How PHAs Can Assist People Experiencing Homelessness

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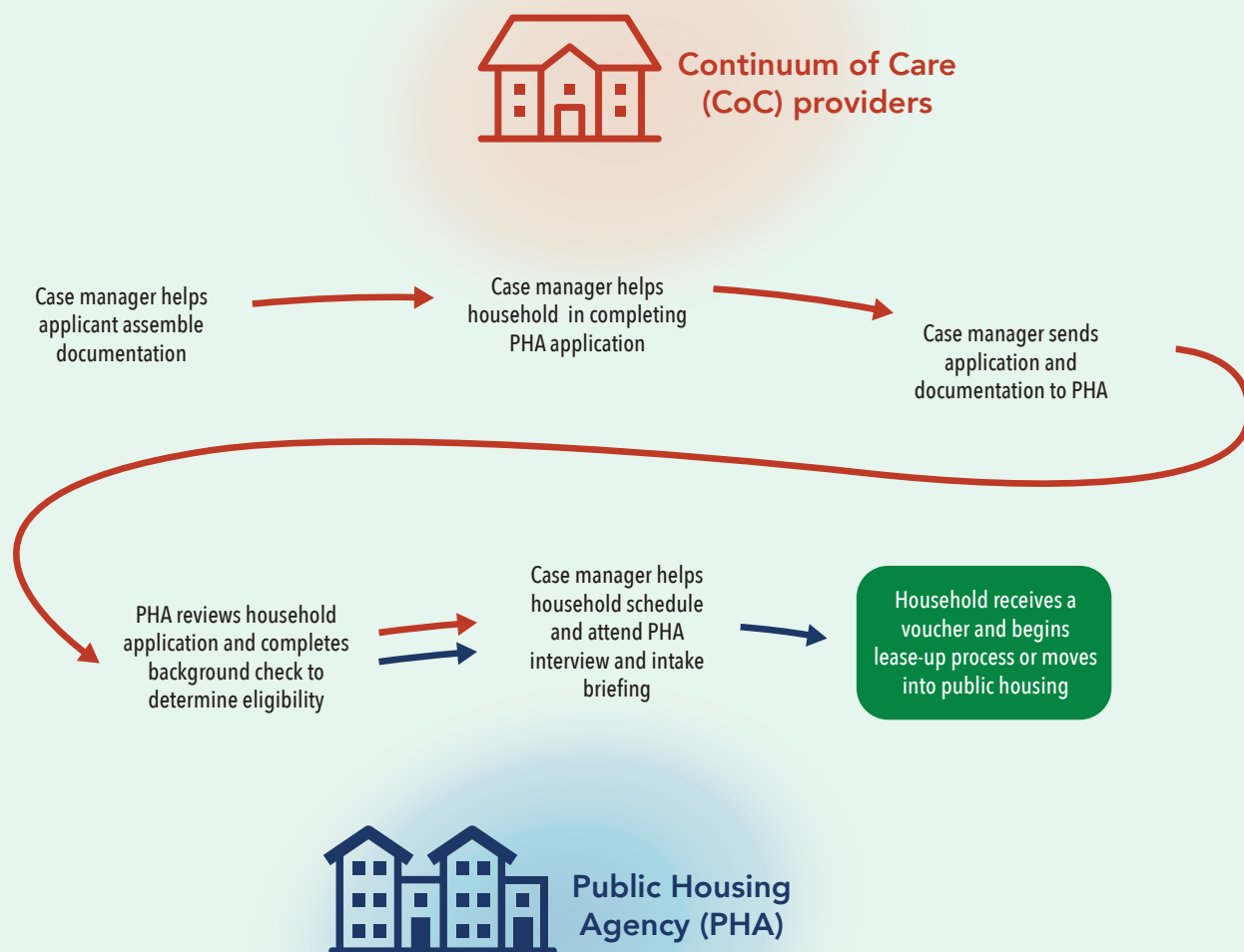
Helping People Experiencing Homelessness Navigate the PHA Application Process

INTRODUCTION

Once a person experiencing homelessness is referred to a PHA for the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) or public housing program, they must complete the PHA application process. The process for applying for housing assistance can be cumbersome, as it requires an applicant to follow several steps, produce multiple documents, and interact with PHA staff. When applicants for housing assistance are notified that they have come to the top of a waiting list, PHA staff provide information and support, but the household also has a lot of responsibility. A household completes an application for the HCV and/or public housing program and submits the necessary personal documentation including Social Security cards and birth certificates for all household members. The household then participates in an intake briefing. For people experiencing homelessness, this process may prove particularly challenging. They may need additional support or advocacy throughout the process because of potential communication barriers. People experiencing homelessness may not have a mailing address, as they typically do not have a stable residence. They may also face technological barriers if they do not have a computer or smart phone or consistent internet access, especially with the virtual shifts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, criminal history screenings and credit checks may mean that people experiencing homelessness are particularly likely to be denied assistance, unless the PHA is convinced that there are mitigating circumstances.

