

## Landlord Engagement during COVID-19 Case Study: **MEMPHIS HOUSING AUTHORITY**



### **BACKGROUND**

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After the mandatory shutdowns in the spring of 2020 due to the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic, Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) suddenly had to adapt to a crisis that made their mission of serving vulnerable families more difficult. For months, PHAs struggled to figure out ways to ensure Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) families were able to continue to lease, that payments were made to landlords on time, and that housing quality issues were addressed timely. A year later, PHAs have settled into a “new normal” and are able to perform day-to-day functions of the HCV program under these new constraints. The Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) in Tennessee is no exception.

Beyond the basic day-to-day operations, PHAs must perform other functions to ensure their ability to continue to house voucher households during and beyond the pandemic. It is important that PHAs continue to engage their business partners—property owners—to ensure that this relationship stays strong through what has been a challenging year for operations and a time of great uncertainty in the rental market.

The more than 2,000 PHAs that administer HCVs across the United States are diverse, and not all have faced the same challenges. While some PHAs have had landlords become more hesitant to rent to voucher households due to fears of not being able to evict them during the eviction moratorium, others have had landlords who were more eager to take on HCV households because they knew that rent would be guaranteed even if their tenants lost their jobs. Aside from leasing, a good deal of outreach has been necessary to ensure landlords understand the ways that HCV operations have had to change during the pandemic and to make sure these landlords can still navigate these changed processes. Additionally, as PHAs change their operational practices to ensure the safety of all community members, they must keep in mind how to do this without compromising the ease of doing business with the housing authority.

Below is a case study of the adaptations that MHA’s HCV program has implemented to continue to thrive and serve its families throughout and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **CASE EVALUATION**

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MHA administers more than 8,000 HCVs for low-income households, including VASH, FUP, and Mainstream vouchers in a county with approximately one million residents. MHA has a long track record of landlord engagement: hosting annual pre-COVID landlord symposiums and using email blasts, mailings, and newsletters keep its landlords in the loop. MHA had to adapt during COVID-19 to ensure it could maintain this connection with its landlords using a multi-pronged approach.

### **OWNER PORTAL**

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Prior to the pandemic, MHA had already planned to launch a landlord portal, so it was in an optimal position in spring 2020 as some of the planning for that launch already underway. The owner portal was set up through MHA’s existing housing software, but a great deal of coordination from MHA’s systems team was still required. In preparation for the launch, MHA set up electronic accounts for owners, created owner tutorials, and trained all staff on the portal so that they could field owner inquiries. MHA launched the portal in April 2020 and accompanied the roll-out with support from MHA’s existing communications infrastructure via email blasts, newsletters, mailings, and social media. Even with extensive preemptive communications efforts, MHA was not surprised when, at the initial launch of the portal, MHA experienced a significant increase in calls and emails about the portal, especially related to initial passcode issues. Using call-data analysis, MHA quickly identified the most common questions landlords had and updated tutorials and internal FAQs to both reduce future calls for technical assistance and equip staff with assistive scripts to address calls more quickly. Less than a year post-launch, 95 percent of MHA’s 2,000 landlords are using the owner portal, and overall call and email requests from owners have been significantly reduced due to continued training and landlords growing more versed in use of the portal.

## OWNER INCENTIVE

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To ensure the pandemic and particularly the eviction moratorium, did not slow the pace of leasing to new families, MHA decided to use a portion of CARES Act funding to implement an owner incentive. The incentive was designed to encourage landlords to offer units that had not been rented under the HCV program in the past 30 days to new MHA voucher holders. The incentive program had two tiers: (1) where a new lease occurred for a regular voucher holder, the landlord received \$500; and (2) where a new lease occurred for a special purpose voucher holder, the landlord received \$700. MHA did extensive outreach via its established channels to spread awareness of the campaign, and, from July 2020 to March 2021, has paid out 70 incentives for leases in new units.

## OWNER WEBINARS

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To keep landlords connected to the housing authority and to ensure that they are aware of changes in operations, MHA hosts online owner webinars every 2 to 3 months on a variety of topics. One topic was training on the new owner portal. An upcoming training on how to prepare for and pass an HQS inspection is timed for resumption of in-person HQS inspections in April 2021. Online webinars typically have 50–60 owners in attendance. While there are a few regulars, MHA feels that the wide variety of topics attract different owners to each session.

## INSPECTIONS

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Like many PHAs, MHA paused in-person inspections at the start of the pandemic, except for unoccupied units. MHA took advantage of existing HUD flexibilities and adopted a provision to allow owner self-certifications of repairs in place of re-inspections. Prior to COVID-19, MHA implemented a final compliance re-inspection provision to allow for a third and final re-inspection after a second failed inspection. This provision allowed owners to correct owner-caused inspection deficiencies and pay a \$100 re-inspection fee for additional administrative costs associated with the same. If the unit passed, the family is not forced to move, and the owner will not have to incur additional costs to make the unit ready to rent. Amid COVID-19, the final compliance re-inspection fee was waived. The response from owners to these flexibilities has been overwhelmingly positive and has allowed MHA to remain compliant while also ensuring safety for inspectors, owners, and families.

