



THE BRIDGE

Housing Counseling and Client Support During the COVID-19 Emergency



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Rental Counseling During COVID-19: A Snapshot of New York City

As COVID-19 brings job losses and health concerns, housing counselors are stepping in to provide meaningful guidance to low- and moderate-income clients whose housing stability may be at risk. New York City was one of the first epicenters of COVID-19 in the United States, and [two-thirds of its residents are renters](#). By counseling tenants on the protections and relief available during COVID-19, housing counselors can help tenants understand their options.



Counselors may assist tenants in navigating a variety of discussions with landlords about issues that arise during COVID-19, such as:

- The inability to pay rent due to job loss
- The ability to use security deposits toward rent
- The lease renewal process
- How to address building maintenance issues such as sanitizing common areas

Counselors should explain how housing relief measures, including state laws, emergency orders, federal moratoria, and guidance from the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), protect tenants against eviction. It is important for housing counselors to stay up to date on both state and federal protections during the COVID-19 national emergency so they can educate clients on preserving their housing. For example, the following laws are currently in place in New York:

Lori Miller from [Neighborhood Housing Services of Jamaica \(NHSJ\)](#) commented on the importance of rental counseling in New York City during the national emergency: "Counselors are unpacking confusing messages about relief, discussing the importance of continuing to pay rent if the tenant is able, and outlining how tenants' circumstances may change if moratoria expire."

New York State Protections	Federal Protections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State Eviction Moratorium: Under Governor’s Executive Orders, an eviction moratorium was in place for all tenants starting on March 20, 2020 through June 19, 2020. The eviction moratorium was continued for the period June 20, 2020 through August 20, 2020 for tenants unable to pay rent due to COVID-19 or who qualify for unemployment. • Security Deposits as Rent: By Governor’s Executive Order, security deposits are to be applied to rent by mutual agreement of the landlord and tenant as a means of preventing or addressing rent arrears. <p>Read more information about New York protections for renters during COVID-19.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal Eviction Moratorium: FHA’s eviction moratorium applicable to persons in properties secured by FHA-insured mortgages was announced March 18, 2020 and is extended through August 31, 2020. The Federal Housing Finance Agency enacted similar moratoria for properties with government sponsored enterprise (GSE) or federally backed mortgages through August 31, 2020. • Federal CARES Act: The CARES Act provided 120 days of protection against eviction for non-payment of rent in federally-backed and assisted housing beginning March 27, 2020. The CARES Act also provides protection against late fees and penalties.

Counselors are also checking in by calling clients they counseled prior to COVID-19. Carol Birk of the [Housing and Family Services of Greater New York](#) said, “It is very important for us to be reaching out proactively to our clients to do wellness checks. We are making referrals for food assistance, helping to resolve building maintenance issues, and helping to resolve landlord-tenant problems. We are also linking clients directly to community resources and reminding them that we’re available to help them through their challenges.”

The recovery work is just beginning, and tenants will continue to require counselor support during and after COVID-19 mitigation measures to help them navigate their housing challenges.

Way Finders: Helping Clients Manage Budgets and Build Savings in Times of Crisis

[Way Finders](#) is a nonprofit housing counseling agency focused on homelessness prevention, rental support, and homeownership in western Massachusetts. Since the COVID-19 national emergency began, Way Finders has migrated to providing services remotely.



Way Finders quickly pivoted to virtual delivery since they had always provided services online and by phone. However, the transition to helping clients deal with the ramifications of COVID-19 is new. Many clients have been calling counselors feeling stressed and uncertain because of the national emergency – they have experienced a loss of income. They are worried about how they will be able to pay their mortgage or their rent.

Many clients are currently covered by state and national protections put in place during COVID-19 (such as eviction and foreclosure moratoria), so Way Finders has geared up to handle the consequences once those protections are lifted, including providing guidance to

clients looking for additional financial resources in conjunction with housing counseling.

