



## The Business Case for Partnering with Public Housing Agencies to Serve People Who Are Homeless

*Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* affirms that the primary solution for ending homelessness is permanent, affordable housing. While HUD's targeted homelessness programs, the Continuum of Care (CoC) program and Emergency Solutions Grants program, provide housing assistance to many households experiencing homelessness, these targeted programs are not enough to end homelessness. Mainstream housing programs must also be leveraged towards this goal. Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) administer some of the most significant resources available to address affordable housing needs in our communities, and they can play a critical role in local efforts to end homelessness. Many PHAs are interested in becoming involved in efforts to end homelessness, but they are not always sure how to start. Others wonder how much of their time and resources it will require to become involved. PHAs may also have concerns about whether providing assistance to people experiencing homelessness will affect utilization or require added administrative work or costs.

Getting PHAs on board in the local efforts to end homelessness should begin with understanding their concerns and helping to resolve them. One way to do this is to help PHAs see the ways in which partnering with CoCs on these efforts can actually benefit the PHA. CoCs and homeless services providers can assist PHAs with the work they are already doing, reducing administrative burdens. Specifically, CoCs can provide valuable assistance to PHAs in four areas of PHA operations:

1. Waiting Lists
2. Applications and Briefings
3. Housing Choice Voucher Utilization
4. Housing Choice Voucher Inspections

This coordination can be invaluable in an era of reduced administrative fees for PHAs. Working together, PHAs and CoCs can create more efficient waitlist and application procedures, higher Voucher utilization rates, reduced re-inspections, and increased housing stability for the people they serve.

The guidance in this document is designed to help PHAs and CoCs understand the specific ways that partnerships can significantly benefit a local community's efforts to end homelessness.

### Waiting Lists

**Issue:**

PHA's waiting lists can be a barrier to individuals and families experiencing homelessness. It can take years for a PHA to work through its entire waiting list, and the circumstances of the persons on the waiting list can change considerably during that time. As Housing Choice Vouchers (Vouchers) and public housing units become available, PHAs select eligible applicants from the waiting list in order to begin the eligibility determinations process. A PHA may have to conduct multiple eligibility determinations to identify just one eligible applicant. People experiencing homelessness often do not have reliable contact

information, making it difficult to contact them when their name rises to the top of a waiting list or when a PHA is purging its waiting lists.

### **Solutions:**

- 1. CoCs can help PHAs create a limited preference based on a referral source.** PHAs often want to serve people who are homeless, but are frustrated by their inability to locate them when their names come up on a waiting list. One solution to this challenge is to create preferences to serve a specified number of individuals or families referred by a specific referral agency or through the CoC's coordinated entry system. Utilizing coordinated entry is highly recommended. CoC-managed coordinated entry systems can identify the people who would most benefit from vouchers, and PHAs limited preferences will allow them to serve a specific number of people per year or a percentage of their turnover ongoing. When an opening occurs on a Housing Choice Voucher or Public Housing waiting list for applicants who meet the preference, the PHA can contact both the person waiting and the coordinated entry system to ensure contact with the applicant. Coordinated entry systems and/or referral agencies should keep track of the people who have applied and help PHAs locate them when their name comes up.
- 2. Suggest that PHAs open and close their waiting lists frequently for preference populations.** When a PHA has a preference, it is permitted to solicit applications from only those prospective applicants who meet that preference. PHAs can keep their waiting list closed for all other applicants. Once an adequate number of households meeting the preference have been placed on the waiting list, a PHA may choose to close it. This keeps the list manageable and ensures that when the PHA offers assistance to someone on the list they are addressing an immediate local need. When creating a preference, CoCs can provide PHAs with data about how many people would qualify for the preference and discuss with them how often to open and close the list based on anticipated turnover. CoCs can also help PHAs to advertise the opening of their waiting lists.

## **Applications and Briefings**

### **Issue:**

*Paperwork:* PHAs manage large volumes of paperwork associated with the application process for vouchers and public housing. Missing information, lack of documentation, and no-shows for appointments can slow the process down considerably. Some applicants have a hard time completing the significant amount of paperwork that is required for federal housing subsidies. Language barriers, a lack of ability to read or write, and a lack of identification and other required documentation can be barriers. PHA staffs will do everything they can to help applicants, but they may be limited by time and capacity. The idea of serving more people with barriers to successful applications can seem daunting.

