



Final Transcript

HUD: Housing Counseling Industry Stakeholder

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SPEAKERS

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Bill McKee

PRESENTATION

Moderator Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for standing by. Welcome to the Housing Counseling Industry Stakeholder Conference Call. At this time, all participants are in a listen-only mode. Later, we will conduct a question-and-answer session with instructions being given at that time. [Operator instructions]. As a reminder, today's conference is being recorded.

I would now like to turn the conference over to our host, Virginia Holman. Please go ahead.

Virginia

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to today's really important industry stakeholder conference call. But before I turn it over to our presenter Danberry Carmon, I would like to go over a few logistics.

We will be taking questions at the end. We will take maybe two or three call-in questions and then as the operator said, he will tell you at that point how to ask those questions. But, there's another way to ask the question. In the control panel on the right-hand side of your screen is a box where it says Questions. If you just enter your question there, we do have staff that are monitoring those questions and we will also try to take several of those questions at the end of the call. And afterwards, tomorrow or next week, if you have additional questions, send them to housing.counseling@HUD.gov and just put the webinar topic in the subject line so that we can get it to the right person.

And so now let me turn it over to Danberry Carmon, our Assistant Secretary. Danberry?

Danberry

Thank you, Ginger, and good afternoon, everyone. Thanks for joining me and the Office of Housing Counseling team. Today I want to talk about

the Interim Final Rule that HUD announced Friday, July 31st that changes the HUD certified counseling compliance date to August 1, 2021. I also will discuss other changes we've made to improve the certification process.

But before we talk about the new certification deadline, I wanted to take a moment to thank all of you for your continued service during the ongoing COVID-19 national emergency. HUD realizes the importance of your role in our nation's recovery and we appreciate all the efforts you are making to support your clients. Many of you continue to provide much needed services by changing your operations and serving clients in a virtual environment.

To assist these efforts, the Office of Housing Counseling published a partial waiver of the in-person service housing counseling requirement, suspending the requirement that all agencies provide in-person counseling. This waiver is in effect until April 21, 2021.

We also implemented an automatic extension for all 2019 grantees. The period of performance has been extended through March 31, 2021. We also announced almost \$40 million in grant funds for the FY 2020

Housing Counseling Program Comprehensive Grant on June 16th.

Participants of these grant funds competed through the department's two-year NOFA, notice of funding availability, published May 24, 2019. This grant also has a period of performance through March 31, 2021.

COVID-19 also made a major impact on certification efforts. In response to guidelines for social distancing and other shelter-in-place orders, all HUD housing counseling certification testing centers closed as of mid-April 2020. Scheduled in-person place-based housing counseling certification trainings are also cancelled to comply with state and local guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19. Test centers are slowly reopening but as of July 27th, 50% of our test centers will still close. Many of you also contacted us asking for an extension of the certification deadline due to the COVID-19 national emergency.

Now I want to talk a little bit about the Interim Final Rule. I'd like to thank all of you that have already completed the HUD certified housing counseling process. I congratulate you and I thank you for your diligence in doing so. As of August 1st, there are now 2,795 certified housing counselors. Congratulations. That represents 68% of the estimated number of counselors that need to be certified.

On July 31, 2020, HUD announced an interim rule effective immediately resetting the final compliance date to August 1, 2021. This rule also published into the Federal Register so you can go and look at all of the requirements and statement of the rule. We understand that COVID-19 impacted your certification efforts and now demands for rental and mortgage default services are on the rise. This change will allow you more flexibility in balancing certification efforts while serving clients.

The Interim Final Rule also gives you the opportunity to submit comments about the new certification compliance date. You can submit comments by mail or electronically through the Federal Register rule-making portal at www.regulations.gov.

We are very concerned about the high number of housing counselors and agencies that still need to meet the certification requirement. There are approximately 1,300 counselors that need to be certified, including about 25% of our HECM roster counselors. Almost 200 of our grantees do not meet certification requirements. Agencies should reach out to HUD through their points of contact or send an email to

housing.counseling@HUD.gov if they need advice or assistance in meeting the final compliance date or need help with FHA Connection.

We encourage housing counselors to complete their examination and certification requirements as soon as possible and well in advance of the new final compliance date. Agency managers that haven't developed a certification strategy for their networks or agency should do so now and implement the plan as soon as possible.

Now, I wanted to talk a minute about examination preparation and training. If you already have an examination date set, please do not reschedule your exam due to the extension. Please keep your current examination date. We recommend counselors register now to secure your testing date and factor in time for possible examination retakes. Online testing times are available 24 hours a day, every day of the week, except for federal holidays and the date after Thanksgiving. For best results, schedule your examination date well in advance of the new final compliance date. Due to high demand, examination time slots may become limited during the month before the final compliance date.

Training partners have also been practicing social distancing by replacing in-person examination preparation classes with virtual learning sessions. Online and webinar examination preparation classes are available. Please check out our training resources page on the HUD Exchange for more information on how to register for these virtual sessions.