Way Finders is proactively working toward meeting the increase in requests by:

- Marketing to consumers about managing their finances by:
 - Posting on social media platforms such as Facebook, which reaches a broad audience and targets marketing to specific age ranges, cities, and counties.
 - Printing materials sent to all existing clients to make them aware of emergency financial assistance that was available.
 - Proactively reaching out to landlords to let them know about the financial assistance available to their current and future tenants.
- Ensuring clients have a full understanding of emergency financial services available and how current protections may work.

Way Finders clients know they can receive assistance with reaching out to their lenders and creditors, as well as clear information about the financial consequences of the actions they take. Way Finders also helps clients

negotiate with their landlord or mortgage servicer to find a payment plan that will work for them. Due to COVID-19, clients understand now more than ever that their financial future may not always be secure. Way Finders is focusing on helping clients prepare for income changes during this unprecedented time using a two-pronged approach:

- **Help clients create an emergency budget during COVID-19** – Way Finders is assisting clients in looking at the income they have coming in and figuring out what they should be spending on necessities vs. what adjustments could be made to their spending in a time of crisis. Clients can contact their creditors and utility providers to see what their options are during an emergency, and Way Finders can assist with those conversations.
- **Help clients build their savings for the future** – Clients understand their financial future may

not always be secure, especially if they are experiencing the loss of a job or a reduced income. To plan for future savings, Way Finders helps clients understand their current spending patterns and how to adjust their spending to create an emergency fund. Changing habits and behaviors take time, and our counselors help clients find a starting point for growth. Counselors encourage their clients to start small and identify changes they can make today that will help them start an emergency fund for the future.

As clients continue to work through COVID-19, financial education is key. Way Finders provides clients with the tools they need to budget through a crisis and helps them grow their savings so that they will feel more secure in the future.

MSHDA: Meeting Client Needs During COVID-19

The Michigan State Housing Development Authority's (MSHDA) mission is to provide quality affordable housing to support diverse, thriving communities where people have the foundation to reach their full potential. For more than 17 years, MSHDA has partnered with HUD in the delivery of a robust and high-quality housing counseling program. MSHDA currently has 22 HUD-approved sub-grantees bringing housing counseling services to nearly all 83 counties in Michigan.

MSHDA's Housing Education Program agencies have been submitting weekly service numbers since the Michigan *Stay at Home* order was enacted on March 15, 2020. Since that time, their network of agencies has served more than 10,000 clients, a significant increase from clients served in a typical year in the mid-March to mid-May timeframe. The largest number of requests received were for rental counseling services and financial literacy education.



MSHDA staff using a tablet for socially distant check-ins at the client's car.

Educating Michigan families about the rental eviction moratorium has been and continues to be a huge priority. “We have heard from many of our agencies that renters are facing eviction notices from their landlords due to rental delinquencies. It is important that our residents know the laws protecting them, and it is because of this that we see an uptick in the rental counseling requests,” said Carol Brito, MSHDA Program & Business Development Manager.

MSHDA also offers holistic support to its network by holding weekly conference calls during the COVID-19 national emergency providing constant state updates and support. These calls feature presentations from more experienced housing counseling staff to mentor newer counselors and connect agencies for support.

Most of Michigan is rural, and this often brings many challenges to ensuring equitable access to receive housing counseling services. For example, many families do not have access to public transportation, broadband internet, or cell phone service.

MSHDA’s COVID-19 Preparation

The COVID-19 national emergency brought additional housing and economic challenges for Michigan residents which increased the request for services received by their network’s counseling agencies. MSHDA recently delivered a two-part Disaster Relief Housing Counseling place-based training to their network of agencies, which helped contribute to their network’s advanced preparation and ability to immediately deliver services remotely without delay.

Community Action Agency (CAA) in Jackson, MI has been providing housing counseling services to residents of Jackson, Hillsdale, and Lenawee counties since 2002. To effectively reach clients, CAA offers online education and counseling services when mobility is limited. CAA has also been offering specialized virtual classes in response to the COVID-19 crisis for rental, homeownership, and financial programming.