*Appointments:* PHAs schedule appointments with applicants to submit paperwork and brief them on program rules. It can be difficult for some people, especially those who are homeless and/or who have special needs, to schedule and keep appointments. When someone doesn't show up for an appointment, it wastes time for the PHA and creates extra work to find the applicant and reschedule.

When someone misses multiple appointments, pressure increases on the PHA to get a unit filled or a Voucher issued and leased. The PHA may have to move on to the next applicant. People who need housing assistance can lose their opportunity. As well, people with special needs and/or language barriers may need certain accommodations to help them understand the paperwork. Many PHAs are excellent at making these accommodations, but they don't always know when they're needed because some applicants don't know how to advocate for themselves and request accommodations.

### Solutions:

1. **Homeless service providers can support applicants.** Homeless service providers can assist PHAs by helping applicants with their paperwork; putting their agency's name on the application form as contact on behalf of the applicant; making sure people referred to the waiting list meet eligibility requirements; have identification and documentation; and addressing barriers including past evictions, debts and open warrants prior to a household's name coming up on a waiting list. Providers can offer to spend time at the PHA's office helping to greet people who come in and work with them as they complete their applications.
2. **Homeless service providers can attend meetings with applicants and PHAs.** Homeless service providers can support both clients and PHAs by helping applicants get to their meetings with PHAs and providing information to applicants. Service providers that attend these meetings supplement the number of staff available to explain PHA requirements and answer questions.
3. **CoCs can work with PHAs to establish windows of time for applicants to come to their offices.** PHAs can schedule windows of time in which applicants can come in and complete paperwork instead of specific appointment times. This way, PHA staff members can continue their ongoing work until someone comes in. This greatly increases the likelihood that applicants will be successful in meeting a PHA's requirement to come to their office. PHAs and homeless service providers can also co-locate their offices to encourage communication among staffs and expedite assistance for applicants and participants.

## Housing Choice Voucher Utilization

### Issue:

One way HUD measures PHAs' program compliance and determines which PHAs are high performers is by tracking their Voucher utilization rates. Utilization is the percentage of a PHA's Vouchers that are leased. PHAs must continuously monitor their Voucher turnover and leasing success rate to determine the number of Vouchers to issue so that they can be as close to 100% voucher utilization as possible. This is very important to PHAs because they are funded based on the number of vouchers they lease throughout the year. People with special needs sometimes have a harder time leasing up their tenant-based Vouchers with landlords. When PHAs have Voucher holders that aren't able to find housing, it can make the utilization balancing act more difficult. Voucher holders who can't lease-up ultimately lose their opportunity to have a subsidy. PHAs have limited ability to increase the success rates of Voucher

holders in identifying housing. Some PHAs create lists of landlords that accept Housing Choice Vouchers but they don't have time to assist people traveling to look at apartments and meet with landlords.

**Solution:**

**Provide housing search assistance.** PHAs and Voucher holders benefit greatly from homeless service providers specialized knowledge in the housing search process. Homeless service providers have been creative with the housing search process for years due to limited affordable housing options. They are often skilled negotiators who build relationships and can convince landlords to be flexible with screening criteria, which provides opportunities for households with higher barriers to housing. Providing housing search assistance also promotes client choice, which is an important part of the Housing Choice Voucher program. There are often more housing options for Voucher holders to choose from when a skilled negotiator is working as an advocate. With homeless service provider advocacy in the housing search process, households are housed faster, resulting in improved leasing rates, which in turn improve utilization rates for PHAs.

## Housing Choice Voucher Unit Inspections

**Issue:**

Managing the schedule of inspections, re-inspections, and annual inspections of units a PHA must conduct takes a lot of coordination. When units fail their initial inspections, re-inspections have to fit into an already tight schedule. When a PHA has to come back to a unit to re-inspect it, people who are homeless have to wait longer for housing.