I also want to alert grantees to changes to eligible certification expenses under the FY20 Housing Counseling Comprehensive Grant. As noted in the supplemental NOFA published May 27th, there is a limit on costs grantees can charge the HUD grant for certification examination fees for housing counselors. Grantees were notified how much of their award may be used for HUD housing counselor examination fees. Please review the archived training on the FY20 grant agreement broadcasted on June 30th and your grant agreement for more information.

Today I also wanted to share with you a change in online testing process. Many of you have shared your frustrations with us regarding the online testing requirements, including the problems with setting up the camera. Therefore, effective today, we are modifying the camera requirements for online testing. You will be able to use your laptop or computer camera to take the certification examination online.

I also wanted to share with you some of the website updates that are important to you. We've updated our websites to help counselors and managers better navigate the HUD certification process. We revised information and instructions on www.HUDhousingcounselors.com, FHA Connection, and the HUD Exchange.

Changes to HUDhousingcounselors.com include having summary information for individual counselor's progress towards certification and now located in one place. Counselors can easily track their progress and complete online training modules and to schedule examination date as part of their user profile. Information on how to prepare for both online and onsite examinations is provided in an easier to understand format.

HUDhousingcounseling.com now features a separate page for agencies' information on how to request and schedule testing at a proctoring center for multiple candidates at the same time that's available on this webpage.

We also updated instructions for the certification process through FHA Connection. The changes result in a clearer step-by-step process to complete the certification process.

The HUD Exchange certification webpages have been updated for easier navigation. We are also working on a new resource webpage dedicated to examination preparation. There you will find detailed information on both online and in-person testing and follow data on one easy to read webpage. This resource is designed to help you determine which testing method is best suited for your circumstances. We expect to launch this webpage soon.

The annual refresh of HUDhousingcounselors.com for the training, practice examination and knowledge assessment are expected to launch in September of this year. The refresh was due to minor grammar changes and content updates. Many updates are a result of the feedback you have provided to us. Thank you to everyone that submitted comments to us on training materials over the past year.

And finally I wanted to take a moment to talk about the Intermediary Conference that was scheduled for this week. We will be announcing a new date for the Virtual Intermediary Conference soon. The new dates, agenda, and registration information will be sent to intermediaries, state housing finance agencies and multi-state organizations. This change was due in part as a result of efforts that many people put in to change the

certification date from August 1st of this year to August 1st of 2021, and we wanted to be prepared to share that information with you, and so therefore we were forced to reschedule the Intermediary Conference.

At this time, I'd like to open the telephone lines for questions relating to the Interim Final Rule. We will take one or two questions from the audience, live questions. I will not be able to answer NOFA or grant-related questions. If you have questions on those topics, on NOFA grant questions, please submit them to housing.counseling@HUD.gov with the subject line 2020 grant.

Operator, please open the telephone lines. And, while we're waiting, questions can still be submitted to the question box.

Moderator [Operator instructions]. We do have a question. We'll go to the line of Bruce Dorpalen. Please go ahead.

Bruce Well, thank you very much, Danberry, and the Office of Housing Counseling staff and I know at HUD this extension is really important. There was a large collective sigh of relief Friday night, Saturday morning as people learned about it, and it really makes a difference for our work.

We are of course especially concerned because of the COVID-19 crisis that is going on, the pandemic. We do want to have every hand available serving here and this makes it possible for people to be, organizations to be much more effective.

It does sound like there's been progress made on testing and that's great. I'm glad to hear that there's some improvements coming in the pipeline. I think we as an organization, National Housing Resource Center and others, will be highly focused on what happens the next couple months and how we can help bring a lot more people across the finish line on certification.

A couple just areas I think we're most concerned about, and if you have any comments, that would be great, one is that we've found that people where English is not their native language, that the test has been more challenging. I know there's a version in Spanish and that's helpful but there's been challenges around that. And then there's plenty of other languages that are very important to the delivery of our services in our communities and really figuring out how to better accommodate those people.

I think there's the challenge also that we have a lot of—a number of experienced counselors who have been contributing to the field and we feel confident about their skill level and have taken the test several times without passing and figuring out how we can recognize people have different learning styles, different skillsets so that we could be more effective there.

And, I think we will also probably have other suggestions to make in the future but wanted to both thank you and see if you have any immediate comments on those challenges.

Danberry

Thank you, Bruce, and thank you for all of your assistance in helping us to get the deadline extended. Before I turn it over to our examination experts, I do want to comment to all the industry that we do value the experience that our counselors have. I've had the wonderful experience throughout my career in working with some of those same counselors who have been in place 10, 15, 20 years and always amazed at how they're able to help those.

I think we'll just have to work together as an industry with study groups that you've been instrumental in helping set up and other ways in which

we can help those counselors and work with those counselors to get them across the finish line. I think it's certainly doable and I do have faith that they will during an extension period become certified.