“Self-sufficiency must be addressed by a comprehensive plan that addresses all barriers and opportunities. If a resident does not have a computer, CAA has been able to provide them with a tablet and a limited number of hotspots for them to use. However, if no hotspots are available, collaborations with community partners have been established. Residents of our rural communities can also utilize the free internet service provided by the United Way of Lenawee County or the Hillsdale Public Library. Both have set up internet service in their parking lots, where residents can stay safe in their car and log into the internet as a drive-in housing counseling service. This is especially helpful for those who need to apply and validate their unemployment benefits,” said Tami Farnum, CAA’s Program Operations Manager.

Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency, Inc. (NMCAA)

in Traverse City, MI, has been working to communicate effectively with their rural clients during COVID-19. Karen Emerson, NMCAA’s Financial Management Services Manager, shares “since the service area is largely rural, marketing and outreach to the target population takes a lot of collaborative effort from staff, partner organizations, and community members by using Public Service Announcements in local media outlets, radio and TV spots, social media, staff attendance at community events, and word of mouth.”

NMCAA has been tailoring its services in response to the COVID-19 crisis, including offering a Facebook Live series called *Wealthy Wednesdays*. “NMCAA currently provides virtual rental coaching, including budget review, cost analysis, and housing locator reference materials. In addition, we help clean up credit matters that pose barriers to renting. We are here to help our customers strive to break the cycle of poverty by building assets through coaching, education, and program development every day. Now more than ever, we are needed to help our neighbors from falling through the cracks during this pandemic,” said Karen Emerson.

Mon Valley Initiative: Tips to Effectively Counsel Clients Through COVID-19

Jonathan Weaver of [Mon Valley Initiative](#) (MVI) remembers the economic hardship that hit the country during the 2008 Housing Crisis. Now, during the COVID-19 national emergency, Mr. Weaver has been receiving calls daily from people who are facing a situation they could never have imagined – homeowners cannot make their mortgage payments, are unsure about forbearance, and terrified of foreclosure.

Although the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the economy are unknown, housing counselors now have the advantage of great references and resources established in 2008. There are already more supports in place today for borrowers than there were twelve years ago, and government-sponsored enterprises Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, along with the FHA, have put out effective guidance in a short amount of time.



Even with lessons learned from the past, this still can be a challenging time for homeowners who have been financially impacted by COVID-19. Housing counselors, like Mr. Weaver, are being inundated with requests for assistance. He has learned a great deal about counseling clients through a crisis in the past few months, and has the following lessons to share:

- Try to work efficiently yet thoroughly.** Get things done as quickly as possible, especially when a client is desperate for help; avoid holding up the process, but don't rush. Rushing can lead to substandard results. I keep a handwritten note on my desk to remind myself that it is better to get clear and complete information from the client than to rush to turn in incomplete paperwork. Ultimately, taking the time to be thorough and make sure everything is complete. This approach may cause a small delay up front but will save more time on the back end and achieve better results for clients.
- It's a marathon, not a sprint.** To assist both my teammates at Mon Valley Initiative and my clients, I must take care of myself. Every day I make time to step away from files, have lunch, and even take a walk around the block to clear my head. I find it easy to get wrapped up in clients' stress as they face the scariest thing imaginable – losing their home. I know that the work will keep coming in, and I need to be at my personal best to provide the best service to my clients.
- Don't work in a vacuum.** In addition to providing direct housing counseling services, MVI also serves as a HUD housing counseling national intermediary. This role allows them to not only provide technical assistance to their nationwide network of agencies but also provides them with the opportunity to learn best practices on how other agencies are assisting their clients. No one has all the answers, so follow the same advice that you would give your clients: do your homework and seek the help of others when needed. Reach out to industry partners to educate yourself and help your clients.

COVID-19 is not the first crisis housing counselors have helped their clients through, and it may not be the last, but using Jonathan's tips, counselors can continue to learn from the past and move forward to provide the best counseling possible to their clients.

GreenPath Financial Wellness: Using Grant Funds to Expand Financial Counseling During COVID-19

[GreenPath Financial Wellness](#) is a national nonprofit with a long-standing track record of providing trusted housing counseling that offers financial counseling and debt management services. GreenPath's hotline has assisted nine million distressed borrowers since the 2008 housing crisis. Since mid-March 2020, GreenPath has seen a 50 percent increase in hotline calls from homeowners and renters faced with sudden job loss, reduced income, and other financial challenges.

