Landlord Engagement:
Reset your Community's Critical Partnerships During COVID Response

COVID-19

Why Now?

Private market landlords, property managers, owners, and public housing authorities are responding to the same conditions impacting housing crisis response systems nationwide. As everyone faces new or changing conditions and uncertain futures, Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG) recipients in partnership with Continuums of Care (CoCs) should prioritize working with landlords and property owners to house people experiencing homelessness. A proactive, affirmative landlord engagement system is one of the most efficient means of increasing the supply of available rental units in your community. In this document "landlord" refers to any public or private owner or manager of a rental property.

Getting Started

Landlord engagement needs to function at a system level across your community to:

- Avoid duplicated or redundant engagement efforts
- Ensure providers and direct staff are not competing against each other for limited resources
- Communicate a clear and coherent message about the need to community members and landlords

First, designate a dedicated organization(s) responsible for:

- Coordinating strategy and engagement on behalf of the system
- Setting up system-level workgroup(s) dedicated to landlord engagement and retention
- Providing staff responsible for recruiting and maintaining relationships on behalf of the system
- Assessing how the current environment has shifted landlord practices or preferences
- Making adjustments to continue system-level engagement with social distancing, remote protocols and practices that align with landlord preferences, e.g. online applications submission, virtual showings, drop boxes, and virtual meetings
- Creating risk mitigation funds accessible to CoC and ESG projects

The CoC's governance and written standards and ESG written standards should reflect and promote this strategy. The following planning and action steps will allow your system to quickly improve or develop a rapid response landlord engagement strategy. In this document "landlord" refers to any public or private owner or manager of a rental property.

Communication Planning

1. **Lead with equity** by addressing the disparities that people of color face in accessing and maintaining stable housing:
   - Utilize translation services
   - Solicit feedback and collaboration from individuals and families with lived experience of homelessness
   - Engage multi-cultural service providers equipped to communicate with and between people for whom English is not spoken or is a second language.
   - Consult with minority communities and representatives who can address fears and misconceptions of changes to operating policies and procedures, both within your agencies and by landlords.

2. Landlords are under a wide variety of [federal,](#) [state, court-mandated, and local](#) **moratoriums on evictions, late fees, and penalties related to nonpayment of rent**. Your community needs to understand current restrictions, applicability, and time periods for proactive communication with landlords, tenants, and providers. Keep the communication simple and offer translations for non-English speakers: What cannot happen, for how long, basic tenant and landlord responsibilities, and resource referrals.

3. Communities need to maintain and empower client access to **available legal services for homeless and formerly homeless individuals**:

> The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides free legal assistance for low income clients through a request from the state, local, territorial, or tribal governments immediately following an [Individual Assistance (IA) declaration](#) and continuing until services are no longer needed. Legal assistance is provided for non-fee generating cases (cases that would not be taken by local non-pro bono attorneys) regarding a wide range of insurance, estate, consumer protection, home repair, landlord/tenant, and FEMA appeal topics.

> Legal services for advice and representation in matters that interfere with a homeless individual or family's ability to obtain and retain housing are an eligible cost for CoC Supportive Services projects. ESG housing relocation and stabilization services can cover legal services including landlord/tenant matters necessary to resolve a legal problem that prohibits participants from obtaining permanent housing or will likely result in losing current housing.

Communication Action

1. Ensure providers are communicating with current landlords regarding operational changes such as **temporary staffing, points of contact, delays or interruptions affecting rental assistance or leasing payments to landlords, and redetermination of tenant rent** for participants who have lost or had reduced income. Ensure providers are able to pay landlords promptly and landlords are aware of the benefits of reliable rent payments. Ensure providers have available **staff capacity to receive and respond to landlord inquiries and can prioritize proactive communication**. If a housing provider does not have current capacity, solicit and coordinate volunteers internally or within partnering organizations to assist at least temporarily with a mass mailing or outreach to affected landlords.

2. Review available data and trends to **adjust CoC and ESG standards for determining what percentage or amount of rent each program participant must pay while receiving housing assistance**. Note [current employment data](#) shows black and Hispanic people have the highest rates of unemployment by race and ethnicity and young people have by far the highest rate of unemployment by age. Disparate access to employment, lost employment during COVID, and hiring discrimination may result in longer job searches and increased need for sustained rental assistance.

3. Tailor your response and be flexible: when considering accepting rental assistance and potential tenants, **landlords may want to know** the long-term viability of the tenant, credit, rental, and other background histories, and additional lease terms and addendums the program requires.

   - Housing staff should be equipped with relevant information such as the [benefits of accepting rental assistance](#), wraparound and supportive services, regular communication, and landlords who can act as referrals for the project or tenant.