To help people experiencing homelessness navigate the PHA application process, many homeless service provider staff are actively supporting people through this process. The graphic illustrates a how a case manager can help a person experiencing homelessness through the process. In this model, the application process begins with a case manager helping the applicant assemble needed documentation, including birth certificates, Social Security cards, and driver's licenses (as relevant), as well as income verification for all household members. The case manager from the homeless services system then helps the applicant complete the PHA application and sends both the application and the documentation to the PHA. Once the PHA receives this paperwork, intake staff review the application and perform a background check on each household member over 18 years of age to ensure that they are eligible for housing. The case manager then helps the household schedule their PHA interview and intake briefing and often attends the meeting to offer additional support. After the briefing, the household receives approval to move into a public housing unit or is issued a voucher to begin the lease-up process.

Continuum of Care (CoC) providers

Case manager helps applicant assemble documentation → Case manager helps household in completing PHA application → Case manager sends application and documentation to PHA

PHA reviews household application and completes background check to determine eligibility → Case manager helps household schedule and attend PHA interview and intake briefing → Household receives a voucher and begins lease-up process or moves into public housing

Public Housing Agency (PHA)

This subject guide provides suggestions for how a PHA can support people experiencing homelessness through their application process. It identifies common barriers facing people experiencing homelessness during the application process and suggests several strategies for easing the burden of completing the application and simplifying the application process overall. The guide highlights best practices and offers examples of current PHA practices related to the application process, beginning when a household is referred to the PHA for housing assistance through when they are admitted to the HCV or public housing program and ready to begin the lease-up process or move into a public housing unit.[1]

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[1] While this guide focuses on practices that help people experiencing homelessness through the application process, those practices may benefit other households applying for PHA assistance.

Understanding the PHA Application Process

PHAs offer different types of housing assistance, some of which may be reserved for people experiencing homelessness, either because they are special programs or because the PHA has adopted homelessness as a local preference to its waiting list. Applicants for housing assistance may not understand the differences between the various PHA programs, how they operate, and their eligibility criteria. When working with people experiencing homelessness, PHA staff should explain the types of assistance and the requirements for participating in each program for which they are eligible. During the application process, PHA staff should also review any case management or housing navigation support that is available, as well as how the process for leasing up with a voucher or moving into a public housing or other project-based housing unit will work. It is critical to explain the scarcity of housing assistance available so that applicants do not decline assistance from one program in the hopes of receiving another.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs can offer training to homeless service provider staff about how the HCV and public housing programs operate, as well as any special programs administered by the PHA and available to people experiencing homelessness. This will help ensure that homeless service provider case managers are setting realistic expectations around their participant's likelihood of receiving assistance as well as program requirements. Since homeless services case managers may turn over frequently, the PHA should consider recording the training so that new staff can view it as part of their onboarding process.

Barriers to Completing the PHA Application

People experiencing homelessness may face multiple barriers that make it difficult to begin and then complete the application process for both the HCV and PH programs.

- **Missing personal identification documents.** People experiencing homelessness often do not have the types of identification needed to complete the PHA application process. Frequent moves or periods of unsheltered homelessness make it challenging to keep personal possessions. Thus, people experiencing homelessness may not possess the necessary documentation to complete the application—for example, their birth certificates and those of their children or other household members, driver's licenses, and Social Security cards. Homeless service provider case managers often will help applicants obtain new copies of these documents. However, waiting for these documents can delay the application process.

- **Documenting homeless status.** Documenting homeless status can be difficult but is necessary if the applicant is trying to qualify for a program limited to (or with a preference for) people experiencing homelessness.