GreenPath was recently awarded a \$750,000 grant from the [Wells Fargo Foundation](#) to deliver timely counseling to meet the needs of renters and homeowners affected by the COVID-19 national emergency. Funds from Wells Fargo are available for immediate use serving those seeking assistance.

"Millions of people are facing financial concerns due to COVID-19," said Kristen Holt, president and CEO, GreenPath Financial Wellness. "We're here to guide them and help them understand their options. The Wells Fargo grant strengthens our ability to meet increased demand when these services are needed the most."

These funds expand the availability of counseling through HUD's Housing Counseling Program and other important resources that address a household's entire financial situation, including the importance of paying for essentials, understanding debt repayment options, and balancing housing costs with credit card debt, student loans, and unanticipated hardships stemming from the COVID-19 national emergency.

Those seeking counseling can obtain one-on-one counseling by calling 888-995-HOPE. Assistance is free, and no appointment is necessary.

CFPB's New Mortgage and Housing Assistance Website

To ensure homeowners and renters have the most up to date and accurate housing assistance information during the COVID-19 national emergency, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA), and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) launched a new mortgage and housing assistance website in May 2020.

Mortgage and Housing Assistance Website

The [Mortgage and Housing Assistance website](#) is aimed at consumers having trouble paying their mortgage or rent during the pandemic. It consolidates information about the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. It also offers information on how to avoid COVID-19 related scams. Here is a summary of

the protections provided by the CARES Act, covered on the website:

- **Protections for homeowners** – Under the CARES Act, consumers are entitled to mortgage forbearance if they have a federally-backed or Government Sponsored Enterprise (GSE)-backed mortgage (e.g., Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac), request assistance from their servicer, and attest that they are experiencing financial hardship due, directly or indirectly, to the coronavirus national emergency. Borrowers can enter into forbearance, a pause, or reduction in their monthly mortgage. The missed payments will have to be paid back by the borrower, and

depending upon the federal agency and circumstances involved, can be added to the regular monthly payments, paid back all at once, tacked on to the end of the loan, or the borrower can have the term of the loan extended.

- **Protections for renters** – [Renters also receive protections](#) under the CARES Act, which provides for a suspension or moratorium on evictions for renters in qualified housing. Renters who live in specific multifamily properties and other properties with a GSE-backed mortgage cannot be evicted due to a COVID-19 loss of income.

The Mortgage and Housing Assistance website helps consumers learn about which options they may qualify for, offers information on how to request forbearance or mortgage relief, and helps consumers know what to do once they get mortgage relief. It also provides lookup tools for homeowners to determine if their mortgage is federally backed and for renters to find out if their rental unit is insured through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), Fannie Mae, or Freddie Mac.

Additional COVID-19 Response Resources

To protect and assist consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CFPB has also taken numerous steps, including continuing to process consumer complaints through the consumer complaint system. Additionally, the CFPB is working to:

- Provide clear, simple, and timely information about how consumers can access pandemic-relief payments, including information on the [prepaid cards](#) issued by the IRS to some consumers instead of paper checks.
- Ensure consumers will be able to continue to send remittance transfers without disruption.
- Outline the responsibilities of credit reporting companies and data furnishers (e.g., credit bureaus, banks, and credit card companies, debt collection agencies, and other companies that process and provide financial information about consumers, etc.), including a [recently released policy statement](#).
- Take action to provide the needed flexibility to enable financial companies to work with customers in need.

Updates to HUDHousingCounselors.com

On May 28, 2020, HUD launched updates to the certification training and testing website www.HUDHousingCounselors.com. The site content is reorganized, and additional tools are added to improve the user experience in navigating the site and locating information. One of the primary changes is the new [Agency Role in Certification](#) page that will assist administrators in identifying steps to support counselors through the certification process. The update also consolidates exam registration information into easy to follow step-by-step instructions. New buttons have been added to the home page to streamline access to information for individuals taking the examination, and agencies looking for resources to support counselors with getting certified.



The profile page has been updated with a dashboard that provides the user with training information, exam registration, the status of their progress toward certification, and notices and updates that have been released.