4. **Engage community-based organizing groups and other coordinating groups who work with marginalized populations** to communicate the intent and needs of your landlord engagement system and solicit collaboration and referrals.

Recruitment and Retention Planning

1. **Identify your CoC's existing landlord engagement system** and capacity for improving or scaling:

   - **Landlord engagement** performed individually by agencies or direct staff, or by a dedicated organization(s), workgroup, or staff
   - **Rent payments** from agencies to landlords are timely and reliable
   - **Risk mitigation funds** are available and accessible when there is excessive damage done to a unit beyond what the security deposit will pay
   - **Assistance with minor repairs** is available to address deficiencies in the unit that may prevent it from meeting habitability standards
   - **Landlord/tenant mediation** is available to respond to concerns and resolve conflicts
   - **Landlord/tenant education** is provided for all parties, including case managers and other staff who interact with landlords and renting participants
   - **Community-sponsored campaigns or events** are regularly held to engage and recruit landlords
   - **Elected officials and other community leaders** are engaged in landlord recruitment

2. Use available data to **prioritize unit type, location, and site-specific needs**: what type and size of units do you need or have the issues accessing and where.

3. Engage current providers and partners like legal services and faith-based organizations who may be filling some or all of the above elements and **draft system design options for community leaders to consider and move toward implementation or improvement**. These elements may be consolidated under a centralized program like Pierce County's [Landlord Liaison Program](#) or Houston's [Landlord Engagement and Assistance Program](#) or spread across providers with particular specialties or geographically to ensure services can be accessed equitably. Under a centralized design model, funders create one organization landlords contact if they have a unit to rent or if an issue arises, full-time, experienced staff outreach to and engage landlords, and a designated organization(s) can administer mitigation funds, provide mediation, and supply tenant/landlord education. Under a community design model, CoCs provide support for local tools such as [housing locators](#), collaborate with [providers who fill one or several roles](#) within the system strategy, and [build capacity](#) by conducting research, providing training, and applying for funding to support the community's shared strategy.

4. Identify funding opportunities to **support new or improved engagement strategies**. While CoC and ESG programs can support some planning and individual housing location assistance, your community will need dedicated funding for a robust landlord engagement system.

5. **Review existing [landlord mitigation programs](#)** within the community and identify areas or uses that need coverage to incentivize more landlords to participate. [These funds](#) often cover reimbursement for repairs required to pass a program inspection, lost rent due to move-in delays caused by the inspections and repairs, and move-out repairs or damages.

Recruitment and Retention Action

1. Document your need and **simplify the ask to potential landlords:**
   a. how many units are available?
   b. what bedroom and bathroom size?
   c. are you willing to accept tenants without photo ID (rental/credit history, etc.)?
   d. would you participate if you had access to a landlord risk mitigation fund, etc.?

2. **Contact referral sources** including existing landlords, mayor or county elected officials, landlord and property management associations, housing authorities, board members and employees, or by posting notices in community virtual boards or newsletters.

3. **Update inspection standards for ESG and CoC projects** utilizing [applicable waivers](#) and review [examples from other communities,](#) especially communities under similar public health conditions and local restrictions. Adjust procedures to accommodate how local Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) use their [available waivers](#) and collaborate with them to ensure impacted operations do not slow your housing flow to public housing programs.

4. **Review funding restrictions and requirements**, such as habitability standards versus Housing Quality Standards, and create a matrix to communicate eligible housing types and standards to providers and landlords.

5. **Require alignment** between the [Coordinated Entry (CE) management entity](#) and your landlord engagement system. Ideal CE and landlord systems will complement each other by supplying data on need, supply, and process improvements. The CE system can efficiently match households to unique housing types when appropriate like roommates, shared housing, SROs, etc. when working in coordination with landlord engagement teams identifying those opportunities.

6. **Establish minimum standards and training** for case managers, housing counselors, housing navigators, etc. who work with landlords. Use [existing resources as templates](#) to develop a local curriculum.

7. **Direct providers to information and resources on fair housing and anti-discrimination protections** including specific resources like [protections for domestic and sexual violence](#) or [people with disabilities](#) and ensure all participants understand or can access how to file a complaint utilizing a local grievance procedure or [contact HUD directly](#).

8. **Require rental assistance and leasing providers to utilize [standard program lease or sublease agreements](#)** when possible to reduce duplicate or conflicting program requirements depending on the provider or project type.