BEST PRACTICE

Make sure that local homeless service providers are aware of what personal identification documents are needed to complete a PHA application.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs can consider accepting different types of documentation to verify a person's homeless status. Some PHAs that receive referrals through the CoC's coordinated entry system consider the referral to be documentation of a person's homeless status. Other PHAs may request certification from homeless service providers with knowledge of the individual's homelessness status. Some PHAs may allow a person to self-report their homelessness status, especially if they do not have other sources of verification. Accepting several options for documentation of homeless status may lower a barrier for someone experiencing homelessness to receive assistance.

- **Inconsistent or no mailing address.** People currently experiencing homelessness often do not have a permanent mailing address. Many PHAs communicate with applicants throughout the application process by mail. Application instructions and materials are often mailed. Lack of an address may prevent people experiencing homelessness from receiving important information about the status of their application.

> **EXAMPLE:** The *Housing Authority of the City of Austin* now has a "paperless" application process.[2] This means that application paperwork is filled out online. Many PHAs adopted paperless application process in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to limit the amount of person-to-person contact. Homeless service provider case managers or applicants receive the PHA application directly via email and complete it on a computer or other electronic device. The complete application and supporting documentation are then returned electronically to the PHA for processing.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs can use electronic signature software to streamline the process of signing paperwork and reduce the time necessary to mail paperwork back and forth between the PHA, homeless services case manager, and participant. These moves towards reducing the amount of physical paperwork necessary to apply for housing started to eliminate in-person contact during COVID, but many PHAs are experiencing the benefits of reduced paper forms and more streamlined communication

- **Limited access to technology.** People experiencing homelessness may not have regular access to the internet via a computer or cell phone. They also may not have a consistent telephone number. This may make it extremely challenging to stay in regular contact with the PHA to get updates on their application if the PHA has moved to a paperless application that must be completed electronically, it may be difficult for someone experiencing homelessness to access the internet to do so.

> **EXAMPLE:** In Austin, case managers from the *Downtown Austin Community Court (DACC)* offer hands-on support throughout the PHA application process to people who may be experiencing serious psychological and mental health issues. For people who are unable to complete significant amounts of paperwork, make phone calls, or send emails, the case managers can complete the online PHA pre-application packet without the applicant present as long as the case manager obtained release of information (ROI) consent from the applicant. This helps expedite the process and can overcome some of the barriers.

BEST PRACTICE

Homeless service case managers are an essential resource for helping people experiencing homelessness who do not have consistent access to technology apply for housing assistance. Case managers who understand the PHA application process can assist with completing some of the paperwork for the applicant, which may expedite the completion a household's application and avoid back and forth with the household and PHA intake staff. With the proper release of information (ROI) consent from the applicant, case managers may even be able to complete some basic paperwork without the participant in the room.

BEST PRACTICE

The PHA should assign specific staff to work with the CoC/CE staff. This designated staffing can help build relationships between the two organizations and facilitate more information sharing.

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[2] Alternative methods of completing a PHA application such as online or paperless applications are subject to accessibility requirements for person with disabilities (Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act) and limited English proficiency, as well as people needing reasonable accommodations to complete the application process.

Streamlining the Application Process for People Experiencing Homelessness

The PHA application process can be simplified to reduce the burden on people experiencing homelessness. A lengthy application packet and complex submission process may deter people experiencing homelessness from completing or even attempting the application process without some type of support. Some people experiencing homelessness may have low literacy levels, language barriers, or physical or mental health challenges that make it difficult to complete a long, complex application. Simplifying the application process may involve changing the process through which the PHA receives applications, the length and content of the application, or the supports available to people experiencing homelessness in navigating the process.

Receive referrals directly from the homeless services system. Instead of requiring people experiencing homelessness to apply for PHA housing assistance on their own, some PHAs receive referrals directly from their local CoC's coordinated entry (CE) system, emergency shelter staff, or other homeless service providers. This can facilitate a warm handoff from the case manager at the homeless provider to the PHA intake staff. By using a CE system, PHAs can prioritize based on whether applicants experiencing homelessness are the most likely to succeed in the HCV and public housing programs or would need supportive services that will be linked to the housing program. Using a CE system is one way of designing and implementing a PHA's local preferences for people experiencing homelessness. Such preferences may be "general," putting people experiencing homelessness before others on the waiting list, or they can be "limited," in effect creating a set-aside for people referred from CE or a particular service provider. (For more information, please see [Establishing Waiting List Preferences and Programs Specifically for People Experiencing Homelessness](#).) Referrals can also be useful in sharing data and knowledge about the applicant such as case notes or history of supportive services.

