



# Small Area Fair Market Rents (SAFMRs)



## Software and Staff Training

### Software

Software was mentioned as one of the most important components of PHAs’ successful management of the HCV Program as well as payment standards for SAFMRs. Depending on the size of the PHA area, the total number of payment standards each PHA has may increase once SAFMRs are implemented. Having more payment standards can increase the chances of errors, if not properly managed. Software can reduce errors, leading to greater program compliance.

The **Boston Housing Authority (BHA)** uses SAFMR-based exception payment standards voluntarily. The BHA uses **Emphasys Software and Housing Elite**® platforms to manage SAFMRs. The software systems allow the PHA to enter an address and a ZIP Code to automatically identify the correct payment standard. This software reduces the need for extra training and data entry. It also reduces errors when identifying or using the correct payment standards for SAFMRs. BHA serves an area within a 30-mile radius of the City of Boston and has 211 payment standards, one for each ZIP Code it serves.

In addition, BHA created its own tools to assist tenants with unit searches and selection. The Expanded Choice in Housing Opportunity ([ECHO](#)) housing locator tool allows voucher holders to search for housing units near important locations such as jobs and schools, while comparing various community profiles. The [Affordability Calculator](#) or “Maximum Affordability” Tool uses rent reasonableness and payment standard data to help determine if a voucher holder can afford an apartment.

The **Housing Authority of San Diego County** also uses **Emphasys Software and Housing Elite**®, as they can easily accommodate all 57 of its payment standards.

The **Brookline PHA** uses **PHA-Web**® software to manage its HCV Program and payment standards for SAFMRs. Its staff have positive experiences with this software, as all they must do is enter the address and it populates the FMR for them. Brookline has six payment standards in its area.

Both the Dubuque and El Dorado PHAs use **HAPPY Software**® for their HCV Program. Dubuque chose HAPPY because it uses GIS to ensure precise locations and accurate payment standards. El Dorado spoke favorably about HAPPY, reminding new PHAs they must manually enter the payment standards into the system when starting out.

### Staff Training

There were varied responses from the PHAs that were interviewed regarding the need for additional staff training to implement SAFMRs. Some PHAs identified training needs while others did not believe SAFMRs were significantly different from their regular HCV program operations and thus did not require extensive staff training.

The **El Dorado County Housing Authority, Dubuque PHA,** and **San Diego County PHA** emphasized the importance of providing consistent training to case management staff on SAFMRs and use of the PHA’s software. San Diego County trains its case managers and provides scripts for them to use in answering frequently asked questions and calls. It also focuses on the importance of selecting the correct payment standard.

Neither the BHA nor Brookline PHA conducts additional staff training for SAFMRs. The BHA felt it was not necessary to provide extra staff training. Before implementing SAFMRs, it had nine different standards for its Primary Metropolitan Statistical Areas (PMSAs) and referenced a chart to manually select the payment standards. Now, its staff enter an address and ZIP Code into its Emphasys Software and Housing Elite® systems to select the correct standard. **Brookline PHA** agreed that additional training is not warranted because the team is trained on its software system that already accommodates SAFMRs.

### Takeaway messages

- PHAs recommend using software tools to improve management of SAFMR payment standards
- Software can increase program compliance while reducing program administrative and training costs
- Staff training on SAFMR payment standards and PHA software can improve consistency in how staff respond to questions, helping to ensure equitable program delivery



*This material is based upon work supported, in whole or in part, by Federal award number C-18-TA-MD-0001 awarded to Abt Associates, Inc. by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. Neither the United States Government, nor any of its employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately-owned rights. Reference herein to any individuals, agencies, companies, products, process, services, service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not constitute or imply an endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the author(s), contributor(s), the U.S. Government or any agency thereof. Opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, HUD or any Federal agency.*