



ESTABLISHING WAIT LIST PREFERENCES

Background

Access to Public Housing and Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV) can help prevent and end homelessness for families and individuals with extremely low incomes, but federal funding is limited. Nationally, Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) can assist only about one of every four eligible households, and waiting lists are often very long.

Many PHAs have decided to utilize waiting list preferences to target housing assistance to the most vulnerable people in their community, including families and individuals who are experiencing homelessness.

In June 2013, HUD provided guidance on housing individuals and families experiencing homelessness through the Public Housing and Housing Choice Voucher programs ([Notice PIH 2013-15](#)). This guidance includes strategies to expand such housing opportunities, including strategies for waiting list management and homeless admissions preferences.

Flexibility

All PHAs have significant flexibility in establishing procedures and priorities for waiting lists and tenant selection, within the overall framework provided by federal law. Each PHA is required to establish an Annual Plan that describes the PHA's approach to meeting local housing needs among low- and very low-income people. The PHA Plan describes eligibility for housing assistance and tenant screening and selection criteria.

PHAs must ensure that 75 percent of households admitted into the voucher program and 40 percent of households admitted into public housing each year are extremely-low income. Beyond those requirements, PHAs can establish policies for managing their waiting lists: for example, PHAs can select households on their waiting-list on a first-come, first-served basis or through a lottery.

Many PHAs establish priorities or "preferences" for households with particular needs, including

households experiencing homelessness, who are applying for or are on waiting lists for public housing or voucher assistance or both. Changes to local preferences must be based on local housing needs and priorities as identified by generally accepted data sources, such as the Point in Time count and Census data, and information gathered through the PHA Plan public comment process.

PHAs are encouraged to work with local organizations to establish a system of preferences that are informed by goals established through a [collaborative planning](#) process, such as a community's Plan to End Homelessness or the Continuum of Care planning. Federal law places some constraints on such local preferences; for example, they may not conflict with fair housing law.

Closed Waiting Lists

Some PHAs have closed their waiting lists because the list is already long and may stretch for several years. If a PHA has a closed waiting list, preferences, such as homeless preferences, may be applied only to applicants who are already on waiting lists for housing assistance.

This situation can make it difficult for PHAs to collaborate in implementing a [Housing First](#) strategy to move people experiencing homelessness into permanent housing as quickly as possible. To overcome this challenge, some PHAs have amended their PHA Plan to allow the PHA to open the waiting list only for applicants who qualify for a specific preference, such as those who are experiencing homelessness.

PHAs can also put limitations on certain preferences. A PHA may choose to limit the time period that the waiting list remains open for people who qualify for the preference (which could be a year or more). In addition or as an alternative, a PHA may establish a "limited preference" for a specific number of applicants. If desired, limited preferences can also be tied to a specific initiative designed to create housing opportunities for individuals or families experiencing homelessness. For example:

Implementation Tips

- Community partners who are advocating for a PHA to adopt or make changes to waiting list preferences need to understand the pressures and competing demands facing PHAs. Nearly all PHAs face significant competing demands for a limited supply of housing vouchers and units in public housing developments. Some have thousands of people on waiting lists, and many have closed their waiting lists to potential applicants.

Efforts to engage PHAs as partners may be more successful when advocates for people experiencing homelessness acknowledge the scale of a community's unmet needs for affordable housing, partner to develop a shared vision for expanding housing opportunities for the most vulnerable people, and work together to ensure that PHA leaders will be supported when they make tough decisions about priorities.

- PHAs are encouraged to develop a strong [partnership](#) with the Continuum of Care (CoC) and local homeless service providers. CoCs and service providers can benefit the PHA by identifying and "pre-qualifying" eligible people who are experiencing homelessness, making referrals to PHAs, and making supportive services available to households that qualify for PHA waiting list preferences. Community partners may also provide assistance with the PHA's application process, and they can help find qualified applicants when a housing unit or voucher is available, as well as helping with housing search, move-in costs, and providing

furniture, food and other essentials.