**Solution:**

1. **Homeless service providers can pre-inspect units based on Housing Quality Standards (HQS).** Service providers that help households find apartments can learn the basics of HQS, the inspection protocol that PHAs use to approve units for Voucher holders to live in. Providers can conduct informal pre-inspections and address small issues immediately to prevent a unit from failing its first inspection. Examples of small issues that prevent units from failing include replacing light bulbs, installing socket covers, and removing trip hazards.
2. **Homeless service providers and PHAs can work together to pre-inspect units for Voucher holders to choose from.** When housing a large number of people in a priority population, especially those who are literally homeless, time is of the essence for lease-up. Providers can negotiate a process with their PHA in which they identify and inspect units before the Voucher holder moves in. When shopping for housing, the provider and the household they are serving can first look at the units that have been pre-inspected. If one suits them, they can finish their paperwork with the PHA and move in without waiting for an inspection. (If the Voucher holder does not choose one of the pre-inspected units, they can continue with housing search.)

## Housing Stability, Annual Reviews and Inspections

### Issue:

The success of the Housing Choice Voucher program depends on the willingness and cooperation of landlords. When landlords do not feel their needs are being met, Voucher holders lose housing options, and PHA challenges increase in terms of promoting choice and managing utilization. Many good landlords will make efforts to help prevent someone from losing their housing, but when challenges become too significant, they contact the PHA for assistance. PHAs usually don't have the staff capacity to intervene when someone's housing is at risk. And when the risk is based on behavioral health or other significant challenges, most PHA staff members don't have the training and expertise they need to address them. If a landlord doesn't have the support s/he needs to keep someone housed, s/he can feel as though eviction is the only option. Landlords that agree to house people with special needs and find that their tenants are not receiving the services they need might shy away from taking more referrals or worse; they may be less inclined to serve anyone with a Voucher.

Likewise, when a PHA is the landlord, such as in Public Housing, their strengths and priorities are in property management. Some PHAs have support service coordinators in buildings that serve people who are elderly or disabled and other limited self-sufficiency programs for tenants, but they do not provide direct services. When residents have challenges requiring a greater level of support, PHAs need partners with expertise to support them in preventing someone from losing their housing.

In addition to abiding by lease terms, Public Housing tenants and Voucher participants have to participate in annual recertifications and unit inspections. When a household doesn't comply with these requirements, PHA staff members' work can get backlogged. Those households who do not comply may be at risk of losing their housing assistance.

### Solutions:

1. **Create a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between PHAs and referral agencies.** Having an MOU is a great way to outline the roles and responsibilities of the PHA and the service provider. The time it takes to discuss expectations when writing the MOU will pay off when issues come up during operations.
2. **Homeless service providers can provide appropriate supportive services to households referred by the CoC.** First and foremost, if an agency has a referral agreement with a PHA, that agency's staff members should establish a means of regularly communicating with their PHA and landlords to monitor their clients' housing stability. They should be proactive about this communication to address issues early before they result in a risk to a household's housing. Housing stability services must be at the center of the service plan. If multiple providers are working together to support tenants, it is important to give the PHA one central point of contact so they don't have to sift through the names and contact information of multiple case managers.

3. ***Providers within the CoC can provide housing stability/crisis intervention services for any PHA participant.*** There are often vulnerable people already living in Public Housing or using Housing Choice Vouchers. PHAs don't always have the tools or capacity to address significant issues that can threaten the housing stability of these participants. CoCs can often more easily identify agencies within the community that could provide supportive services to households served by PHAs. This will go a long way in meeting both of your organization's missions and establishing goodwill and trust among staffs.
4. ***Homeless service providers can locate staff within a PHA's office.*** Some PHAs are willing to donate or rent office space for service providers working with their participants. This enables cross-agency teams to work alongside each other, build rapport, and address issues quickly using their combined expertise.
5. ***CoCs can leverage funding to pay for supportive services that support PHA participants.*** Funders of supportive services know that housing is a critical foundation from which services can be delivered and received. Their funding will have more impact when it is aligned with PHA Vouchers and Public Housing. Funders of supportive services should offer to commit resources when asking PHA's to do so. This will give PHAs confidence that the people they serve will succeed in Public Housing and the Housing Choice Voucher program.

For more information about partnerships between PHAs and COCs, please visit the following online guides:

- [Public and Indian Housing: Ending and Preventing Homelessness](#)
- [Resources for CoC and PHA Collaboration to End Homelessness](#)
- [CSH's PHA Toolkit](#)
- [USICH's PHA Portal](#)