



PHA GUIDE TO APPLICATION ASSISTANCE

Background

The process for applying for and receiving housing assistance administered by PHAs can be challenging for any applicant household, but is even harder to navigate for individuals and families experiencing homelessness.

Depending upon the specific types of housing assistance and PHA policies regarding waiting list preferences, the application process can involve submitting forms and documentation, showing up for interviews and scheduled appointments, and waiting for weeks, months, or even years before an eligible household receives assistance.

The difficulties of navigating the application and wait list process are among the most commonly cited obstacles PHAs have identified to serving people experiencing homelessness. PHAs with the greatest level of engagement in assisting homeless individuals and families have successfully addressed these barriers through partnerships with service providers.

These partnerships can ensure that people experiencing homeless receive the help to successfully navigate this process and receive housing assistance. Essential roles for partners include:

- helping people experiencing homelessness complete application forms and provide necessary documentation
- maintaining applicants' eligibility while on the waiting list
- ensuring that applicants with disabilities receive reasonable accommodations when needed

Helping with the Application Process and Documentation

Each PHA has the flexibility to design their own waiting list and application process in accordance with [HUD regulations](#). PHAs are required to document these processes and make them publicly available through their administrative plans. HUD maintains [a searchable database](#) of PHA administrative plans.

Programs that serve people experiencing homelessness should ensure that relevant staff have up-to-date information on the application process and waiting list policies of PHAs within their service areas. Staff need to know:

- whether PHAs have separate waiting lists for the Housing Choice Voucher, public housing, and specific project-based voucher programs
- the preferences for each of these wait lists
- when PHA waiting lists are open or closed. Staff should also be responsible for notifying clients when PHAs open their waiting lists or change their admission preferences

Many PHAs use a preliminary application for households to get on the waiting list for assistance. The preliminary application often contains a minimal amount of information such as name, family size, date of application, race and ethnicity, and whether the applicant qualifies for any local preference. Then, when applicants are selected from the waiting list they complete the full application and provide the necessary documentation to establish their eligibility for assistance and the level of assistance for which they qualify.

Partner organizations can work with homeless applicants to ensure that all the fields in the application form are successfully completed and the applicant provides the appropriate documentation, such as government issued identification, pay stubs, and tax returns. For programs that are targeted or have a preference for people experiencing homelessness, partner organizations can help applicants provide the documentation showing that they meet the eligibility criteria. Partner organizations can also help applicants proactively address any potential barriers an individual or family may have to admission, such as past involvement with the criminal justice system, prior evictions, or debts owed to the PHA.

PHAs cannot approve an application for assistance if it is incomplete or lacks the necessary documentation. When applications are incomplete, PHA staff have to try to follow-up with the applicant and, if that is unsuccessful, they move on to the next applicant drawn from their waiting list. Incomplete applications and missing documentation can be a major barrier to PHAs' ability and willingness to dedicate resources to people experiencing homelessness. Partner organizations that are knowledgeable about the PHA admission process and work closely with people experiencing homelessness are critical to addressing this barrier.

For the HCV program, applicants also must attend an oral briefing to learn about the program and their obligations as participants, how their rent is determined, and how to select an eligible unit with their voucher. PHAs can deny assistance to households for failing to provide necessary identification and employment information or for missing their oral briefing. Partner organizations

can work with PHAs to adopt flexible scheduling for people experiencing homelessness and provide transportation assistance to help these applicants attend the necessary appointments to receive and maintain their assistance.

Partner organizations can also work with PHAs to help assess whether there are steps in their application and screening processes and for issuing vouchers that are unnecessary or create significant barriers for people experiencing homelessness being able to successfully receive and utilize their vouchers.

Maintaining Eligibility for Households on the Waiting List

On average, it takes a household more than two years between initially applying for rental assistance and being offered assistance.¹ The wait can be much shorter for applicants eligible for a PHA's established waiting list preferences. The majority of PHAs maintain waiting lists for public housing and rental assistance. To manage their waiting lists, PHAs can periodically ask households on the waiting list, frequently via mailings, for information or updates to confirm their continued interest in rental assistance.

In accordance with their administrative plans, PHAs can remove from their waiting lists households that do not respond to PHA requests for information or updates. These approaches and policies can create a significant barrier to receiving assistance for people experiencing homelessness who often lack a fixed address and, consequently, have a difficult time receiving mail.

Partner organizations can help address this barrier by designating a point of contact responsible for making sure their clients receive PHA notifications. This contact person, often a case manager, may also have the authority to provide the necessary notifications or updates directly to the PHA to ensure the applicant can remain on the waiting list. Partner organizations can also work with PHAs to develop alternate ways of contacting wait list households who lack a fixed address, such as through a community voicemail system.