Simplify the PHA application process. A PHA can conduct a reassessment of its application process to look for opportunities to simplify it. Streamlining the information requested can ease the burden for the applicant. PHAs can also partner with other PHAs in the same region to produce a common application. This would reduce the burden for households and homeless services system case managers associated with submitting applications to multiple PHAs. However, PHAs must ensure that they are still requesting the information necessary to determine an applicant's eligibility in accordance with HUD regulations.

It may be possible to condense the intake and briefing meetings so they can occur on the same day. This strategy would reduce the number of times the applicant needs to come into the office. Alternatively, if the process is virtual, the applicant would need to have technology access for one session instead of two or more.

> **EXAMPLE:** *MaineHousing* collaborated with other Maine PHAs to develop a single universal application that can be used to apply to all PHAs in the state. This streamlined universal application asks for less information than their previous applications. Having a single application allows homeless people to complete one application and maximize their opportunities to receive long-term housing assistance through a PHA.

> **EXAMPLE:** The *San Diego Housing Commission* streamlined its HCV application, reducing the number of questions asked. That reduced the number of pages by half, to about 15 pages. This streamlining followed a review of the application requirements that looked for redundancies and requests for information that was not essential.

Partner with homeless service provider staff throughout the application process: PHAs should seek out opportunities to partner with case managers from homeless service providers to help guide people experiencing homelessness through the application process. Homeless service provider case managers usually have an established rapport with the person experiencing homelessness. This rapport may help the case manager keep in touch with the applicant, help the applicant gather the necessary identification documents, and schedule the intake and briefing.

Involvement of the service provider case manager can ease the burden on PHA staff, as well as provide needed support to the person experiencing homelessness.

EXAMPLE: For its HAVEN programs that serve people experiencing homelessness by linking voucher holders with service providers, *Atlanta Housing* has dedicated intake staff. These dedicated staff provide support throughout the application and lease up process, and have established relationships with the staff at local homeless providers and the Atlanta CoC. They also have extensive knowledge of challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness, allowing them to better help the applicants with common challenges. HAVEN intake staff have smaller than typical caseloads to facilitate a higher level of support for people experiencing homelessness during the intake process.

While HAVEN applicants must submit an eligibility packet to Atlanta Housing 48 hours before the intake appointment and briefing, Atlanta Housing does not wait until the household is confirmed eligible to issue the voucher. Atlanta Housing issues a preliminary voucher as soon as the applicant completes the intake meeting and briefing so that the individual or family can begin to search for a unit as soon as possible. If the applicant completes the eligibility and background check process and the applicant is approved, they can continue with the lease-up process. If the applicant is denied because of the background check or other suitability issues, they can no longer look for a unit. However, since they are in the CE system, the household is brought back to a case conference to determine whether they may be eligible for a different housing or homeless assistance program.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs can designate specific staff to work with applicants who are currently experiencing homelessness. These specialized staff can be intake workers for particular programs or staff who operate across the PHA's programs. Assigning the same staff to work with people experiencing homelessness will develop expertise at the PHA and enable efficient communication with case managers at homeless service providers. Specialized PHA staff may develop a deep understanding of barriers facing people experiencing homelessness and identify ways to help this population to complete the application process. Dedicated PHA staff may develop relationships that facilitate collaboration with staff at the local CoC or homeless service providers.

BEST PRACTICE

PHAs should consider hosting regular in-person events to bring HCV and public housing applicants, homeless service system case managers, and PHA intake staff together. Uniting these stakeholders in a single location offers a unique opportunity to leverage knowledge and expertise and complete the application process more efficiently.

EXAMPLE: In San Diego, the *San Diego Housing Commission* and the CoC, the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, sponsor housing fairs. These in-person events bring people experiencing homelessness, case managers from homeless service providers, property managers and PHA intake workers together to expedite the application and lease-up process for Permanent Supportive Housing units. During the event, all parties work together to make sure that each household's housing packet that includes all the required PHA paperwork is completed by the end of the day. A normal application completion process can take weeks or months and can involve multiple rounds of communication between these entities to ensure the application is complete. In addition to expediting the application process, the event also builds trust between the partner organizations and between the applicants and PHA staff. It also strengthens the connections of the PHA and local homeless service provider staff, and this could result in further collaboration and cooperation in other aspects of the housing process.

