

How PHAs Can Assist People Experiencing Homelessness

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Assisting People Experiencing Homelessness Through the Lease-Up Process

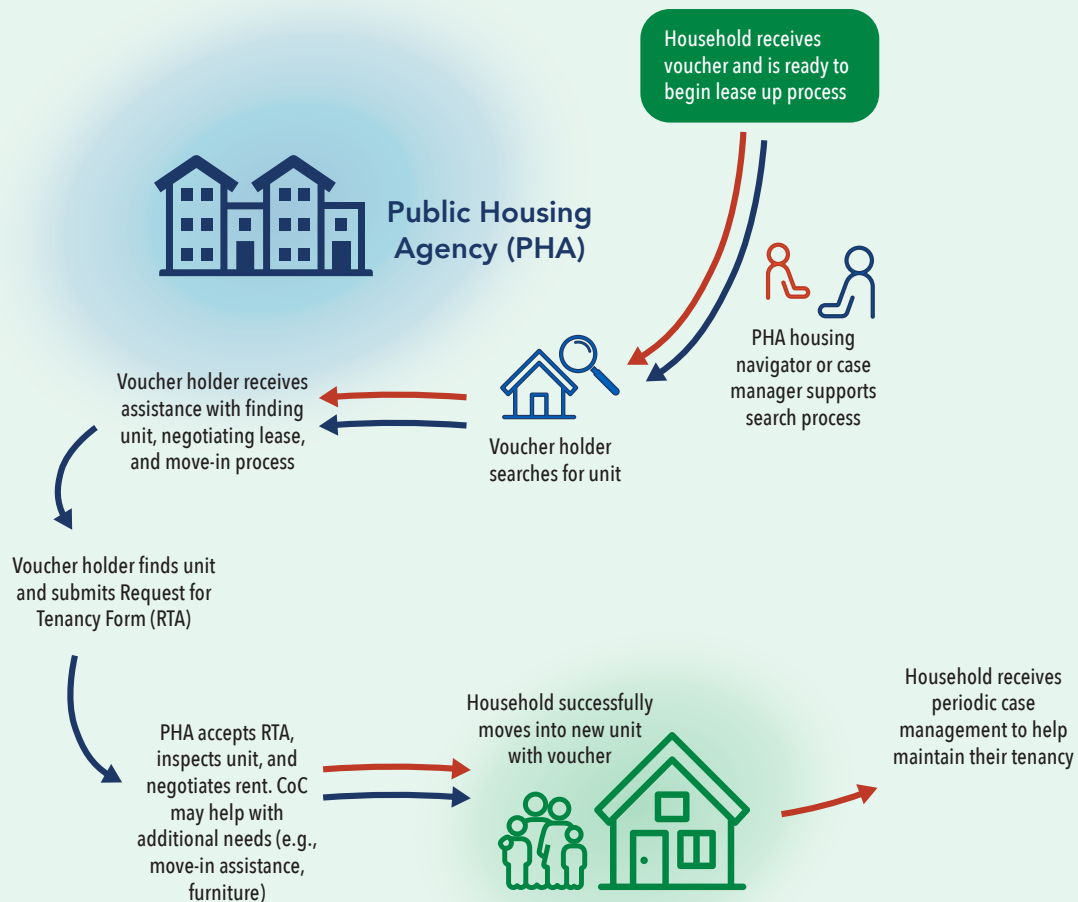


INTRODUCTION

Receiving a housing voucher can be a critical step in ending an individual or a family's homelessness and giving them long-term housing stability. However, receiving a Housing Choice Voucher from a PHA is not enough. The household will need to "lease up"—that is, find a housing unit where they can use their rental subsidy. The lease up process can be especially challenging for people experiencing homelessness. They may struggle to identify and visit potential housing units. Without a permanent address, they may find it difficult to assemble the necessary documentation for the landlord. People experiencing homelessness sometimes face discrimination from landlords, who may be hesitant to lease their unit to someone exiting homelessness. After finding a unit with a willing landlord, the household may need help obtaining furniture and other things necessary for moving in. People using a voucher to leave homelessness may also need a case manager during the first year of tenancy to help them maintain their housing stability.

