



## PHA GUIDE TO HELPING PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS USE HOUSING VOUCHERS

### Background

Once issued a housing voucher, people who don't already have a place to live may have difficulty using that voucher within the local rental market. People who are experiencing homelessness may find it challenging to find available rental units that meet program standards, and which are managed by landlords who are willing to accept tenants with housing vouchers. This can be especially challenging if they have health and behavioral health conditions, poor credit, histories of contact with the criminal justice system, or prior evictions.

With some extra help, vulnerable people can successfully use vouchers to obtain housing and exit homelessness. For example, some PHAs and their service-provider organization partners have worked together to streamline the housing search process and provided assistance to make it easier for people who are experiencing homelessness to use their vouchers.

Recent studies indicate that nearly a third of households fail to successfully use their voucher to lease a unit, meaning that many of the households that have been issued vouchers are unable to use them within the timeframe allowed by the program. Vouchers are then often returned to the PHA who will provide them to another household instead. Successfully using a voucher is generally more difficult in tight rental markets with [high costs and low vacancy rates](#).

To address this problem, many PHAs have implemented strategies to improve voucher utilization success rates. Strategies that have been particularly effective include:

- Establishing ongoing relationships with landlords or property management firms that control a significant number of rental units, informing them about how the voucher program works and the support services that will be available to program participants, engaging them as partners, and establishing a track record of supporting successful tenancies.

- Reaching out to landlords who have other tenants who are voucher holders, and asking them to share information about vacancies that can be made available to people experiencing homelessness;
- Expediting the approval process by assigning dedicated staff and completing several tasks simultaneously, rather than waiting to complete one step in the process before starting another one;
- Pre-inspecting apartments that can be made available for prospective tenants (see [HUD VASH Plus](#) or [Pathways to Housing](#)).

Some PHAs have established partnerships with organizations that provide services to people with disabilities, low-income households, and people experiencing homelessness in order to provide additional help to people who may face particular challenges in using housing vouchers. These PHAs may rely on their service partners to help people use vouchers to find housing. Successful strategies include:

- Hiring housing specialists, with a background in real estate or housing, who can assist people with housing search, provide coaching about where to look for housing and how to talk to potential landlords (see [Leading the Way III](#), [Supportive Housing for Families Program](#), the [Project H3 Vets Initiative](#), and the [Homeless Outreach and Stabilization Team](#));
- Providing training for households about the rights and responsibilities of tenancy, and offering a certificate for completion of a [“ready to rent” program](#); and
- Other strategies, including those described above, to establish and maintain strong relationships with landlords (see [Homestart](#), [Pathways to Housing](#), [VASH Plus](#), and [Housing First](#) programs).

Strategies that streamline the process for using a housing voucher can be particularly important for engaging people experiencing chronic homelessness with an offer of housing that is available as soon as possible after the time a vulnerable person expresses acceptance of such a housing opportunity, rather than weeks or even months later.

To be even more successful in serving people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, a PHA can work in partnership with other organizations that may be able to offer short-term, interim housing opportunities. By providing a place for a person to stay while completing the housing search process, partner organizations can help make it possible for people to utilize their vouchers more efficiently.

### **Where Can PHAs Do This?**

All PHAs that administer housing vouchers can take steps to make it easier for individuals and families experiencing or most at risk of homelessness to successfully use those vouchers. Partnerships between PHAs and community-based organizations can be used to expand PHAs’ capacity to implement effective strategies.

### **Who Can PHAs Assist?**

All people experiencing or most at risk of homelessness often need help to use housing vouchers, particularly in communities with tight rental markets and low vacancy rates, in homes or apartments that meet voucher program standards for housing quality and are available for rent at the fair market rent level. Strategies for helping people use housing vouchers are also important for

veterans who are eligible for assistance through the HUD-VASH program, which provides housing vouchers administered by PHAs linked to services provided by VA Medical Centers.

## Additional Resources

- [Housing Search and Move-In Assistance](#)
- [Streamlining Access to Housing](#) from the USICH Solutions database
- [HUD-VASH Best Practices – Version 1.0](#), a working document from HUD
- The 100,000 Homes Campaign has provided a [sample job description of a housing search specialist](#) on their website. [Housing Search Assistance Toolkit](#), 2007, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Homelessness Resource Exchange
- [Rapid Re-Housing for Homeless Populations: Program and Community Strategies for Recruiting Private-Market Landlords & Overcoming Housing Barriers](#), December 2010. Beyond Shelter, HomeStart, Inc. and National Center on Housing and Child Welfare

### Examples

- The **Des Moines Housing Authority** worked with the Veterans Administration to create a flyer about the HUD-VASH program and mailed it with monthly checks to landlords who were already leasing units to participants in the regular voucher program. The flyer included a description of the supportive services provided by VA case managers to help Veterans be successful tenants.
- Instead of having one department of a PHA complete the inspection to ensure an apartment meets housing quality standards and having another department negotiate rent reasonableness with a landlord, the **Long Beach Housing Authority** allows both the inspection and rent reasonableness determination to be completed at the same time. The PHA estimates that this eliminates 21 days from the leasing process for HUD-VASH.
- As part of the 100,000 Homes Campaign of Community Solutions, a national non-profit organization, organized housing placement “boot camps” to help PHAs, VA Medical Centers, and their partners map out the current housing placement process and the time required to complete each step. In a collaborative brainstorming session, the agencies re-designed the process by streamlining or combining activities and reducing steps in order to help Veterans experiencing homelessness move into housing faster.