Revise the criminal background screening process: PHAs can revisit their criminal background screening process to determine whether any of the existing screening criteria can be modified or eliminated. Because PHAs have the authority to establish additional screening criteria beyond what is required by HUD, PHAs can update their criminal screening criteria to determine suitability of applicants. Some additional requirements established by PHAs may exclude people experiencing homelessness, who often have criminal histories. By modifying their criminal screening process and applying it consistently, PHAs can help to ensure that people experiencing homelessness and other families with the similar challenges are not barred from participating in the HCV and public housing programs.

> **EXAMPLE:** The *Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA)* shortened its lookback period for criminal history in their HCV program from five years to three years and is now implementing a one-year lookback period. Prior to 2017, LACDA prohibited program admission to their HCV program for "applicant(s) currently engaging in, or who have engaged in criminal activities" where criminal activities were defined as "(a) drug-related criminal activity; (b) violent criminal activity; and (c) other criminal activity." In 2017, LACDA revised their administrate plan removing these prohibitions, instead focusing on HUD's requirements for the HCV program that relate to violent crimes, people who are selling or manufacturing drugs, and sex offenders.[3] LACDA aligned its criminal screening with the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA), further simplifying the application process and removing a potential barrier to housing assistance faced by people experiencing homelessness.

Changes to Application Processes Due to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic led many public housing authorities to modify their traditional application and intake processes to safeguard public health. Some PHAs have altered steps of the process that would traditionally take place in large or crowded rooms, require significant face-to-face interaction, or otherwise amplify the risk of spreading COVID-19. Some PHAs may keep these new procedures after the pandemic ends, as they introduced efficiencies and enhanced collaboration.[4]

Some PHAs moved large portions of the application process to virtual platforms. For example, some PHAs implemented virtual briefings, through either pre-recorded video or a live teleconference. This way, applicants do not need to attend in-person briefing sessions (either individually or in groups) that would typically occur in an office or gathering space. Retaining virtual briefings post-pandemic could be beneficial to people experiencing homelessness, who may have health challenges that make participating in a group briefing difficult. Virtual briefings also reduce the transportation burden and childcare challenges associated with traveling to the PHA office. Some applicants may be employed during the day and struggle to visit the PHA during working hours. However, conducting the briefing virtually may not provide the same level of support as an in-person briefing, as it may be reassuring to meet and interact with PHA staff face-to-face and ask specific questions.

Many PHAs are now using Zoom or other videoconferencing software to complete intake appointments. Like virtual briefings, virtual intake meetings may relieve transportation and childcare barriers but also may be difficult for people without regular access to videoconferencing devices or the internet. Moving forward, PHA staff may consider offering applicants the option of completing appointments virtually or in-person.

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3 HUD requires that PHAs deny assistance in the following cases: (1) any member of a household has been evicted from federally assisted housing in the last three years for drug-related criminal activity; (2) if the PHA determines that any household member is currently engaged in the use of illegal drugs; (c) the PHA has reasonable cause to believe that any household's member's drug or alcohol use may threaten the health, safety, or right to peaceful enjoyment of other residents; (d) any household member has ever been convicted of drug-related criminal activity or production or manufacture of methamphetamine on the premise of federally assisted housing; or (e) any household (13 years of age or older) is subject to lifetime registration requirements of a state sext offender registration program.

4 The alternative methods of completing a PHA application introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic still had to meet the accessibility requirements for person with disabilities (Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act) and limited English proficiency, as well as people needing reasonable accommodations to complete the application process.

Several PHAs have found the use of electronic signature software to be exceptionally useful and may continue to utilize it after the pandemic subsides. This software can save a lot of time and can reduce the amount of back-and-forth communication between intake workers, case managers, and applicants. While the use of this type of software may be beneficial to some applicants, it may be a burden to others, depending heavily on their personal comfort with and access to technology. PHA intake workers should communicate with case managers to help overcome any communication barriers and ensure that people experiencing homelessness are able to complete all paperwork.

When helping people experiencing homelessness through the application process, it is important to keep in mind that they are generally used to face-to-face communication with homeless service provider staff. If they cannot see the facial expressions and body language of the PHA intake worker, they may not feel as comfortable with sharing their situation and potential barriers to accessing and maintaining housing. Forging trust is always important when working with people experiencing homelessness, and it may be more challenging to build this trust when using virtual platforms. PHA staff should remain flexible in their approach to completing the application process based on the need and preferences of the applicant household.