

# The State of Multifamily Broadband Services During the Pandemic

Independent providers are tackling the challenge of being an essential service for MDU residents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

By Valerie M. Sargent / *Multifamily Broadband Council*

The entire United States completely changed during recent months because of the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting apartment communities to try to manage effectively, either from remote locations or in restricted office settings with social distancing protocols in place. To encourage a new online style of engagement and community building and create a sense of connection, management teams searched for creative ways to communicate.

Meanwhile, multifamily residents suddenly found themselves confined at home. Between Zoom conferences for work, online classes or leisure, not to mention being stuck at home with nothing better to do, suddenly the need for incredibly dependable internet service and onscreen entertainment options mattered more than ever.

Independent broadband providers found themselves well positioned as an essential service to meet those needs. The Multifamily Broadband Council (MBC) checked in with its members to discover how they have risen to the challenge, and how this pandemic has affected their overall business.

## SUBSCRIBERS AND PAYMENTS

Many MBC members expressed that they are grateful to be needed right now and lucky to be essential, with customer service teams working from home and service technicians available for ongoing service needs. Independent providers have partnered with clients and

customers to upgrade services for those in need, customizing services for desired streaming and speed capacities.

Some property management clients have observed that fiber provides more consistent speeds for their residents, increasing bandwidth capabilities. Apartment residents upgrade to higher speed packages or new Wi-Fi extenders to improve their signals as more people in their shared spaces need reliable online access. Service providers that traditionally offer video services only reach out to other members to partner with them for internet connection as well. Relationships are being built as companies help one another and further their service abilities.

Although some MBC members have seen subscription drops or delayed or non-payments because many apartment residents have been furloughed or laid off from jobs, many report that collections from both bulk billing from property clients and residential billing from multifamily customers are in good shape. Upgrades and higher speed packages often cover any revenue loss due to non-payment.

The National Multifamily Housing Council (NMHC)'s Rent Payment Tracker ([www.nmhc.org/research-insight/nmhc-rent-payment-tracker/](http://www.nmhc.org/research-insight/nmhc-rent-payment-tracker/)) reveals how rent collections fared for the multifamily industry during the months of April and May 2020. The data provides potential indicators of what might be seen within the broadband industry. In a survey of 11.4 million units of professionally managed

apartment units nationwide, NMHC found 87.7 percent of apartment households made a full or partial rent payment by May 13, 2020, compared with 85 percent that had paid by April 13, 2020.

Surprisingly, the May figure is only 2.1 percent less than the same time frame in May 2019. The data points include an array of market-rate U.S. rental properties but do not include rent payments smaller landlords, affordable communities or subsidized properties collected.

“These excluded properties are the ones more likely to house residents experiencing financial stress,” says Doug Bibby, president of NMHC. “In addition, as current federal support programs begin to reach their limit, it will be even more critical for Congress to enact a meaningful renter assistance program. It’s the only way to avoid adding a housing crisis to our health and economic crisis.”

## OVERCOMING COVID-19’S CHALLENGES

Because many MBC operators are small business owners, they spent time navigating the Small Business Administration’s relief programs through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) or Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) assistance. We were happy to hear that several were able to secure PPP loans, allowing those companies to feel more comfortable and to ensure their technicians and employees could be paid their full wages. As a result, team members feel motivated and more productive, and the companies have a cushion to absorb any short-term downturns in business.

MBC would like to see the FCC pursue subsidies to help reimburse independent providers for non-payers. The MBC has members that have signed the FCC’s “Keep Americans Connected” pledge, which was extended through June 30, 2020.

This pledge asks companies to pledge to not terminate service to residential or small business customers because of their inability to pay bills during the pandemic, waive late fees that residential or small business customers incur because of pandemic-related economic circumstances, and open Wi-Fi hot spots to any American who needs them. (See [www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected](http://www.fcc.gov/keep-americans-connected) for more.)

Aside from some installations that already were in progress, MBC providers have seen development stall during recent months, slowing companies from closing new deals.

Protocol has changed regarding ongoing service for multifamily customers. Some companies have found getting enough PPE, such as masks, gloves, disinfecting wipes and booties, challenging. Technicians must be able to verify customers’ health before entering their premises. Things that were never at play before are now top priority. Operators that already were installing and launching are bracing for a longer leasing cycle, which may slow projected collections.

## ON-SITE APARTMENT SERVICES

Of course, more leasing teams have relied on virtual tours recently, and integrated cloud or web-based storage solutions for remote workers. It is rewarding to see the ways on-site teams utilize online services to connect with residents. When we inquired, we discovered they use platforms such as Zoom

to conduct online happy hours, cooking classes, fitness classes, trivia night, boozy brunches, talent shows, movie nights and more.

Curious about whether online events drew those who would not normally attend in person, we learned that some online guests were newer residents and that being online did attract a few more introverts. Some residents joined and did not turn on their video; however, they clearly wanted to be part of the party. There are always the usual suspects whom management can count on to be at everything, online or off!

On-site management reports that these online events are fun and casual, and the residents enjoy them despite having a lower attendance than they would typically enjoy with in-person events. I know I have looked forward to any regular online events I have been able to join. This likely will be a trend that continues for a while, and the MBC is proud that so many of its members help provide these much-needed services to their clients and customers across the United States. ❖

*Valerie M. Sargent is the executive director of the Multifamily Broadband Council and a multifamily speaker, trainer and executive consultant. Contact her at [vsargent@mfbroadband.org](mailto:vsargent@mfbroadband.org) or 949.274.3434. For more information, visit [www.mfbroadband.org](http://www.mfbroadband.org) or [www.valeriemarsargent.com](http://www.valeriemarsargent.com).*

The Leading Broadband Event for Multi-Housing, Commercial Properties, and Communities

**Broadband Communities Magazine** *Congratulates*

**Spectrum** | COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

For becoming the Foyer Display Sponsor at the 2020 Broadband Communities Summit

For more information on Charter, visit [www.spectrumcommunitysolutions.com](http://www.spectrumcommunitysolutions.com).

You are cordially invited to come see Charter at the upcoming

**Broadband Communities 2020 • SUMMIT** | AUGUST 10 – 13, 2020  
HOUSTON, TX  
Marriott Marquis Houston

TO SPONSOR OR EXHIBIT:  
email: [irene@bbcmag.com](mailto:irene@bbcmag.com) | phone: 505-867-3299

877-588-1649 | [www.bbcmag.com](http://www.bbcmag.com)