This subject guide provides suggestions about how a PHA can support people experiencing homelessness through the housing lease-up process. It identifies common barriers that people experiencing homelessness face during the lease-up process and suggests several strategies for supporting them in securing a housing unit. The guide highlights best practices and offers examples of current PHA practices related to the lease-up process, beginning when a household is approved for a voucher through the time they move into a unit.

The graphic below illustrates the steps that occur from when household experiencing homelessness receives a voucher to when the household is a successful tenant.



People Experiencing Homelessness May Struggle to Find a Housing Unit

People experiencing homelessness may need more support during the housing search process than other HCV participants. Some challenges that may impede their ability to look for housing are:

- **Lack of knowledge about how to search for units.** Households may not be knowledgeable about what strategies and approaches to use to look for available units. They also may not have access to the internet to search for units online. Especially in high-cost housing markets, it may be hard to find affordable units and some units may be located in unfamiliar neighborhoods.
- **Stress and mental health challenges.** The stress associated with experiencing homelessness may make it difficult to independently complete the multiple steps associated with the housing search process. Some people experiencing homelessness also have mental health challenges that may negatively affect their ability to look for or visit housing units.
- **Transportation and childcare challenges.** Increasingly, affordable rental units may be outside of areas accessible by public transportation or in areas that households may be less familiar with. Additionally, families experiencing homelessness often include young children. Parents may not have access to childcare and may not want to or be able to bring their children to view housing units.
- **Ability to complete application and required landlord paperwork.** Similar to challenges with the PHA application process, people experiencing homelessness may struggle to complete the rental application and provide the required paperwork to the landlord (e.g., income documentation).

PHA staff, or a contracted case manager from another social service program, can assist and guide voucher holders currently experiencing homelessness throughout the lease-up process. Housing vouchers expire after a certain amount of time. Therefore, it is important that voucher holders be able to locate, visit, and apply for potential housing units in a timely manner so that their voucher does not expire and they remain homeless.

BEST PRACTICE



PHAs should consider designating staff to assist people experiencing homelessness with the processes of searching for housing and applying for a unit. This staff might be in the Housing Choice Voucher program or could be in a more centralized PHA office that oversees all of the PHA's programs that assist people experiencing homelessness (e.g., VASH, Mainstream, and Shelter Plus Care programs). The designated staff can advise voucher holders on where to look for units. They also can accompany people experiencing homelessness to view units and provide guidance on which units may be the best fit given the household's budget and housing criteria such as number of bedrooms and whether the unit is likely to passing the PHA's housing inspection. If needed, the staff can help the household complete the process of applying for a unit.

If the PHA does not have the ability to dedicate this staff internally, the PHA could consider partnering with a local homeless service provider or other organization to provide this support during the housing search process for people experiencing homelessness. Some PHAs rely on the same homeless service provider case managers that helped a household through process of applying to the PHA and receiving a voucher. Having gained the voucher holder's trust and cooperation, the case manager may be able to provide effective advice and support during lease up. If the landlord is reluctant because of the voucher holder's criminal justice involvement, a case manager may be able to explain mitigating circumstances such as compliance with probation or time elapsed without reoffending.

EXAMPLE: The *Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA)* relies on case managers from the referring homeless service providers to continue to help the voucher holders through the lease-up process. The case manager may accompany the voucher holder to visit potential units and may help with completing leasing applications. HACA also has a landlord housing navigator who works with HCV participants to locate housing units. The housing navigator participates in meetings with case managers to strategize how to help the most challenged applicants complete the housing search process and successfully use their vouchers.

