

City of Portland Strategy

Housing Access & Stabilization:

Access & Stabilization Services

The goal of the program is to promote long-term housing stability by providing a continuum of services that assist individuals and families to locate, obtain, and maintain decent affordable housing; help eligible persons to qualify for benefits; and encourage private landlords to rent to households that do not meet standard tenant screening criteria.

General Housing Service Needs

Low-income households may face multiple barriers in locating, obtaining and maintaining decent affordable housing, including:

- Lack of income to pay monthly rent and utilities, etc.
- Lack of funds to pay initial move-in costs.
- Inability to meet tenant screening criteria, including criminal history, poor credit history and poor tenant history.
- Inability to locate appropriate housing (cannot find or doesn't know how to look).
- Inability to retain housing over time.
- Inability to maintain unit to required standards.
- Refusal to rent, discrimination in terms and conditions of tenancy or other impediments to Fair Housing.
- Landlord-tenant communication and tenant rights education and enforcement.
- Lack of documented resident status.

Specific Need for Benefits Eligibility Services

Many people transitioning out of homelessness have no income even though they have disabilities that would qualify them for federal benefit programs such as Social Security and Medicaid.

Specific Need for Fair Housing Services

The most recent Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing (AI) was completed in 2011. The full text of the AI and exhibits is available on line at www.portlandonline.com/phb/fairhousing.

Specific Need for Access, Placement & Retention Services

On average, 3,500 searches for housing are completed each week on www.housingconnections.org, illustrating the demand for an affordable housing locator.

There is a documented shortage of deeply affordable rental housing units. Formerly homeless people face additional barriers to rental housing because they are typically unable to meet standard rental criteria.

Access and Stabilization Program Description

The Access and Stabilization program area addresses barriers to locating, obtaining

and maintaining decent affordable housing. Program staff monitors the housing market and gathers data from service providers to determine the most significant barriers, and then fund programs to address those barriers. When necessary, existing programs are restructured to better address barriers. Housing Services activities that no longer meet current barriers, or are not meeting performance outcomes, are discontinued, and the resources are moved to fund services that address current needs.

Benefits Eligibility Services

Many of the most vulnerable people without housing have disabilities that make them eligible for federal benefits, including Social Security and Medicaid that could help pay for housing and support services. Successful programs demonstrating local and national best-practice assist individuals to quickly complete the benefits application and appeals process so they can access a sustaining income.

Fair Housing Services

PHB funds Fair Housing education and enforcement activities. PHB funds translation services to ensure that community members with limited English proficiency can participate in PHB's programs. www.HousingConnections.org is a web-based housing locator service that furthers fair housing by presenting a wide array of housing opportunities to all prospective tenants, without regard to protected class status. Assistance is available in a wide range of languages through 211info.

Access, Placement & Retention Services

PHB employs many access, placement and retention strategies. Housing Connections currently lists over 54,000 units in the four-county Portland-Vancouver metro region with a special focus on affordable, accessible and special needs units. Housing Connections includes a housing services database to assist households to find services that will help them obtain and maintain housing.

Shared Housing helps elderly and other low- and moderate-income people who cannot afford or do not want to live alone, to locate, evaluate, and select shared housing and living situations that meet their economic and social needs. Shared Housing will match people who wish to share their homes with people seeking a shared housing arrangement.

RentWell and the Risk Mitigation Pool are a set of programs that increase access to housing low-income households that have difficulty meeting the tenant screening criteria due to criminal history, poor credit history, and/or poor rental history. Both programs include access to a guarantee fund that provides some financial compensation to the landlord or property manager if the tenant damages the unit or vacates the unit without full payment. RentWell is focused on households that have participated in a training designed to help them be successful tenants.

The Risk Mitigation Pool assists housing providers to serve populations that face multiple barriers to housing. To participate in any of these programs, the housing provider must agree to use alternative screening criteria.

PHB funds a renter's rights hotline and tenant education. Tenants who understand their

rights and responsibilities may be in a better position to retain their housing.

