

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES FOR VETERAN FAMILIES (SSVF)

Practice Area 5: Landlord Supports

Landlords in tight housing markets are able to be extremely selective in choosing new tenants, and they have many reasons to screen carefully. And whenever the supply of prospective tenants greatly exceeds the number of available rental vacancies, strict screening requirements increase. A large percentage of re-housing/prevention participants have poverty-related credit and income barriers and would be screened out without the assistance of a service provider. This Practice Area addresses the reasons why landlords are willing to accept tenants who are working with a service provider, and how programs can develop these partnerships.

Training: SSVF Program LAUNCH: Landlord Supports (2013) This recording discusses the need for landlord supports and how best to cultivate this relationship. [SSVF Program LAUNCH: Landlord Supports.aspx](#)

Best Practice Standards

The VA has developed best practice standards for homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs. The standards reflect a growing consensus about what works in homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs and have been developed to further promote best practices among SSVF grantees. The VA also encourages non-SSVF funded homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing providers to review and use these standards to support program improvement adherence to best practices.

The standards are organized according to the five practice areas. Click on the link provided to learn about the best practice standards as they apply to: Landlord Supports
http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/SSVF_Practice_Standards_April_2013.pdf

Guidance

Homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing programs have two main clients: program participants and landlords. Programs whose fundamental purpose is to resolve housing crisis cannot be successful without a broad base of landlord relationships and an ability to understand and respond to landlord needs. Programs must dedicate staff time and resources to meeting landlord concerns while also attending to participant needs. This is no small task and requires thoughtful planning, ongoing communication with landlords, and dedicated staff or distinct staff accountabilities for responding to landlord needs. Programs often find that landlords are willing and eager partners who appreciate contributing to solving housing crises, but who also value the benefits offered by the program that help assure they receive rent and resolve any tenancy issues that may arise.



Working with Landlords

Landlords have many incentives to screen carefully and, especially in tight housing markets (i.e., low vacancy rates), are able to be extremely selective in choosing new tenants. First, tenants who accumulate rental arrears, leave without proper notice, or damage the housing unit cost the landlord money. Second, some communities have enacted laws that hold landlords liable for drug crimes committed on their property. Many landlords buy information about tenant histories ("Tenant Screening Reports") from agencies that search criminal, credit and eviction records, and verify income, employment, and rental references. When working with landlords, it's important to keep the following in mind:

- **People with very low incomes and those who have experienced homelessness are not competitive in tight rental housing markets where landlords screen.** Many have income-related problems like poor credit, rental arrears and even one or more evictions—which is often enough for landlords to screen them out. If the person has a criminal record, particularly for drug offenses or crimes against persons or property, they can be virtually "un-housable" in some rental markets—unless they have help.
- **The more landlord partners a program has, the more effectively and quickly they will be able to relocate or re-house their participant households.** Advantages to the program:
 - Landlords will overlook many tenant screening barriers or may even bypass a Tenant Screening Report for program households;
 - The more landlords a program has recruited, the more housing options a program participant has access to—maximizing participant choice;
 - Landlords will alert the program to tenancy problems rather than allowing the concern to escalate to an eviction;
 - Some landlords will be flexible for program participants, allowing occasional extensions on rental arrears.
- **Well-designed landlord incentives can be used to recruit and retain landlords for the hardest-to-house participants.** Landlords screen to reduce their risks of unpaid rent, property damage, complaints by other tenants, and police calls, but they know screenings do not guarantee risk-free tenancies. A partnership can offer significant benefits to landlords:
 - *Reduces vacancies.* The program can quickly refer participants to fill vacancies. Advertising, screening and interviewing tenants takes time. Turnover can also be decreased by stable tenants.
 - *Reduces costs.* Advertising, buying screening reports, turning over a unit for the next tenant, and evictions are extremely expensive to landlords.
 - *Reduces the landlord's involvement in complaints by other tenants.* The landlord can communicate to the program; their staff will intervene.