One of the most important decisions that a user makes is whether to take the exam online or in person at a testing center. The website now includes a comparison of testing methods and key considerations to help users determine which way is right for them. We have provided more detailed instructions on preparing for

the online exam, including [Advice for a Successful Online Exam](#). The [Online Exam Pre-launch instructions](#) page helps users understand online testing guidelines and requirements. As candidates prepare to take the certification exam, HUD is committed to providing information and support to make training and testing a successful experience.

HUD Exchange COVID-19 Resources

Housing counseling agencies often work with multiple HUD programs and serve clients with varied needs. The HUD Exchange team created a site-wide page on [Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#) to help agencies who work on multiple HUD programs. The [Housing Counseling Program COVID-19 resource page](#) is also included on this page. Housing counseling agencies may be particularly interested in the following programs and resources:

- [Community Development Block Grant \(CDBG\)](#) – Eviction moratorium Q&As, supplemental allocations, waivers, flexibilities, and eligible activities for COVID-19 response for CDBG grantees. Housing Counseling agencies may find additional resources and ideas for supporting their program. A list of [CDBG grantees](#) is also available.
- [HOME Investment Partnerships Program](#) – Waivers and frequently asked questions (FAQs)

are available for HOME grantees. Waivers include the ability of grantees and owners/managers of HOME-assisted units and Tenant-Based Rental Assistance (TBRA) to accept new tenants using a special self-certification application. A list of [HOME grantees](#) is also available.

- [Homelessness Assistance Programs](#) – Waivers, supplemental allocations, FAQs, eligible costs, toolkits, and resources for those who work with homeless persons are available. A list of [ESG and CoC grantees](#) is also available.

Although there are many national regulatory flexibilities around COVID-19, decisions on how these are operationalized will vary on the local level. Housing counseling agencies who wish to learn more about the local response to the COVID-19 national emergency should reach out to other HUD grantees to determine how best to collaborate.

National Homeownership Month: Social Distancing and the Housing Industry

The Office of Housing Counseling (OHC) celebrated National Homeownership Month with an exciting virtual panel event on June 23rd, focusing on social distancing and its effect on the housing industry. The event included a keynote speech by HUD Secretary, Ben Carson, who emphasized the importance of homeownership as the basis of strong communities.

HUD Deputy Secretary Brian Montgomery spoke about HUD's unique role in helping homeowners during COVID-19; Acting Assistant Secretary for Housing – FHA

"This has been a year we will all remember, when the value of owning a safe, healthy, affordable home was truly evident. We recognize this month with a renewed sense of purpose to continuing to help those who need us the most to keep their homes." – HUD Deputy Secretary Brian Montgomery

Commissioner Len Wolfson highlighted the importance of housing counselors to help homeowners stay in their

homes during the COVID-19 crisis; and Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for OHC, Danberry Carson shared a personal family success story of how housing counseling made a positive difference.

Terry Carr, Senior Program Advisor with OHC, moderated the panel of industry experts and influencers who provided thought-provoking and insightful conversations about social distancing in their industry of expertise.

- **Lending:** [Kathy Cummings](#), Senior Vice President, Homeownership Solutions and Strategic Relationships, Bank of America
- **Real Estate:** [Mabél Guzmán](#), Broker, @properties in Chicago and 2020 Vice President, Association Affairs, National Association of REALTORS®
- **Housing Counseling:** [Dan Ellis](#), Executive Director, Neighborhood Housing Services of Baltimore, Inc. (NHS)

- **Title Company:** [Diane Tomb](#), CEO, American Land Title Association

During National Homeownership Month, we recognize the value of owning a home and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many families in our country. We rededicate ourselves toward supporting housing counseling agencies and every hardworking and responsible American to a fair chance of keeping their home. As professionals working in the industry – now often virtually – we recognize you are significantly impacting the economy by helping others in homeownership counseling, rental assistance, and preventing mortgage delinquency and foreclosure.

Since 1968, the HUD Housing Counseling Program has been committed to serving the needs of homebuying consumers and a legion of stakeholders. It provides a comprehensive array of invaluable information, education, and resources located on the HUD Exchange [Housing Counseling webpage](#).



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