

Effective Property Management Engagement Strategies:

Addressing the Housing Needs of
Individuals with Serious Mental
Illness, Substance Use Disorders, and
Co-occurring Disorders

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Introduction

For individuals with behavioral health needs who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, the success of a supportive housing program depends in part upon the availability of high-quality affordable housing options. Successfully engaging property management and identifying available and affordable rental units requires a strategic approach, informed by local opportunities and available resources.

Behavioral health and homeless service providers can cultivate effective partnerships that address the needs and perspectives of property management while also meeting the needs of people experiencing homelessness. This issue brief covers the following:

- identifying service providers' strengths and resources that will appeal to property management,
- developing an agency "pitch,"
- identifying existing rental industry networks or initiating a network where none exists, and
- formalizing the property management-provider partnership.

With this information, behavioral health and homeless service providers will be better able to engage and retain property management partners to aid in the swift identification of rental units in their communities, ultimately optimizing the health and wellness of those who are served.

The Property Management Perspective

Whether a potential housing unit is operated by a private property owner or within a for-profit, nonprofit, or affordable housing property, managers generally have the same concerns in selecting tenants:

- Will the tenant pay their rent in full and on time every month?
- Will the tenant take care of their apartment, keeping it clean and pest-free?
- Will the tenant be a good neighbor?

Property management will have these questions for every applicant but will be especially concerned about applicants who have housing barriers. In a strong rental

Terminology: "Landlord" and "Property Manager"

In this brief, we use the term "property management/manager" instead of "landlord." Landlord typically refers to the owner of the unit, while property management is the entity leasing the unit and maintaining day-to-day operations. While in some instances these two can be the same person or company, the rental industry uses the term "property management" to describe the functions of the role most pertinent to this brief.



market, one in which a property manager likely has many applicants from which to choose, applicants with housing barriers will have difficulty meeting the tenant selection criteria for housing units.

How Service-Provider Support Can Make the Difference

Programs across the country have demonstrated efficacy in helping people experiencing homelessness with mental and substance use disorders to address their housing barriers, gain access to the rental market, and sustain their tenancies. Because they may have extremely low incomes and/or rely on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), securing rental assistance is critical. Rental assistance can be covered by a variety of federal and local sources (e.g., the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Continuum of Care, housing choice vouchers). For more details on federal housing programs, see [*Applying New COVID-19-Related Funding to Address the Housing Needs of Individuals with Serious Mental Illness, Substance Use Disorders, and Co-occurring Disorders*](#).

How each local program achieves success in housing this population depends on its resources and capacity. Here are some strategies that different agencies have found effective:

- **Provide financial incentives.** Offering property managers incentives, such as lease-signing bonuses or extra security deposits, may increase their willingness to lease housing units to the people your agency serves.
- **Make a “rent readiness” program available.** Programs such as [*Ready to Rent*](#) provide a successful model in educating individuals on their responsibilities as new tenants; presenting certificates of completion to property managers may reassure them.
- **Utilize a sponsor-based leasing model.** Allowing the provider to lease the unit and then sublease it to the tenant under a sponsor-based model provides increased assurance to property management that the full monthly rent payment will be made consistently.
- **Target services to support timely payment of tenant portions.** Providing regular reminders and check-ins with tenants can help ensure that their rent portion, should they have one, is paid in a timely manner.
- **Assign staff to be a direct point of contact for property management.** Providing a single point of contact for property management ensures consistent communication to address property management concerns; determining and communicating response-time expectations to property management is a key element.

When property managers are concerned about a tenant’s capacity to care for their apartment, such as when the tenant has a history of damages or hoarding or has not previously leased their own apartment, a provider can help the tenant with onsite skills training and can regularly visit the unit to assess its condition. Regular in-person check-ins will also allow the provider to support the tenant in making requests for repairs when needed.

Common Housing Barriers

- Little to no rental history
- Poor rental history including but not limited to evictions
- Poor credit history
- Prior legal system involvement



Building rapport with property managers is essential to successful partnerships. Trust is developed over time by establishing what property managers can expect from service providers and then following up with consistent reliability and timely responsiveness. By delivering reliable and responsive supports to tenants, service providers are better able to identify housing opportunities for those who might otherwise be deemed risky due to poor rental history or other housing barriers. This rapport and trust reassure property managers that service providers will be there if issues arise.

