CASE STUDY:
Housing Authority of Chester County, PA

BACKGROUND

Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) must either lease their allocated vouchers or use Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) funds to maintain their housing program budget for the following year. The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges to achieve leasing goals. PHA housing programs have also had to change their operations to protect staff, residents, and landlords. Where traditional (i.e., pre-COVID-19) PHA operations may have allowed for new applicants and owners to attend meetings at the PHA to work with housing staff to determine program eligibility or execute a HAP contract, these practices have been transformed to meet safety requirements imposed by COVID-19.

Many PHAs have developed alternative office schedules or have closed offices to outside visitors to protect the health of staff and visitors. Technology has allowed PHA staff to work remotely, facilitated online program briefings and video meetings, and provided access to unit and family information through online client portals. However, implementing new technology during the COVID-19 pandemic may be difficult. While the CARES Act has provided PHAs with financial resources to procure technology, other resources needed to implement these new solutions remain limited. The availability of PHA staff to develop technical requirements, configure systems to the needs of the PHA, test and deploy functionality, and provide training and support can be problematic when staff are not available or are working remotely.

To achieve successful technology implementation during COVID-19, PHAs may adopt a new approach that prioritizes functionality to align with immediate needs of the organization and phase deployment to accommodate the availability of resources. This approach will ensure that housing operations continue while allowing for future functionality to be rolled out as resources become available and as operations return to "normal" post–COVID-19.

Following is an example provided by the Housing Authority of Chester County (HACC) in Pennsylvania illustrating how it implemented new technology during COVID-19 to successfully meet the needs of the PHA and its clients.

CASE EVALUATION

HACC serves a large geographically-diverse jurisdiction, including cities, towns, and semi-rural and large developing suburban communities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, HACC updated its technology solutions to include integrated housing-management web portals for landlords and applicants, document scanning, and digital signatures to expedite the leasing processes.

In response to COVID-19, HACC closed its offices to the public and implemented alternative office operations that include staff working remotely whenever possible. HACC quickly realized that technology alone would not meet the needs required to continue HCV leasing processes. To continue to lease units, HACC required limited office staffing for tasks such as accepting documents delivered to its outside drop box and to scan them into an electronic format accessible to staff working remotely. In-person meetings are also required for when circumstances require reasonable accommodations or when clients had limited access or ability to use technology.

HACC desired a tool that would meet its immediate, near-term, and long-term needs to ensure continued leasing of housing choice vouchers.

Immediate need: To provide on-site staff and clients requiring in-person meetings with safeguards to protect against COVID-19

Near-term need: To streamline the leasing process by providing clients with access to document scanning, electronic signature, and email; and provide video chat capabilities with housing staff working either remotely or on-site

Long-term need: To provide clients with limited access or ability to use technology to obtain housing information with on-site resources and assistance

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Kiosks allow for a laptop, tablet, or computer display stations to be placed in a business area for use by staff and visitors to access information. Kiosks are currently found in many types of businesses, from doctors' offices to entertainment venues. Many PHAs have implemented kiosks in waiting room areas to allow visitors to check in for appointments. Some PHAs have integrated their kiosks with housing-management software to provide access to housing data and information. The flexibility offered by kiosks allows HACC to meet its immediate, near-term, and long-term needs to maximize leasing for its housing programs.

IMPLEMENTATION

Although the CARES Act provided HACC with the financial resources to implement the digital kiosks, HACC understood that the internal resources required for a technology implementation were limited due to new alternative office operations that allows staff to work remotely several days a week.

Technology implementations often require the use of "subject matter experts" (SMEs) to configure the technology to meet specific circumstances and needs of the organization. SMEs are also used to test product functions as needed. Through their detailed interaction with the product configuration, these SMEs also become a resource to support the new technology, train new users, and resolve end-user issues.

HACC determined that, rather than implementing the full functionality of the digital kiosk, it would limit initial roll out to meet the most immediate needs. Limiting the initial functionality of the new technology allowed HACC to assign the project to a single SME to assist with configurations, testing, and support of the product.

The immediate needs of the agency were met with the following kiosk functionalities:

Provide electronic check-in for staff working on-site

Allow visitors to check in for appointments

Check the temperature of staff and visitors

Recognize if the visitor is wearing a mask and provide a reminder that doing so is required

Provide a log of visitors and staff accessing the office (which also assists in contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 positive case reported)

Provide face recognition for staff to unlock office door

Rather than providing the functionality of the system to all potential users (visitors and staff), HACC initially rolled the technology out to internal staff only. This allowed staff to test the system during on-site hours and to become more familiar with the tool. The staff found that additional configurations were needed to provide for the facial recognition needed to tie to the security system and open locked office doors. This approach allowed HACC to implement two kiosks for its main office within 60 days.

CONCLUSION

HACC was able to use the financial resources available through the CARES Act to address an immediate need to maintain leasing operations for the HCV Program. HACC was able to identify what actions were needed to continue to lease units and prioritized those needs to implement the solution using available staff resources.

This approach to implementation does not address all needs of the agency at one time, but it has allowed HACC to introduce new technology to its staff and to office visitors in a phased-in process. The benefits realized by HACC thus far include having staff and visitors feel that the environment is safer due to temperature-screening and mask-identification features. Staff and visitors are also becoming more comfortable using this new technology. Future phases of the implementation will benefit from a group of users that are already familiar with the technology. HACC will use its internal SMEs to build upon the existing functionality as resources become available. HACC plans to continue to use and further develop this tool as an integral part of its business continuity planning for operations post-COVID-19 and the return to a new leasing process.