dr. Melissa Nolan of the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina and Dr. Eric Brennan from Prisma Health will be joining us in meeting with our residents in the following communities (*canceled due to update of protocols from public health officials*).
 - ✓ Arrington Manor
 - ✓ Oak Reid
 - ✓ Marion Street
 - ✓ Rosewood Hills

- **03.16.2020:** Restricted Public Access to Main Office Building
- **03.13.2020:** Notified all individuals having reserved the Tillis Center that due to COVID-19 and the CDC's recommendation on Social Distancing, we are [canceling all events at the Tillis Center](#) for the next two weeks. Deposits will be refunded and we will accommodate rescheduling these events after the CDC has lifted such recommendations.
- **03.11.2020:** Contacted PRISMA Health, SC DHEC regarding staff/resident training and possible quarantine measures should that need arise.
- **03.10.2020:** Hung 100 informational posters from the CDC about reducing the spread of the virus in the main office and tech services; distributed 150 signs and full-sized posters to Property Management teams to display in our housing communities and high rises.
- **03.10.2020:** WISTV ran a story citing our News Release - "[Columbia Housing announces precautionary steps to prevent the spread of coronavirus](#)"
- **03.09.2020:** Issued News Release via website and social media "[Columbia Housing's Actions to Address Corona Virus Concerns](#)"
- **03.09.2020:** Acquired hand sanitizer stations for the Main Office, Tech Services Building, Tillis Center and high rises; distributed disinfectant wipes and cleaning solution to Property Management team and Maintenance staff.
- **03.09.2020:** Fully implemented CDC recommendations:
 - ✚ Hand sanitizer stations will be placed in the following locations:
 - ✓ Headquarters & all Lobby Areas throughout our portfolio
 - ✓ Reception Areas
 - ✓ Administrative Offices
 - ✓ Conference Rooms
 - ✓ High-rise Buildings (Arrington Manor, Marion Street, Oak Reid, Rosewood)
 - ✓ Tillis Center
 - ✓ Any Other areas deemed appropriate
 - ✚ Disinfecting wipes will be distributed to Conference Rooms, Administrative Offices, Reception Areas; and any other areas deemed appropriate.
 - ✚ Columbia Housing's janitorial services contractor is disinfecting common areas and surfaces throughout Columbia Housing's headquarters at 1917 Harden Street, including elevator buttons, door handles, and faucets, and is communicating with the CDC for any guidance on additional recommendations for cleaning procedures.
 - ✚ Disposable gloves and pocket-size hand sanitizer dispensers will be ordered and distributed to inspectors, maintenance technicians, and Columbia Housing's staff who perform home visits in the course of their job responsibilities.
 - ✚ Employees who are ill are encouraged to stay home.
 - ✚ Employees and residents are encouraged to wash their hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds; if soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol.
 - ✚ Columbia Housing is not ordering or providing face-masks at this time because the CDC specifically does not recommend that people who are well wear a face-mask to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19 novel coronavirus. In addition, the U.S. Surgeon General posted a tweet on February 29 that said, "STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing the general public from catching #Coronavirus, ..."
- **03.04.2020:** Began the process of trying to procure sufficient hand sanitizer, bleach wipes, and disinfecting materials
- **03.03.2020:** Issued News Release via the Website and Social Media "[What you Need to Know About Coronavirus](#)"

FEBRUARY

- **2.28.2020:** Deployed COVID-19 Task Force to activate staff involvement to address the coronavirus outbreak using principals outlined in Columbia housing's recently adopted Emergency Preparedness Plan. (November 2019)
- **02.28.2020:** Issued News Release via the Website and Social Media "[Columbia Housing Stresses Healthy Habits Amid Coronavirus Concerns](#)" included every day preventative measures that can be taken to avoid the virus. "We want our staff, residents and community partners to take every precaution to remain healthy and safe," says Interim Executive Director Ivory Mathews. "Many of these healthy habits are already incorporated into our daily routines; we just need to be mindful to take extra precautions with this heightened concern about coronavirus," concludes Mathews.

MID-LATE JANUARY & FEBRUARY

- Preparedness discussions began regarding possibilities and the need for staff to be aware and ready to act quickly if the virus begins to spread outside China

We have and will continue to assure our residents and program participants that they are not in this alone. *We are housers* and are *dedicated to continued efforts of providing a safe and thriving environment for all*. Complying with public health and public officials' recommendations of social-distancing has not been easy for the staff and we'd much rather be in the office doing the jobs we love with face to face interaction with the people we care much about.