- PHAs often collaborate with community partners to make supportive services available to households who qualify for preferences. The most effective service partners typically have demonstrated ability to deliver services in scattered-site settings and build effective relationships with housing owners and property managers. Service partners often have access to other sources of funding to help pay for these supportive services. The types, intensity, and duration of supportive services should be determined based on needs. Depending on the target population and the needs of households receiving assistance, services may be time-limited.

Where Can PHAs Do This?

All PHAs can establish preferences for their waiting lists for public housing and/or Housing Choice Vouchers.

Who Can PHAs Assist?

- PHAs can establish a wide range of local preferences. Some examples include preferences for veterans, people with disabilities, people who are homeless, chronically homeless people, and people who are moving on from permanent supportive housing or transitional housing. PHAs may also establish waiting list preferences for victims of [domestic violence](#). PHA policies that provide access to safe, affordable, permanent housing, and partnerships with providers of services for domestic violence victims can help to prevent homelessness for victims and their families.
- As described in Notice PIH 2013-15, PHAs can create such preferences or limited preferences specifically for people who are referred by a partnering homeless services organization or consortia of such organizations. However, a PHA may not limit the source of referrals to an agency organization, or consortia that denies its services to members of any Federally protected class under fair housing laws, i.e., race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, or familial status.

Additional Resources

- [USICH Solutions Database](#) contains profiles of model programs and practices that have demonstrated results, including profiles of programs that are implemented in partnership with PHAs that have established waiting list preferences for persons experiencing homelessness.
- [CSH's PHA Toolkit](#) includes profiles of several PHAs that have established waiting list preferences for persons experiencing homelessness. These PHAs have established partnerships with community organizations to identify, refer, and provide ongoing support services, as needed, to people who qualify for housing assistance based on these preferences.
- See also the [Federal rules](#) regarding local preferences for public housing programs.

Examples

- **The Housing Authority of the City of Asheville, NC (HACA)** actively participates in the community's 10-year plan to end homelessness and ongoing collaboration meetings with community partners. This collaboration led to the design and implementation of preferences for individuals experiencing homelessness that were established for HACA's Public Housing and Housing Choice Voucher programs. Initially, the preference was limited to chronically homeless individuals, but has been expanded recently to those who have been homeless for more than 90 days. Ongoing case management is a key component. [A profile with more information](#), including specific language included in the HACA Annual Plan, is included in the [Corporation for Supportive Housing's PHA Toolkit](#).
- **The Loudoun County Virginia PHA** amended its administrative plan to establish a waiting list preference for persons experiencing homelessness. As housing vouchers become available through turnover, every tenth (10th) voucher is made available to a person who is homeless. The PHA is administered by the Loudon County Department of Family Services. The County found that when a housing voucher is provided to a person experiencing homelessness, this provides stability and an opportunity for the person to focus on other issues and solve medical or other problems. This has an impact on reducing the person's need for other administered services.
- **MaineHousing** has given people experiencing homelessness a preference for Housing Choice Vouchers, meaning that they are given extra points that help them access the waiting list for Housing Choice Vouchers. In addition, there are preferences in order of priority for victims of domestic violence, veterans and homeless families 2+, disabled, elderly and individuals. Preferences are cumulative, meaning that a victim of domestic violence or veteran experiencing homelessness would have a higher preference than a family of 2+, an elderly person, or a person with disabilities who is experiencing homelessness but who is not eligible for another preference.
- In response to data analysis that identified approximately 1,000 to 1,200 individuals experiencing homelessness who are frequent users of emergency departments, the **Ann Arbor Housing Commission** jointly applied for a grant from the Corporation for Supportive Housing with Catholic Social Services, Avalon Housing Inc., Packard Health Clinic, the Shelter Association of Washtenaw County, the University of Michigan Health Services, among others. With this grant, these partners are linking supportive and health services with housing resources provided by the Ann Arbor Housing Commission. These resources were made possible by the Commission's adoption of a limited preference that makes available public housing and Housing Choice Vouchers available for up to 40 individuals identified as high utilizers of crisis health services.