EXAMPLE: In 2015, the *United Way of Cass-Clay in North Dakota* funded a design process that included Fargo-Moorhead area homeless service providers to identify best practices in the field. This work resulted in a pilot project in 2016, the Housing Navigation Program. Currently operated by Presentation Partners in Housing, the Housing Navigation Program supports people experiencing homelessness with case management and applying for and successfully using housing programs. People experiencing homelessness who receive a Housing Choice Voucher continue to work with the housing navigators through their lease-up process. The United Way tracked the cost savings for the 20 families that the program placed and remained housed and reported more than \$500,000 in savings to other public programs. The state of North Dakota is currently replicating the program.

PHAs Can Build Relationships With Landlords to Overcome Any Potential Bias Towards People Experiencing Homelessness

Landlords may not be willing to rent their units to people who have poor rental history, including past evictions, and who have limited or no income, all common situations for households exiting homelessness. In some areas, landlords may be able to charge a higher rent for their unit on the private market compared with what a voucher holder is able to pay, making it less appealing to rent to a voucher holder. People experiencing homelessness also may face discrimination from landlords when applying for units. Landlords may perceive people experiencing homelessness as tenants who may not be responsible neighbors, who will not pay their rent, or who may damage the housing unit. Landlord hesitation sometimes reflects past experience with tenants who needed ongoing support about their rights and responsibilities as tenants but did not receive it.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs can incentivize landlords to participate in the HCV program and to accept people exiting homelessness as tenants. Some common types of landlord incentives are double security deposits; funds to help cover repairs needed to pass Housing Quality Standards inspections; landlord mitigation funds to cover any damage to the unit; and a telephone hotline to report tenant issues.



EXAMPLE: Across the state, Maine has an increasingly tight rental market that makes it challenging for voucher holders to find rental units. To attract more landlords to the HCV program, *MaineHousing* provides landlords with grants to repair health and safety issues in their units that would cause the unit to fail the initial PHA-required Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection. These funds can help pay for substantial work such as lead paint mitigation, window egress changes, or roof repairs. Each landlord can receive up to \$5,000 to complete repairs, as long as they contribute at least \$250. In 2020, the program awarded landlords approximately \$256,000 to remedy inspection issues so voucher holders could move into the units. MaineHousing staff said that after participating in the program, landlords are likely to continue to work with MaineHousing and rent their units to HCV recipients.

EXAMPLE: *San Diego Housing Commission* operates the [Landlord Engagement and Assistance Program \(LEAP\)](#). This program offers San Diego landlords a range of incentives to encourage them to rent to voucher holders exiting homelessness. Incentives include: \$500 payment for the first unit rented to a household experiencing homelessness and a \$250 payment for subsequent units; up to two times the unit's contracted rent in security deposits as well as a utility assistance subsidy for each household; a contingency fund to cover any expenses beyond the enhanced security deposit; and dedicated landlord specialists to help answer landlord questions and concerns. San Diego Housing Commission staff said that landlords are encouraged to let the PHA know if any of their units are becoming available soon. This helps give people experiencing homelessness an opportunity to use their Housing Choice vouchers ahead of people renting on the private market without a subsidy.

EXAMPLE: The *Fargo-Moorhead Coalition to End Homelessness* operates a [Landlord Risk Mitigation Fund](#) to encourage landlords to rent their units to people experiencing homelessness. The fund began 2014 with a \$10,000 City of Fargo Social Services grant and a pledge from a local community action agency. The fund offers landlords and property managers the opportunity to recoup funds loss from excessive damage to unit or unpaid rent, up to \$3,000 in physical and operational costs over a two-year period. Participation in the fund is only offered for households moving from a social service provider who is part of the Coalition. A support services worker is assigned to each participating landlord and serves as a liaison between the tenant and the landlord. Decisions about whether a household is eligible for funds are made by an advisory committee that includes local landlords, social service providers, and real estate experts. The fund also offers free remediation services for landlords and tenants through a local Community Action Agency. The state of North Dakota recently implemented a similar program but only covers up to \$1,000 per participant.

EXAMPLE: The *Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA)* has an internal team that conducts engagement with landlords and building owners to expand the number of housing units for voucher holders to consider. In 2020, MPHA engaged 150 new property owners. MPHA has set a higher goal for 2021. To complement this landlord outreach, MPHA provides search assistance internally for families on the cusp of running out of time on their vouchers.