- *Offers satisfaction.* Many landlords are also rewarded by helping people who have faced hard times. Some landlords have a special affinity for assisting Veterans, families with small children, or people who are struggling with alcoholism.
- **Effective rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention programs have carefully designed their landlord incentives on two levels:** 1.) A base level of support, available for a specified period of time, to all partner landlords for all program participants; and 2.) Add-on supports, offered on a case-by-case basis, to landlords who require more incentives to take a participant with particularly severe housing barriers. Not all programs can or must offer all possible incentives; the local housing market, program participant characteristics, and program reputation/credibility will influence the specific package.
- **Recruitment of landlord partners is an ongoing, multi-pronged effort.** Staff utilize all their connections—friends, family, neighbors, churches—to find landlords to approach. They drive around neighborhoods with lower-cost rental housing to look for vacancy signs in windows or flyers with tear-away contact information. They read the classified rental ads. Program staff speak to associations of landlords, write Letters to the Editor or articles for local newspapers. One good landlord connection can result in introductions to other landlords. Written references from partnering landlords can be used to recruit additional landlords.
- **Landlord retention is even more essential for program success.** A landlord who leaves the partnership disappointed is the worst "publicity" the program can experience, as they will be certain to communicate their disapproval to other landlords. Programs cannot simply refer a tenant and assume their job is over. Once the household has moved into their new housing, the real work of landlord and tenancy supports begins. Retaining landlord partners requires:
 - *Keeping your word.* Programs must follow through on all promises made to landlords. If a program can't follow through on a promise, that promise should not be given.
 - *Responding promptly to landlord concerns.* The most important benefit for a landlord partner is the intervention of program staff to resolve tenancy problems. These situations may never occur, but if/when they do, the landlord must be able to trust that the program will provide the needed assistance. This does not mean that the program is available 24/7 or can successfully resolve every problem with every tenant. But the landlord must know that the program will make serious and timely efforts—and if they fail, nothing more could have been done.
 - *Negotiating a win-win in conflict situations.* Landlords have rights and responsibilities, just like tenants. When a landlord fails to live up to her obligations, program staff must hold their partner accountable. But they must be equally fair-minded and diplomatic about holding tenants accountable. Staff should be able to balance the landlord's perspective with that of their participants and find a mutually-acceptable solution to most conflicts.
 - *Recognizing and appreciating the invaluable contributions landlords make to preventing and resolving homelessness.* When a landlord goes "above and beyond" to support a tenant, especially one with a history of problem behavior, the program should express their gratitude. Phone calls from senior management, personal cards and letters, a

certificate of appreciation, an annual and public recognition event are effective ways to provide partners with sincere thanks for their investment in ending homelessness.

- **Programs can designate a specialized staff for landlord recruitment and communication or case managers can perform this function.** Either model can be effective.
 - ***Specialized "Housing Locator" staff.*** A specific staff can be designated as the landlords' primary contact.
 - *Advantages:* The Housing Locator may have experience as a landlord or real estate/rental broker, and will be trained to easily identify the landlord's perspective. That staff should also be able to survey landlords for satisfaction and concerns about the program's landlord supports and determine when/if program changes should be made.
 - *Disadvantages:* When the landlord calls to report an urgent concern, the Locator will have to alert the case manager to intervene with the participant. When the program is reliant on one person to be the communication link, delays and miscommunications can result. And by restricting landlord interactions to a specialized staff, the participant's case managers are isolated from – and less able to understand -- the perspective of the landlord. As a result, staff may develop or retain a bias against landlords and undermine program efforts to maintain their partnerships.
 - ***The landlord's primary contact is the participant's case manager.*** Each case manager would establish a relationship with each landlord who rents to his participants.
 - *Advantages:* The landlord can report urgent problems directly to the person who will be intervening with the participant. By interacting with landlords, case managers will learn their perspective. They are then more likely to be able to represent the landlord's legitimate concerns to their participants and to negotiate a win-win resolution.
 - *Disadvantages:* Case managers with high caseloads may neglect routine communication with landlords.
- **The program must acknowledge and combat persistent bias against landlords.** Staff and participants may have had some bad experiences with some landlords, which lead them to hold negative stereotypes about all landlords. Tenant rights advocates tend to emphasize tenant rights and landlord responsibilities (to the exclusion of tenant responsibilities and landlord rights). It is impossible to create a win-win for landlord partners and tenant participants unless the legitimate perspective of landlords is aggressively sought and utilized in the program's practice.

Integrating the Core Concepts

Housing First: Because the goal of rapid re-housing and homelessness prevention programs is to resolve housing crises, understanding housing options and having constructive, supportive relationships with

various landlords is absolutely critical. Extensive landlord partnerships and dedicated staff time and resources to support these partnerships creates more opportunities to link participants with landlords willing to look past barriers, such as low income or a poor rental history.

Crisis Response: Landlords are key partners in efforts to prevent and end homelessness. As such, they often come to appreciate that partnering with a program can make good business sense, while also providing a sense of “giving back” to the community by virtue of their flexibility to help house participants and their collaboration with staff to help participants retain housing.

Client Choice: Some programs require participants to locate their own housing. This does not automatically maximize client choice (or efficiency), as they may lack transportation, search only in limited areas, interview poorly, or accept the first unit offered—even if the price is too high or the condition is unacceptable. Ideally, the program has partnerships with enough landlords that the client can identify a preferred location and has a choice of units run by responsible landlords with decent and more affordable units.