

NYC social worker describes the challenges of ‘shelter in place’ orders for vulnerable tenants

It feels “like nothing we can do is quite enough at this point,” she said.



Alison Sutter is seen here outside of the Gouverneur Court building.
Alison Sutter

For Alison Sutter, the [COVID-19](#) pandemic has laid bare the inequities that were already apparent in [New York City](#).

The 29-year-old social worker believes that housing instability and insecurity has always been an issue in the city and is one of the reasons why she got into her line of work.

Sutter is the assistant program director at Gouverneur Court, a supportive housing site run by the organization Community Access. She is one of the essential workers who are still going out every day to do their jobs.

According to Sutter, one of the main things her organization does is provide affordable housing to people with mental health needs. Community Access has buildings throughout the city where the rent for the tenants is based on their income.

“We have staff onsite in those buildings who provide supportive services such as linking people to health care, offering supportive counseling, setting up transportation for people to get to appointments, working with people

to ensure their benefits are correctly set up,” Sutter told ABC News.

Due to her work, Sutter is acutely aware of how the coronavirus crisis has disproportionately affected vulnerable communities. She says the directives of sheltering in place and social distancing have uniquely impacted the tenants she works with, especially due to financial limitations and lack of access to resources.



Lorraine Snyder is a chef who works in the Gouverneur Court building.
Alison Sutter



Bruce Dillon, one of the tenants, is seen here.
Alison Sutter

“I think that it’s one thing to see on social media some of the memes that are coming out about isolation or the way that people are doing Zoom happy hours and things like that,” she said. “When we’re talking about marginalized communities that don’t have those same social networks necessarily or rely on other forms of communication due to a lack of access to resources – internet, smartphones – it’s a really different picture here.”

Community Access is trying to respond to the needs of residents during this crisis, whether it’s by bringing them groceries or providing them with forms of entertainment such as radios or shared laptops. One of the tenants, 59-year-old Bruce Dillon, has been passing the time by creating several postcards that he has been giving as gifts.

“We survived Hurricane Sandy. We survived Tuesday, Sept. 11 – 9/11 – 2001, and we’re gonna survive this, too,” Dillon said.

In audio diaries she recorded, Sutter talks about how the coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately affected the vulnerable tenants she works with and how she manages her stress to continue doing this difficult work. Her personal story can be heard in this week’s episode of the ABC News podcast “[The Essentials: Inside the Curve](#).”

Sutter’s 29th birthday was on March 12. To celebrate, her best friend came over with a piece of cake. As they sat on her couch, they snapped a selfie to send to her mom in Illinois. Looking back on this photo, Sutter was struck by how much things have changed since this last moment of normalcy.

“We look a lot more happy and carefree than I feel now,” she said.

One of Sutter’s friend’s came into town to stay with her just as the city began to shut down. Sutter was worried entering her apartment after spending the day at work and commuting on the subway. She thought that if her friend got sick, it would be coming from her. The friend stayed for several weeks before ultimately making the decision to go home. Now, Sutter is back to living alone.

Sutter said the work she does is not easy as Community Access is working to maintain supportive services while managing an agency-wide response to the coronavirus. After an especially difficult day, she reflected, saying it feels like “nothing we can do is quite enough at this point.”

A common concern in mental health and social work is burnout. Sutter said that in order to manage the stress of her work, she is practicing self-care at home, whether it be watching “garbage television” or picking back up an old cross-stitching project that she started months ago. She strives to continue helping those who are especially vulnerable during the coronavirus pandemic.

“I’m proud to be an essential worker for Community Access,” she said, “knowing that, as long as we’re operating, our tenants have a safe place to be and have supportive services that they can access.”



Alison Sutter is seen celebrating her birthday on March 12 with a friend.
Alison Sutter