9. Centralizing your CoC's outreach and engagement efforts should be paired with consolidating access to and utilization of participating landlords. **Develop a system-level tool or database to collect and maintain**

available units and landlord contact information. This can be as complex as a customer relationship management database or [online housing search tool](#) or as simple as a group email inbox or spreadsheet.

10. **Collect and require all agencies to utilize [tenancy and landlord tools](#)**. These may include [guidelines for home visits](#), [how to read a lease](#), role plays for making or responding to a landlord complaint, simplified lists of lease do's and don'ts, etc.

11. **Invest in targeted outreach to landlords in higher opportunity areas** (e.g. low crime rate, low poverty concentrations, transit- oriented developments, etc.) to encourage greater mobility and housing choice. Examples include San Diego Housing Commission's [Landlord Engagement and Assistance Program](#) and Chicago Housing Authority's [landlord incentive payments in Mobility Areas](#). These programs provide bonus payments to participating landlords in addition to other incentives.

12. **Create marketing materials** to support your campaign available [online](#), by [video](#), or [in print](#).

13. **Establish a "[barrier busting](#)" team** of housing providers and partners who can be incentivized by flexible funds reserved for unmet needs. These teams commit to providing staff who will collaborate to reduce barriers to housing stability, act as liaisons for other agencies whose clients may have difficulty accessing their services, and case conference particular challenges.

14. **Establish a landlord advisory group** or ensure diverse landlord representation in your governance or advisory bodies. Use the group to discuss landlords' fears about accepting different rental assistance and what it would take to get them to change their minds. Ask for suggestions concerning the best way to recruit landlords. Recruit members who are willing to help promote your projects, introduce you to other landlords, and serve as references.

15. **Evaluate your strategy and report out through your CoC's leadership**, including a landlord advisory group, using follow-up surveys of participants and landlords, tracking evictions of housing program participants, and escalating when there are lost units due to previously engaged landlords who decline to continue accepting rental assistance.

Tools and Templates

[Strategies for Working with Landlords Toolkit](#) The sample materials included were provided by agencies within Michigan and the National Alliance to End Homelessness. These include materials to setup and run a landlord forum and support for a recruiting campaign.

[Housing Search Assistance Toolkit](#) A resource developed for case managers and housing advocates to assist clients with accessing and maintaining housing.

[HUD's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO)](#) works to eliminate housing discrimination and promote civil rights and economic opportunity through housing. One of FHEO's roles is to investigate complaints of housing discrimination. Anyone who believes they have been discriminated against in violation of federal fair housing laws can and should be encouraged to [file a complaint with FHEO](#).

[Landlord Benefits Checklist](#) This checklist outlines the benefits landlords receive from working with a housing search program. The checklist provides examples and would have to be tailored according to the services your program provides. The checklist could be used as a marketing tool to advertise your program to potential landlords. Housing advocates could also use the information as talking points when calling or meeting with prospective partners.

[Landlord Marketing Letter](#) This marketing letter can be used separately or with the Landlord Benefits Checklist to advertise your program to landlords in your community.

[Landlord Information Template](#) Using this form will allow your agency to collect information about landlords in your community as well as the type of housing that is available. It is important to note, however, that many communities either have or are in the process of creating a housing inventory database. If you live in one of these communities, there are probably forms and procedures in place for collecting information and populating the database.

[Landlord-Tenant-Case Manager Communication Agreement](#) This communication agreement can be used to promote open communication between the landlord, tenant, and case manager/housing advocate and to address problems before they become irreparable.

[Landlord Toolkit for Responding to COVID-19 Impacted Tenants](#) The purpose of this toolkit is to provide initial tools and resources for small- and large-scale landlords as they face unprecedented loss of rental income and uncertainty. There are some resources available to assist tenants but the timing of receipt of these resources is unclear. In the

meantime, if tenants struggle to pay rent, many landlords may be unable to meet their own financial and operational obligations.

Multifamily Preparedness Begins with an Incident Response Plan Research and insight from the National Multifamily Housing Council provides valuable recommendations for multifamily housing providers, many of which may be owned by or subsidiaries of housing service providers.

Fraud Prevention Tips and Resources HUD's Office of Inspector General is alerting the public about potential fraud schemes related to the CARES Act funding. These cover rising trends, schemes, or other intelligence they uncover regarding criminal practices targeting the public and those obtaining services from HUD programs.

Risk Mitigation Funds Community Profiles These two documents provide details on how four communities set-up and implement their risk mitigation funds.

Example Landlord Recruitment & Retention Program and Marketing Campaign Report The Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust commissioned an assessment for recommendations to create a landlord marketing campaign and program with the objective of recruiting and retaining landlords. The report includes recommended actions, a timeline, and proposed budget.