I will ask Robin Penick to join us and talk about the examination, the Spanish version versus the English.

Robin Thank you, Danberry. This is Robin Penick. Thank you for the question about the Spanish version of the exam as well as consideration of other languages for the exam.

The Spanish version of the exam has not been utilized a lot and in addition to that, the passing rate for the Spanish exam is lower than the passing rate for the English version of the exam. We are concerned about it, and we are forming a group to evaluate that exam and to see what changes could be made that would make that a more effective instrument for counselors.

Bruce Robin, do you have any thoughts about for other languages, where there's no actual test available?

Robin I think money is always an issue in regards to any changes that we make to the exam that we currently have published. So, that's also in addition to surveying what those specific other areas or other languages would need to be.

Danberry Thank you, Robin. And Bruce, I'm sure you can appreciate, too, as we found with Spanish there's so many different dialects within a particular language that as Robin mentioned it may be cost-prohibitive to really try to provide an examination in another language given the limited number that would be taking it.

Thank you for your questions and your insights, Bruce.

Bruce Good, thank you.

Moderator Then with that, there's no one else in the question queue. Please continue.

Danberry Ginger, are there any submitted questions?

Virginia Yes, we do have a few that have been written in. I'm hoping that Robin will be looking at some of them. One of the comments, wanted to follow

up on your discussion of using the camera, the change in that policy. They just wanted you to refresh their memory on what you said.

Danberry Okay. So again, I go back to what I said earlier in terms of the camera. So effective today, we've modified the camera requirement for online testing so you'll be able to use your laptop or computer camera to take the certification examination online.

Robin, do you want to elaborate a little bit more?

Robin Well, thank you, Danberry. Yes, it seemed like a lot of testers were having issues with the external camera and what we will use, start using as of today, is allow testers to access the online exam through the computer camera or the laptop camera.

Danberry Thank you, Robin. Is there another question?

Virginia Robin, would you look and see whether there's some other questions that you would be able to answer?

Robin I was looking at some of these and in regards to—a lot of these, there’s one question about financial coaching and certification and who needs to become certified. I don’t know if Bill wants to address who needs to be certified.

Bill Sure, Robin. This is Bill McKee and actually we had some very good questions submitted to us when it was uncertain as to whether the final compliance date would be this past Saturday, August 1, 2020 or not, and having to do with what uncertified counselors could or could not do. And, I can give you a general answer but I’ll also say that we are going to—we got a lot of good questions and we’re going to be working on some FAQs so that we can fine-tune the answers.

But, just as a general concept, the requirement is that any “housing counseling” under any connection with any HUD program has to be performed by a HUD-certified counselor. And so when we say that, housing counseling is specifically defined in the regulations as a certain thing. And some of the core components of that are financial analysis, action plan, and follow-up are some key components of that. So, those components are considered to be part of the definition of housing counseling and as such should be done by a HUD-certified counselor, the

actual, the analysis of itself, what are the unique client circumstances, and the steps that need to be taken by both the housing counseling agency and the client to address those circumstances and then of course the follow-up in terms of seeing how the client is doing to address those circumstances.

So the general answer is that those things that are the core of what the definition of housing counseling is has to be performed by a HUD-certified housing counselor and can't be really parsed out to a counselor who is not certified. That being said, as I indicated, we're going to work on some FAQs to help you out and make it a little bit more better defined in terms of that specific question.

So, we'll have more to follow and we'll let you know. Good question. I appreciate it.

Danberry Thank you, Bill.

Virginia And, one of the other questions in the queue has to do with the cost of the exam and if the fees will remain the same. I can answer that one and right now the costs are the same as when it was initially posted. It is \$60 for the online version of the certification exam and \$100 for the site-based exam.

Danberry

Thank you. With that, I think that we'll move to close. But, in closing, I'd like to thank all of you for working through this difficult time and continuing to extend services to clients in need. Your efforts critically support the national recovery from COVID-19.

I also would like to share my thoughts. I looked at a report in the last few days of the amount of funds either returned, Comprehensive Grant funds, returned to HUD or just not used. It raised a number of concerns so I would ask each of you that if you are grantees, please make every effort and please certainly work with your [indiscernible] to use the grant funds. We're certainly appreciative of the appropriations that Congress makes to housing counseling each year and recognizing that we could use a lot more we certainly want to demonstrate to Congress and to the administration that the funds, 100% of the funds, are utilized and not returned to the Treasury.

So, finally, if you have any questions, please send an email to housing.counseling@HUD.gov and include housing counseling certification or any other topic in the subject line so that we can immediately respond and send it to the right person for a response. Please

do not submit comments regarding the Interim Final Rule to this mailbox.
Please follow the instructions and the document for submitting comments
in the Federal Register.

Again, thank you for joining the Office of Housing Counseling team today
and have a good rest of the day. Thank you.

Moderator

Ladies and gentlemen that does conclude the conference for today. Thank
you for your participation and for using AT&T Teleconference Services.
You may now disconnect.