Assemble the Property Management Engagement Toolbox

Now that you understand property management’s perspective, it is time for you to inventory the agency and community resources available to help service recipients access and maintain housing and address property managers’ potential concerns. Together, supportive services, rental assistance, and your “provider pitch” will make up your property management engagement toolbox.

As you begin to develop your local strategy, consider opportunities to incorporate the best range of housing choices possible for those you are serving. Access to fresh food, public transportation, high-performing schools, and employment opportunities can all aid in someone’s wellness. Work to design strategies that will facilitate access to multiple housing types (e.g., apartments, single-family homes, duplexes, RVs) in all areas or neighborhoods of your community.



Inventory Your Available Resources

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

Behavioral health and homeless service providers assist people to both secure and to maintain their housing. Supports to maintain housing include coaching on how to be a good neighbor, how to care for a unit, and how to ensure rental payments are made in a timely manner. This coaching is appealing to property managers because it supports tenants in abiding by their lease and ensures that the property owner is able to maintain their assets.

Begin by taking an inventory of the portfolio of services your agency or program provides, as well as services you can access through an “established referral pathway”—a formal or informal network of community resources to which your agency has access. By highlighting this service inventory for property managers, you may discover that they are more willing to partner with your organization as they are assured you will be there if things become challenging with their tenant. Describe how your agency assesses tenants for potential housing barriers related to monthly income, rental history, credit history, legal history, and other factors. Collecting this information in advance of a rental application assures property managers that you are considering only qualified applicants for available units.

A list of supportive services that may be available to their tenant could include any of those listed in Table 1 below. The list should also include details about the frequency and duration of supportive services offered and should specify whether these will be offered by your organization or a community resource.



Table 1: Sample Supportive Services Checklist

Supportive Service	Frequency	Duration	Internal Service	Community Resource
Assessment of Potential Housing Barriers				
Budgeting and Financial Literacy				
Housekeeping and Skills Training				
Access to Food Pantry				
Routine Health and Safety Checks				
Behavioral Health Services				
Medication Management				
Home Health Services				
Employment and Income Support Services				
Landlord Mediation				
Single Point of Contact for Property Managers				

RENTAL ASSISTANCE

Financial assistance, in the form of tenant-based subsidies and/or rental assistance provided by public housing agencies or local nonprofits, is fundamental in supporting the efforts of those with mental and substance use disorders to achieve financial stability. Rental assistance is also appealing to property management partners as it translates to stable rental income. However, the requirements of rental assistance can be confusing and overwhelming. Your agency's inventory should include supports available to assist property managers in understanding how specific rental assistance is administered and in navigating administrative requirements. To develop this skill set, you might select one staff person or team that is allotted time and training to better understand rental assistance program requirements. You could also



consider developing robust FAQs on program requirements, sample forms, and other materials for staff to easily access when needed.

Administrative Requirements

Rental assistance is typically accompanied by substantial documentation requirements. Common documentation requirements include “[Request for Tenancy Approval](#)” [PDF] and “[Housing Assistance Payment](#)” [PDF] contracts. These requirements can vary by jurisdiction. The agency or public housing authority administering the rental assistance will have more details on its specific requirements. These requirements may be unfamiliar and require staff to complete additional steps in leasing their units. Consider offering to sit side by side with property management staff while completing the required documentation to answer questions and offer clarity.

Become well versed on details of rental payments. Inventory the date rental assistance will be provided and ensure that it complies with the terms of the lease. Additionally, inventory the transaction types available. Some rental assistance providers only distribute assistance in the form of paper checks, while some may also have electronic transfer options.

Inspections

Rental assistance programs typically require some form of physical inspection of the desired unit and may include a more comprehensive inspection of a multifamily development as a whole. This process may be unfamiliar to property managers and may occasionally result in an immediate termination of the lease if units or buildings don’t meet habitability standards. Consider conducting a pre-inspection on the desired unit to aid in identifying potential concerns or reasons for a failed inspection. Pre-inspections can help to alleviate rental loss incurred by property managers and can assist service providers in ensuring that the desired unit is safe and decent for tenancy.

Common Federal Inspection Requirements

Housing quality standards govern most subsidy programs administered by Public Housing Authorities, including the Housing Choice Voucher program. Both administrative and unit inspection requirements vary among different administrators of rental assistance. If you choose to further invest in developing this skill set, ask your Public Housing Authority to recommend training opportunities.

