

CASE STUDY:

Housing Authority of
Washington County (HAWC),
Oregon



During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) had to pivot and shift their operations to ensure the safety of PHA staff and residents, including by closing their doors to the general public. However, despite closures and alternative work solutions, essential PHA operations and functions had to continue. Many PHAs with Public Housing funds were particularly challenged and had to grapple with addressing such things as routine maintenance and work orders, inspections, and emergencies.

Public Housing Inspectional Services Challenges

Like many other PHAs across the nation, the Housing Authority of Washington County (HAWC) in Oregon was faced with the challenge of how to best serve its Public Housing residents while implementing safety measures to keep HAWC staff and residents safe and healthy. Adding to some of these challenges, HAWC is unique in that its portfolio of 244 Public Housing units is largely scattered site units comprising single-family and duplex properties.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, HAWC initially had a slower response time for routine work orders and ceased annual inspections and routine maintenance. HAWC also encountered some resistance from some of its at-risk populations, who expressed fear of PHA staff entering their units. Consequently, these residents did not submit work orders for repairs or other issues in their units.

Understanding the Individual PHA

Despite a brief slow period for routine work orders, HAWC was able to implement alternative work routines, quickly catch up on any backlog, and stay on top of work orders throughout the challenges of the pandemic. HAWC rotated technicians so that they did not overlap, provided ample personal protective equipment (PPE), and conducted screening protocols before entering any units.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, HAWC established clear lines of communication with its residents. In particular, HAWC staff worked with all residents who voiced particular concerns about technicians entering their unit and worked on a case-by-case basis to determine an approach to completing work orders that would also give residents a sense of ease and safety.

As spring of 2021 approached, HAWC turned its attention to resumption of annual inspections and overall routine maintenance. Anticipating a large level of effort to return to “normal” inspections and maintenance, HAWC internally partnered with the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program to use HCV inspection staff who were underutilized at the time due to a pause in annual inspections. Using a collaboration between HCV inspectors and Public Housing program inspectors and technicians, HAWC conducted visual assessments of all of its 244 units to identify areas of needs. The team used a HAWC–developed assessment tool that mirrors the approach used for the Real Estate Assessment Center (REAC). This tool allowed for the entire team to perform the same assessment and create a baseline understanding for the status of all Public Housing units.

To date, all assessments have been completed, and Public Housing technicians are reviewing the assessments to triage high-need issues and identify next steps. HAWC is anticipating breaking its jurisdiction into smaller geographic areas and working through the properties in each area one at a time until all work is completed.