As the COVID-19 epidemic unfolds, Columbia Housing will continue to implement measures, to the greatest extent possible, to ensure that families maintain stable housing. Below is a high-level summary of measures that we've implemented to protect residents, program participants, and employees.

IMPLEMENTED ACTIONS FOR PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENTS

- Suspension of **Notices to Vacate** for lease violations
- Suspension of evictions
- Suspension of transfer, unless it is a true emergency
- Suspension of routine work orders
- Emergency work orders may require additional troubleshooting via phone calls
- Suspension of housekeeping inspections
- Suspension of late fees
- Suspension of all resident activities to include the **Resident Executive Council**
- Suspension of grievance hearings
- Existing repayment agreements will be extended
- Waived policy to expedite [rent reductions](#) for loss of income
- Recertification deadlines will be extended
- Rental payments should be made via mail, drop-box or [online](#); receipts for rent payments will be mailed later
- Visitors for social purposes, especially at elderly properties are discouraged; medically related visitors and caregivers may continue to visit residents
- Pest control services will be conducted on the exterior of buildings and common areas. Routine interior pest control services will be suspended.
- Cyclical sanitizing of Senior High-Rise communities

- 24-7 call center for emergencies **803-251-2747**

IMPLEMENTED ACTIONS FOR HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER PARTICIPANTS

- Existing repayment agreements will be extended
- Suspension of annual recertification's
- Suspension of inspections except for true emergencies and vacant unit move-ins
- Suspension of terminations
- Suspension of voucher issuance for current and new participants
- Postponing issuing vouchers and voucher briefings for portability
- Toll voucher searches until the state of emergency is lifted
- Suspension of grievance hearings
- Waived policy to expedite [rent reductions](#) for loss of income
- 24-7 call center for emergencies **803-251-2747**
- **Continued on-time rental payments to landlords**

IMPLEMENTED ACTION FOR ADMINISTRATION

- Virtual Board of Commissioners Meetings
- Virtual Board of Commissioner Committee Meeting
- Essential staff assigned to virtual work hours
- Virtual staff meetings
- Daily scheduled virtual Executive Leadership, Leadership and Department Team meetings

On March 23, 2020, the SC Public Housing Authority Executive Directors received an email from you on behalf of the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, South Carolina Legal Services, One80 Place Legal Services, Homeless No More, and the Midlands Area Consortium for the Homeless with a letter attached outlining recommendations for consideration of protections for low-income families during COVID-19 (*see Appleseed Legal Justice website [South Carolina Appleseed Letter to Executive Directors of South Carolina Housing Authorities](#)*).

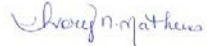
In an email correspondence sent back to you on March 23, 2020, I responded that we (*SC Housing Authorities*) have implemented the measures outlined in your letter, but welcome your assistance (*South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, South Carolina Legal Services, One80 Place Legal Services, Homeless No More, and the Midlands Area Consortium for the Homeless*) in helping us (*SC Housing Authorities*) reach out to the South Carolina Congressional Delegation in securing immediate statutory relief from administrative requirements that, if continued, creates an immediate threat to our staff and residents, as they are in direct opposition to the guidelines set forth to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Our conversation was continued via phone on March 25, 2020, where I understood you to say that many of the groups mentioned above were not able to join our advocacy efforts as it could place them in non-compliance with their respective funding streams. I was really hoping this was an opportunity for us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in support of the families we serve.

My colleagues and I have continued our advocacy work and have made significant progress over the last 10 days in communicating our needs to the South Carolina and Washington, DC offices of Congressman Jim Clyburn, and Senators Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott. The regulatory and statutory waiver requests are needed to continue providing stable housing to our families while balancing the impact to our internal operations created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, we realize that COVID-19 has brought about many concerns for our communities most vulnerable citizens and to the general public at-large. We hope that our documented actions since January 2020 have demonstrated how equally concerned we are in protecting the families we serve. We are all in this together. If you have any questions, please feel free to give me a call at 803.667.0267 (mobile) or send me an email at imathews@columbiahousing.org.

All the best,

Ivory N. Mathews



Interim Executive Director

Copy:

Columbia Housing Board of Commissioners
South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center
South Carolina Legal Services
One80 Place Legal Services
Homeless No More
Midlands Area Consortium for the Homeless