CREATE YOUR PITCH

Following a thorough inventory of supports available to a household, service providers can begin to build their unique pitch to potential property management partners. As the individual pitch or negotiation tactic is built, exercise caution in using jargon or language specific to the behavioral health and homeless service provider profession. Successful property management engagement strategies integrate vocabulary and jargon more common to the rental industry to build rapport and support effective communication. Developing productive relationships with property managers can be challenging, particularly in highly competitive rental markets, so taking time to build relationships is important.

ACTIVATE THE PROPERTY MANAGEMENT ENGAGEMENT TOOLBOX

When speaking with leasing agents or property managers and beginning negotiation to access an available



rental unit, turn to the inventory of your programmatic strengths, including both supportive services and financial assistance, to foster a strategic conversation. This can be a more effective starting place than beginning the conversation by highlighting the need to comply with rental assistance requirements or with the tenant's potential housing barriers.

Construct a brief pitch to help guide the introductory conversation with potential property management partners. As you might with a new program participant, begin the conversation by establishing a relationship, through active listening skills, curious questions, and acknowledgement of common ground. Remember that successful property management engagement is based primarily on establishing strong rapport with the property manager. Consider how you might describe your profession and the work you do to friends and family who work in other fields. For example, when considering your choice of language, instead of saying "behavioral health services," explain that you work with people to connect them to needed resources, like food, employment, and disability benefits.

Exercise discretion when describing support service eligibility or individual disability status for members of the tenant household. Avoid tokenizing households receiving services and setting them up for potential retraumatization by sharing their history. Instead, rely primarily on the strengths of your professional and interpersonal skill sets and the resources made accessible to the household receiving services. Avoid property engagement tactics that require the household receiving services to recount their personal story to property management.

Focus your pitch on how you can help overcome a specific household's housing barriers or reasons that they may not meet the property manager's tenant screening criteria. For example, if the household's primary barrier is a lack of rental history, focus your discussion on the specific rental assistance the household will be receiving. Describe the concrete continuity of the funding available and the funding's ability to accommodate potential fluctuation in the household's income. For example, a household enrolled in a typical Housing Choice Voucher program will pay 30 to 40 percent of their income toward rent. This calculation is designed to fluctuate as the household's income fluctuates, ensuring continued affordability for the household. You can also describe any employment services or budgeting skills training available to the household. If you encounter continued resistance, use your [motivational interviewing](#) [PDF] training and consider modifications you may be able to make in your service package to accommodate a property manager's expressed reservations. For example, offer to personally assist the household in acquiring a money order for their tenant portion a day before rent is due, and then accompany them to submit their payment.

Formalize Roles and Responsibilities of the Partnership

Many communities use a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to outline the expectations between

Supporting Applicants in Being Their Own Advocates

Program participants may choose to navigate their housing search and application process independently. As a supportive service provider, you can help a household prepare for this process. Role-playing the conversation with the leasing agent or property manager can foster confidence and skill development in clear communication and negotiation. Individuals may benefit from having a document that describes supports available to them from your agency, which may aid in educating potential property managers.



property managers, the behavioral health and/or homeless service provider agency, and other community partners committed to supporting tenants. These documents can help clarify specifics of the agreed-upon partnership. Components of an MOU might include the following:

- Contact information for all parties, including a point of contact at the behavioral health agency and/or homeless service provider agency and their available hours
- Expected response time from service provider agency and property manager (e.g., 24/7 or next business day)
- Regularly scheduled meeting between agency and property management
- Commitment to make available units known to the service provider agency before marketing to the broader community
- Lowered tenant screening requirements
- Acceptance of promissory notes for application fees and security deposits

To increase the number of units you have access to, set up agreements that help property managers optimize their work. One way to do this is making arrangements that minimize rental earning losses. In highly competitive rental markets, it is difficult for a property manager to justify to the property owner any days when a unit is not occupied. Loss of rental income due to a vacant unit is commonly called “vacancy loss” in the rental industry. If you want greater access to a specific property manager’s portfolio, consider asking them to set aside a certain number of units in perpetuity for your program; in exchange, establish a guaranteed maximum vacancy time to help minimize any vacancy loss for property managers. This particular tactic may require your program to pay for unoccupied rentals for a period in cases where occupancy does not transition quickly from one individual or family to the next, but it will expand and help ensure continuity of your program’s rental options.