BEST PRACTICE



PHAs can designate staff who are responsible for communicating and working with local landlords. These positions, sometimes called *landlord specialists* or *housing navigators*, develop ongoing relationships with local landlords and rental agencies so that they can refer voucher holders to their units. Landlord specialists also offer a contact for landlords to reach out to if an issue arises with a HCV tenant. This can be important for preventing bad experiences that discourage landlords from accepting voucher holders in the future. PHAs also can consider collaborating with their local Continuum of Care (CoC) to recruit landlords to participate in different types of homelessness and housing assistance programs (e.g., rapid re-housing, project-based HCV).

BEST PRACTICE



PHAs should develop strategies to increase their engagement with local landlords. Landlord outreach activities could include hosting in-person or online events, providing education to landlords about the HCV program, and developing relationships with local apartment organizations and rental agencies.

PHAs Can Expedite the Move-In Process for People Experiencing Homelessness

People experiencing homelessness need to move into their new subsidized housing unit quickly. They may be living in an unsheltered location such as an encampment or other outdoor location or in a time-limited homeless assistance program like an emergency shelter or transitional housing. In housing markets with low vacancy rates, it also is important to expedite the move-in process so that landlords are not dissuaded from accepting a tenant with a housing voucher.

PHAs should consider one or more of the following steps to expedite the move-in process for households experiencing homelessness:

Conduct inspections virtually. While it is important that PHAs follow HUD regulations regarding unit inspections, some PHAs have successfully modified the unit inspection process to maximize the number of potential units available for voucher holders and to expedite the move-in process. HUD permits Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspections to be completed virtually through a Remote Video Inspection (RVI). Especially useful due to the public health challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, RVIs can also help work around scheduling challenges and may alleviate landlord concerns around permitting people to enter their units.

Expedite the process for re-inspecting units. Scheduling and completing the unit inspection process can sometimes slow down the lease-up process. PHAs can prioritize inspections for people experiencing homelessness to expedite their move in. However, if a unit does not pass the inspection and needs repairs, the voucher holder will need to wait until the repairs are complete or locate another unit. Some PHAs implement strategies to encourage landlords to quickly perform repairs so voucher holders can lease-up and move into the unit.

EXAMPLE: *MaineHousing* has expedited the unit inspection process for people experiencing homelessness. They prioritize completing unit inspections within two days for currently homeless voucher holders. Even if a housing unit does not pass its first inspection, HUD allows HCV holders to move into the unit if the identified issues are not safety related. *MaineHousing* allows households to move into the unit regardless of whether it passes the first inspection and provides grants to landlords to make necessary repairs to their units.

EXAMPLE: *Atlanta Housing's* supportive housing (HAVEN) program has three dedicated Housing Services Administrators. After working with people experiencing homelessness to determine their initial eligibility for the voucher program, the Housing Service Administrators try to get Requests for Tenancy Approval (RTA) processed quickly. They also work directly with the landlords, negotiating the rent amount and determining a move-in date. They try to get the landlord to expedite the process to ensure that people experiencing homelessness can enter their permanent housing unit quickly.

Provide post-lease up support to HCV participants to help them stay stably housed. Some PHAs offer households exiting homelessness case management for a defined period after they are housed to make sure they are able to maintain their tenancy. This support can be ad-hoc or can be more structured with regular meetings for a set period of time.

EXAMPLE: *MaineHousing* funds housing navigators in each of its emergency shelters using HUD Emergency Solution Grant (ESG) funding. When a household experiencing homelessness is referred to the HCV program at the shelter, the housing navigator begins to work with them and provides support in preparing documentation, searching for housing, and the lease-up process. The state has an extremely low vacancy rate, so it is helpful to voucher holders to have support during the housing search process. Once the household successfully leases a unit, the housing navigator continues to follow the household for one year through monthly check-ins. These monthly check-ins provide recently housed tenants with post-tenancy support to help them stay stably housed.