Program Tools

Benefits Eligibility

The program offers assistance in qualifying for federal benefits, and appealing adverse determinations.

Fair Housing

- Education in fair housing rights and responsibilities
- Outreach to tenants and property owners/managers
- Enforcement of local, state and federal fair housing laws
- Testing for evidence of discrimination
- www.HousingConnections.org
- Translation services

Access, Placement and Retention

- www.HousingConnections.org housing locator
- ServicePoint, a web-based housing database
- 211 information and referral
- Shared housing
- RentWell tenant education
- Risk Mitigation Pool
- Renters' Rights Hotline for information and referral on tenant rights

Note that services provided specifically for people living with HIV/AIDS and their families are described in the HOPWA strategy.

Project Selection

PHB funds programs that:

- Streamline access to information about housing opportunities, rental assistance and service linkages.
- Have a proven ability to promote housing stability, particularly for households at 0-30 percent MFI.
- Provide services that affirmatively further fair housing and reduce disparities in access to housing opportunities.

PHB has used a variety of mechanisms to select Access & Stabilization projects and providers, including competitive Requests for Proposals and renewals of exiting contractors. PHB reviews each Housing Services project to determine whether the project meets these criteria. Services that do not meet these criteria will be discontinued or restructured, with changes reflected in the contractors' scope of work. In the event that a service is significantly restructured and/or the contractor is not performing, PHB will use a competitive Request for Proposals process to select a new contractor unless there is clearly only one contractor qualified to do the work. In an RFP process, the selection criteria will be included in the RFP materials.

Program Eligibility

Benefits eligibility services are available to individuals who appear to meet the eligibility criteria for federal benefit programs and are homeless or transitioning out of homelessness. Fair housing services are available to all persons, without regard to income.

HousingConnections.org is a web-based service that may be accessed by anyone with a computer. (Assistance is also available by phone in several languages to households without computer access.) However, only properties affordable to households with incomes at or below 80 percent MFI may be listed in the HousingConnections.org database.

Other housing services programs are generally open to households with incomes at or below 50 percent MFI. For some housing service programs, a household member may need to belong to a specific target population to be eligible.

Potential Barriers

Cuts in federal funding or changes to the formulae for entitlement grants would reduce the federal funds available to provide housing services. A tighter rental market with lower vacancy rates could reduce the willingness of property owners and managers to participate in programs like RentWell or the Risk Mitigation Pool. They could be less willing to rent to households that do not meet their standard rental criteria.

Partner Agencies and Organizations

The Contractors for FY 2012-13 are listed in the Action Plan:

- Fair Housing Council of Oregon provides fair housing education, outreach and enforcement.
- Legal Aid Services of Oregon represents tenants with fair housing complaints.
- Home Forward (formerly Housing Authority of Portland) administers RentWell.
- Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon operates the Shared Housing Program.
- 211info performs an outreach function for Housing Connections to renters and agencies; provides phone and email support to renters, agencies and landlords; and provides data quality review. 211info also provides these services for people with limited English proficiency.
- Community Alliance of Tenants operates the Renter's Rights Hotline.
- The Portland Housing Advisory Commission provides policy oversight.
- Central City Concern and Outside In provide benefits eligibility services.
- IRCO provides translation services.

Complementary Local, Regional and National Efforts

- The Oregon Community Warehouse provides basic furnishings for individuals and families transitioning from homelessness.
- Clark County Public Health and the Cascade AIDS Project provide general supportive services to people living with HIV and their families. See HOPWA strategy for details.

Housing access and stabilization services support implementation of a number of initiatives, including "Home Again: A 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Portland and

Multnomah County,” and the work of the Multnomah County Transitions Services Unit to reintegrate ex-offenders into the community.

Geographic Service Areas

(including areas of low-income families and/or racial/minority concentration)

City-wide. In some cases a service is only provided by one organization, and outreach is critical to inform eligible households that the service is available. In other cases, the service is provided by a number of organizations and may be accessed in multiple locations.

Monitoring

A description of PHB’s Monitoring program is in Section One.