Sustaining Tenancies

Successful relationships with property managers not only benefit your program participants who are looking for apartments but can also potentially help prevent evictions for others housed at a property. Because your agency will likely know about available community resources from which other tenants can also benefit, your expertise will offer an added value to property managers. As your agency becomes known for these resources and referral channels, property managers may further promote working with your program participants.

Identifying Local Partnership Opportunities

Your pitch is ready to go! How can you identify property management companies that might be open to developing a mutually beneficial relationship?

To build a successful property management engagement strategy, first assess any existing local partnership opportunities. Each community has its own strengths and existing networks that homeless and behavioral health providers can tap into, and through which they may find partners.

Tapping into existing efforts aimed at engaging the rental industry may be the most strategic starting point in building capacity to support households in accessing rental opportunities.



- Contact your local [Public Housing Authority](#) (PHA) to learn of any existing property management engagement initiatives. Many PHAs have developed and sustained networks of rental industry professionals.
- Contact your local [Continuum of Care](#) (CoC) to learn of property engagement strategies designed to support the homeless response system. Your local CoC may also offer trainings and resources to support skill development in property manager engagement.

If you are unable to identify an existing network, your organization may need to initiate one. In addition to reaching out to PHAs and CoCs to identify “friendly” management companies, a partnership with a local realtor, broker, or apartment locator may also prove fruitful in fostering connections to rental industry partners that are marketing units within sought-after lower rental ranges. These professionals are typically paid by the property management partner or leasing agent seeking to identify qualified applicants and so do not charge the applicant themselves.

Consider also engaging in direct dialogue and negotiation with a local trade organization targeted at the market-rate rental industry. In many communities, this may be the local affiliate of the [National Apartment Association](#). Relationship development and management are key when accessing the market-rate rental industry.

Tools and Resources

Federal funders and national partners maintain and continue to develop resources to bolster community efforts to effectively engage rental industry partners. Below is a list of links to relevant resources that outline proven strategies, promising guidance, and community spotlights:

- [Landlord Engagement: Reset your Community’s Critical Partnerships During COVID Response](#) [PDF]
- [Rapid Re-Housing Landlord Benefits Checklist](#)
- [Landlord Marketing Letter](#) [Word document]
- “[Landlord Engagement](#),” United States Interagency Council on Homelessness
- [HCV Landlord Strategy Guidebook](#)

Special Considerations and Opportunities

Renter Protections

FEDERAL FAIR HOUSING ACT

The federal [Fair Housing Act](#) provides robust protections to members of protected classes, including people living with a disability. [Locate your state’s leadership related to tenant rights](#) or [legal advocates for the rights of people with disabilities](#); these organizations not only carry expertise in federal fair housing protections but will also incorporate state-level policy.



Reasonable Accommodations and Modifications

Individuals with disabilities may need to access protections granted under the Fair Housing Act. [Reasonable accommodations](#) are requests to alter practices or rules to allow for equal access for persons with disabilities, and reasonable modifications are physical alterations to a structure to allow for safe and full enjoyment of a space for persons with disabilities. Engaged service providers play a critical role in supporting individuals in accessing their rights. Local tenant rights organizations or legal advocates can assist in navigating the process of making requests to property managers under these protections.

Using Reasonable Accommodation to Help People with Disabilities Access and Sustain Housing

A reasonable accommodation is a change, exception, or adjustment to a rule, policy, practice, or service that may be necessary for a person with disabilities to have an equal opportunity to access and use their apartment. The Fair Housing Act requires that property owners and managers provide reasonable accommodations to eligible persons with disabilities. *Note that some types of properties are not covered by these requirements.*

Reasonable accommodations can help people with disabilities such as serious mental illness, substance use disorders, or co-occurring disorders to overcome barriers to housing, such as no or poor tenancy history, and to retain their housing if they incur lease violations. Take the following example:

- If a property management company requires applicants to come to the rental office in person, but the applicant has a disability that makes this difficult, a reasonable accommodation request can be made for a video appointment.
- If a property manager denies an applicant because of a poor landlord reference, but the person can demonstrate that their poor tenancy history is disability-related and is not likely to recur, they can appeal the denial and request an accommodation.

This is a complex area but can be a useful tool in your toolbox. For more information, see [Reasonable Accommodations and Modifications](#) and [Reasonable Modification in the Housing Choice Voucher Program](#).

Local Context

LOCAL PROTECTIONS

Many state and local jurisdictions have codified additional fair housing protection through the addition of protected classes. Examples include source of income, student status, and gender identity, among others. Connect with your local and state tenant rights organizations for more information.



