Guest Opinion - Housing Costs

Affordable housing part of what's needed for healthier communities

Leaders at Saint Alphonsus Health System and St. Luke's Health System believe there should be a heightened awareness surrounding the link between our community's health and housing affordability in Idaho.

We know social factors such as housing affordability can have significant effects on overall health. But housing is often left out of discussions about health care.

When housing costs are manageable, people are generally less likely to have unmet medical needs. This translates into, among other things, fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations. Housing affordability and physical health are so closely linked that researchers are able to predict the health of a given community based on ZIP code alone.

Across our state, access to affordable housing remains out of reach for many Idahoans. In fact, Ada County has more than three times the number of low-income renters than there are available and affordable units. In more rural areas, the affordability crisis is equally dire.

The crisis also affects the health of Idaho's children. When children are homeless or live in unstable housing situations, they are more likely to face gaps in their health insurance. More than a quarter of people experiencing housing instability in Idaho are children.

In recognizing this issue, numerous organizations have taken meaningful first steps. Last September, Saint Alphonsus, St. Luke's, the Idaho Housing and Finance Association, Northwest Integrity Co., CATCH, Terry Reilly, the Boise City/Ada County Housing Authority, Pacific West Communities and Thomas Development Co. invested in Boise's Housing First initiative.

The Housing First approach puts the priority on housing for homeless people and provides a platform for opportunities to improve life circumstances. Named New Path Community Housing Development, the project is an innovative, cost-effective solution for our community's most vulnerable.

New Path will offer permanent housing, wrap-around health services and additional support programs for Boise's chronically homeless residents, allowing them to get back on the road toward self-sufficiency. New Path was made possible through donations from these organizations and has incorporated federal housing affordability investment tools such as HOME funds, Low Income Housing Tax Credits and rental vouchers.

Hard work remains in solving housing affordability issues in our region. But this affordability is an essential building block in improving the health and well-being of our communities, and it is our responsibility to join together to serve our community's most vulnerable individuals.

David C. Pate, M.D., J.D., is president and CEO of St. Luke's Health System, based in Boise. Rodney D. Reider is the president and CEO of Saint Alphonsus Health System.