Responding to Requests for Reasonable Accommodations

People with disabilities have a right to reasonable accommodations to ensure that they are not denied assistance as a result of their disabilities. In 2004 HUD and the US Department of Justice (DOJ) released a [joint statement to provide technical assistance regarding reasonable accommodations under the Fair Housing Act](#). The joint statement contains examples of the ways in which PHAs and other housing providers may be required to make reasonable accommodations in rules, policies, practices, or services in order to provide equal opportunities for people with disabilities to use housing.

For example, PHAs and other housing providers may reject housing applicants whose tenancy would constitute a "direct threat" to the health and safety of other individuals or result in substantial physical damage to the property of others unless the threat can be eliminated or significantly reduced by reasonable accommodation. People cannot be excluded from housing

¹ Leopold, Josh. "The Housing Needs of Rental Assistance Applicants." *Cityscape* (2012): 275-298.

based upon fear, speculation, or stereotype about a particular disability or persons with disabilities in general. A determination that an individual poses a direct threat must be based upon objective evidence regarding current conduct or a recent history of overt acts, and a housing provider must consider whether the individual has received intervening treatment or medication that eliminates the threat of harm. As a reasonable accommodation, a person with a disability who has a history that includes behavior that would be considered a possible threat can ask the PHA to consider assurances that he or she will receive appropriate counseling or medications that will ensure that there is no threat to the health or safety of other residents.

Additional information about reasonable accommodations in tenant selection is available in [Between the Lines: A Question and Answer Guide on Legal Issues in Supportive Housing](#), which is available from the Corporation for Supportive Housing. Organizations with expertise in helping people with disabilities experiencing homelessness can partner with PHAs to provide a non-adversarial process that ensures applicants receive reasonable accommodations as required by law.

Where Can PHAs Do This?

All communities could benefit from partnerships between PHAs and homeless service providers for application assistance. These partnerships may be particularly valuable for PHAs that have long waiting lists, as well as those that administer programs or preferences that target housing assistance to persons experiencing homelessness. Partnerships that offer assistance with the application process can be an important part of efforts to improve and speed up the process of connecting housing assistance to people who are experiencing chronic homelessness, or improving utilization of targeted programs such as HUD-VASH.

Who Can PHAs Assist?

All populations. In particular, partner organizations should be aware that people with disabilities experiencing homelessness have additional protections to prevent them from inadvertently being withdrawn from PHA waiting lists.²

Providers that are familiar with the SOAR(<http://www.prainc.com/soar/>) process for helping people experiencing homelessness apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI)/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits should consider adapting lessons learned from that process as they develop partnerships to help people apply for rental assistance.

Additional Resource

Through the HUD-VASH program, PHAs have collaborated with VA medical centers to streamline the voucher application and lease-up process for Veterans experiencing chronic homelessness, and have compiled [a list of best practices](#).

² A PHA decision to withdraw from the waiting list the name of an applicant family that includes a person with disabilities is subject to reasonable accommodation in accordance with 24 CFR part 8. If the applicant did not respond to the PHA request for information or updates because of the family member's disability, the PHA must reinstate the applicant in the family's former position on the waiting list.

Examples

- The **Dallas Housing Authority** partnered with a non-profit company in Seattle to give applicants access to a community voicemail system. Homeless applicants and other applicants without a fixed address can call into their community voicemail from any number to access their messages and notify the PHA of their continued interest in assistance so they are not dropped from the wait list.
- Several PHAs, including the **Columbus (OH) Metropolitan Housing Authority** and the **Boston Housing Authority**, authorize case managers from homeless service providers to act as a point of contact for homeless applicants. The case managers typically have the relationships and resources to contact these applicants and help them complete their applications and receive assistance when PHA staff are unable to.
- In Washington, DC, for the HUD-VASH program, the City's Department of Human Services (DHS) conducts a pre-eligibility screening of all clients to ensure that they meet the eligibility criteria for the program. The **DC Housing Authority** trained DHS staff on the application process so that DHS can ensure clients' successfully complete the application. A web-based project management tool notifies both DHS and DCHA on changes to clients' application status. The DHS case manager attends the oral briefing with the client and helps guide him or her through the lease-up process.
- To expedite the lease-up process for the most vulnerable, chronically homeless veterans as part of the Project H3 Vets Initiative¹, the **Phoenix Housing Department** developed a public-private partnership that contracted lease-up functions of the HUD-VASH program to [Housing Operations and Management, Inc. \(HOM, Inc.\)](#), a company that specializes in the management and operations of rental housing assistance and supportive housing programs. The Phoenix VAMC sends referrals of eligible Veterans directly to HOM, Inc. and staff from that agency determine eligibility for the HUD-VASH vouchers and conduct the HUD-VASH program briefing at which the voucher is issued.