Get the Facts: HOPWA and COVID-19 Response

REMOTE METHODS/PRACTICES

The use of remote methods to deliver HOPWA housing and services may be necessary in order to protect program staff and client households and to comply with local and state public health safety rules related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving from on-site program delivery to remote work will likely call for adjustments to normal program operations in order to continue uninterrupted services to HOPWA-eligible households. Below are some examples:

What types of communication are important to the success of our program while we are trying to adapt to social distancing and community shut-downs?

Communication with clients, landlords and the community should be an early priority! Let them know what you are doing and why. Letters, emails, website messages and direct calls will help provide information, transparency, and less uncertainty for all involved.

Communication with Clients:
- Provide information on COVID-19 and how they can stay safe
- Explain why and how you are changing the way you interact with them and how the program is going to work during this time
- Make sure clients know how to reach your program and how you will be reaching them
- Let them know what additional services are available to help, if appropriate
- Ensure that potential clients know where and how to reach agencies and apply for assistance

Communication with Landlords:
- Provide information on how you are changing program procedures during the pandemic
- Explain why and how you are changing the way you interact with them and how the program is going to work during this time
- Explain how remote housing inspections will work and how some inspections may be delayed
- Provide a brief fact sheet on remote inspections, especially for new landlords
- Make sure landlords and property managers know how to reach your program

Note: All communication with the household and landlord must be done in a manner that protects client confidentiality.

Is there guidance on waiving of required signatures for clients that are eligible for HOPWA services?

Grantees should look at all reasonable remote methods that will allow critical program activities to continue, including ways to temporarily bypass any local hard signature requirements. Remote methods to obtain signatures may include documents signed/scanned and emailed back to the program or the use of electronic signatures.

When these methods are not possible, programs may allow a client's verbal agreement to sign, documented by the program staff and placed in the client's file. Be sure to document these transactions carefully. Policies on remote methods, including verbal attestation of signatures, should be set by grantees, to be followed uniformly by their project sponsors.

Note: Remember that hard/wet signatures are generally local requirements, not regulatory.

What remote methods are acceptable when carrying out unit inspections, client reassessments or other similar program functions?

Virtual Unit Inspections: Methods can include video streaming (such as FaceTime) or video recordings that are used by program staff to complete a unit inspection form. Another option is use of time/date-stamped photographs. Visual inspections using these methods should show all areas of the unit, if possible and include a test of smoke detectors as well as a visual paint inspection when applicable. (See Remote Inspection fact sheet and webinar)

Making a Virtual Inspection Happen: Programs may need to be creative in how they carry out remote work, including inspections, without a program staff member on site. The videos (or other methods) could be performed by the Landlord, the client, a client's household member or others, depending on the situation and availability of technology. Program staff should let the on-site person know what needs to be recorded, shown or photographed, then review the results and complete an inspection form for the record.

Remote Meetings with Clients and Others: In order to ensure the safety of clients and staff while continuing vital program operations, programs should look at all reasonable methods to conduct meetings remotely. Phone calls, conference and video calls (Facetime, Zoom and others) can be used for client intake, case management, virtual home visits, annual client reassessments, landlord meetings and many other functions. Documents may be exchanged and signed using regular mail, email, electronic signatures or verbal attestation. HOPWA funds may be used under some circumstances to purchase phones or other equipment necessary to support remote work. (See Supportive Services fact sheet and webinar.)

Note: Grantees and Project Sponsors must have policies and procedures in place to guide remote work processes and required documentation. If conducting work allowed under a HUD waiver (such as HOPWA Property Standards for initial unit inspections, the grantee must notify its Field Office at least 2 days prior to implementing the waiver provision.

If we do not conduct annual inspections, are there other remote ways to help ensure that units are safe?

Yes, programs are encouraged to be creative in finding ways to check on clients and client housing conditions. Some suggestions include:
- Check in with clients by phone about their unit conditions using a simple Habitability check-list as a guide
- Ask clients to test smoke detectors during a call
- If conducting case management by phone, ask the client to FaceTime (if available) or take pictures of any problem areas
- Note any unit concerns in the case record; relay any safety concerns to the LL
- Make sure clients know they can call you with concerns about the unit even though inspections are delayed

The contents of this fact sheet reflect guidance presented in a series of HOPWA/COVID-19 Q&A webinars available at: https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hopwa/covid-19/#webinars