System Coordination

LOCAL PROPERTY MANAGEMENT ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Local promising practices focus on the creation of a centralized or unified property management strategy. Given the extreme scarcity of available rental units in most communities, service providers may find the greatest success in working collaboratively, building a unified marketing campaign, and adhering to agreed-upon practices that govern all rental industry strategies and relationship management. [Open Doors](#) in Atlanta, Georgia offers an example of a successful system-level approach to property management engagement and unit identification.

Alternatively, many programs find success in dedicating a full-time position to property management engagement and unit acquisition strategies. Identifying property management companies and developing relationships is time-consuming and difficult to execute well if it is an add-on or afterthought to your core role and responsibilities. Communities that are successful in engaging property managers often have a dedicated single point of contact for them. If at all possible, developing and maintaining these relationships must be someone's primary job. In some communities, these positions are referred to as Landlord Outreach Specialists or Housing Navigators. Additionally, monitoring property manager satisfaction through regularly scheduled surveying can help service provider agencies modify their practices and retain strong relationships.

RESOURCES FOR PROPERTY MANAGEMENT PARTNERS

Rental industry stakeholders are often motivated to be strong partners in creating and sustaining healthy communities. Consider equipping your partners with resources that empower them to become fellow advocates and to address issues that may arise with any of their tenants. Examples include resources supporting the identification of domestic violence or trafficking and connection to relevant service providers, education on mental health first aid, and access to emergency rental assistance for households facing eviction proceedings, among others.

Express Your Appreciation

Property management can be a difficult and unrewarding field. Consider sending thank you notes, holiday cards, or other tokens of appreciation to reinforce the value of the partnership. Close your emails to property management with a note acknowledging their partnership in ending homelessness in your community. Hold a small appreciation event like an early morning breakfast or simply drop by with coffee and a snack in the afternoon. How often are you thanked for your hard work, and how did you feel when that occurred? Small acts to express your appreciation for property managers' assistance will be remembered.



Appendix A: Sample Landlord Letter

March 7, 2022

Rex Forester
Vice President
Excellent Management Company
123 Revere Street
Salem, Massachusetts 02116

Dear Mr. Forester:

I am writing to introduce myself and the organization Salem Regional Services (SRS). SRS is a nonprofit agency based in Salem that provides a broad range of services for very low-income individuals and families including those with disabilities and those who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Our services are aimed at helping people who have housing to maintain and sustain their tenancies and to help others to locate affordable housing.

SRS operates a number of different kinds of programs, including:

- 125 units of permanent supportive housing (affordable housing linked to services)
- In collaboration with the Salem Regional Housing Agency, we make referrals for housing choice vouchers, including Emergency Housing Vouchers and Mainstream vouchers
- In-home case management and case coordination for over 500 households in the Salem area

Our housing programs are very successful. Our permanent supportive housing program has a 93% retention rate. Over 450 of the 500 households receiving case management have lived in the community for an average of 3 years. We believe the high quality of and easy access to our supportive services is the primary reason for our success in helping people stay housed.

As I am sure you are aware, it has become more and more difficult to locate affordable housing in our region, even when our clients have good references and a voucher to cover market rent. I am hoping we can meet to discuss SRS's services in more detail and the potential opportunity to work together.

I will contact your office next week to discuss your availability to meet. I know you are very busy and thank you in advance for your time.

Best,

Abby Light

Program Manager



Appendix B: Property Management Letter Template

_____:

Thank you for joining us in the work to end homelessness!

Please keep this document in _____ file for ease of access.

Supportive Services

Primary Care Coordinator information:

Care Coordinator's name: _____

Care Coordinator's direct line: _____

Care Coordinator's email: _____

Hours and days available: _____

After-hours point of contact name and phone number: _____

Rental Assistance

Rental assistance provider: _____

Contact information: _____

Date payment will be made available: _____

Payment amount: \$ _____

Payment details: _____

Tenant portion: \$ _____

We look forward to supporting _____ in fulfilling the terms of their lease agreement with you. Please do not hesitate to reach out at any point. We will respond to all communication within _____

Thank you,





Learn More about the Homeless and Housing Resource Center

Providing high-quality, no-cost training for health and housing professionals in evidence-based practices that contributes to housing stability, recovery, and an end to homelessness.

Contact Us:

- hhrctraining.org
- info@hhrctraining.org

