

STRATEGY: LANDLORD PORTAL

Providing information to landlords about their individual profile, units, payments, and tenants in a secure electronic website portal.

Who: PHAs that already use a vendor that provides portals, and PHAs that are considering investing in a portal (which includes tenant and PHA elements as well as landlord elements).

Cost: \$ \$\$ \$\$\$ Moderate for PHAs that already work with a vendor offering web-based services. May be more substantial for PHAs that do not currently work with a vendor, or would like to develop this feature in-house.

Implementation Considerations: ● LOW ● MEDIUM ○ DIFFICULT

HCV Landlord Portal PHA Process Improvements

| PHA Process Improvement | HCV Landlord Portal |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Increase Recruitment | |
| Increase Retention | X |
| Improve Responsiveness | X |
| Improve Tenant-Landlord Relationship | X |
| Improve Inspections Process | X |
| Minimize Bureaucracy | X |

WHAT THIS IS AND WHY IT WORKS: One of the major challenges facing PHAs is responding in a timely manner to landlords' requests for information. The HCV program is the largest rental housing assistance program in the United States and, for many PHAs, their single largest program. As a result, the number of landlords who participate can be quite large and the volume of requests for information can be challenging, at times, for PHAs. In an online portal, current landlords log into a secure website where they can access a broad range of information specific to their HCV housing portfolio. This 24/7 access to information may decrease the volume of inquiries PHAs receive.



In addition to reducing the number of inquiries received, PHAs might also see a reduction in postage costs as a result of distributing information electronically.

While a PHA website with a landlord page offers information relevant to all landlords, a portal provides current HCV landlords with secure access to information specific to their portfolio. Commonly, this includes useful payment information including the dates and amounts of payments broken out by tenants and units. This information is especially helpful for landlords with multiple units in the program.

Note: Providing payment information online typically requires that landlords accept direct deposit of HAP. For some PHAs and some landlords, switching to direct deposit may be an extra first step in implementing a portal.

Many portal accounts also provide inspection appointment dates, inspection reports, and results. When the inspection and portal software are compatible, these reports and results may be sent from a mobile device, such as a mobile phone, and uploaded to the portal in real or near-real time.

Some portals are designed to allow forms, other paperwork, or messages to be sent between landlords and PHAs.

Related Strategies:

- [Inspections Technology](#)
 - [Landlord Outreach Events](#)
 - [Information Sharing](#)
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IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

A landlord portal is an investment for PHAs. PHAs should carefully consider whether the information they want to share with landlords is best provided through the PHA website and/or through a dedicated portal. To get a sense of the types of information that portals can provide, PHAs may want to review the products of different software vendors.

If a PHA has a tenant portal, the information provided there to assist voucher families with navigating the process may offer the PHA ideas about what to offer from the landlord's perspective. Also, the experience that voucher families or case managers report in using the portal may offer the PHA areas of interest to follow up on when researching the landlord portal.

Understanding what a portal can provide can help PHAs decide whether they want to implement a portal by using vendor software or by developing one in-house. PHAs must also consider how they will roll out their new portal, including providing training to their

current landlords who may have varying levels of comfort with technology and with passwords or user names.

Is a Portal Right for Your PHA?

Below are ways PHAs can evaluate if a landlord portal may be a good fit:

- **Talk to staff:** Review the number of inquiries received that could be addressed in a portal. Ask staff if they think landlords would utilize a portal. Does the PHA have IT staff to maintain the portal? Does the PHA have staff available to train landlords on the new portal, including some hands-on assistance for those less familiar with technology? If a portal is an additional module on vendor-supplied software, training and support may be part of that contract, but PHA staff will still find situations where they will need to provide support to some users.
- **Ask landlords:** Consider doing a formal, or even an informal, poll of landlords to gauge their level of interest in a portal and their comfort level with online technology. The PHA could administer a poll at an upcoming PHA event or via email. When designing the poll, PHAs should have an idea of the range of portal functions and what the PHA would be open to implementing.

Note: Portals do not serve prospective landlords. Information that the PHA wants to provide digitally to a prospective landlord would be more accessible from a website, rather than a secure portal requiring a username/password for access.



Tip: Talk to other PHAs, your industry group(s), and local government agencies to see if they utilize a landlord portal and ask them about start-up costs, operational costs and needs, and the successes and challenges.

Portal Selection

A PHA that has determined a landlord portal would be beneficial will next examine whether they will design and create a portal in-house or whether they will contract with a vendor.



Costs

PHAs should note that they may see a slight cost savings due to the reduction of printing and postage expenses. A landlord portal may also result in savings of staff time answering questions.

Using a Software Vendor

Since portal software typically interacts with other PHA information such as HAP amounts, inspection appointment dates and results, and direct deposit dates, the most important characteristic of any portal software is that it can interact with existing PHA computer systems to share the information the PHA wants to have available on the portal. PHAs will want to check with any portal software vendor to see if that software can function as a standalone module if that software vendor is not the PHA's primary vendor. Costs vary depending on the vendor and the services offered. Be sure to review what services commercial vendors offer and compare start-up and operational costs before deciding to develop an in-house portal. It is important to understand the ongoing support or training that a vendor may offer, the associated cost, and what in-house IT staff may need to learn to supplement the vendor in operations or emergencies.

The PHA will need to devote some resources to evaluating which software and/or services fit best and what offerings will provide the PHA the greatest return on investment. The PHA should also consider what features will help landlords do their jobs effectively. PHAs should ask how the potential portal features interface with current and desired PHA practices. For instance, will it allow PHAs to move to direct deposit of HAP? Will landlords be able to

receive inspection results through the portal the same day as an inspection or quicker than they normally would? How might a portal impact PHA staff time beyond fewer landlord requests for information? Is the portal similar to neighboring PHAs' portals, so landlords that own units in both jurisdictions do not have to learn to use very different portal designs?

Portal features PHAs have noted are helpful to their landlords or that they hope to add to their existing portals include features where landlords can:

- View HAP history and remittances
- View inspections results and deficiencies
- Submit photos of corrected deficiencies to meet HQS requirements
- See previous and upcoming inspection dates
- Request rent changes
- Review status of rent increases
- Receive notifications and send messages
- Download forms
- View electronic copies of signed forms including contracts and leases
- Submit completed forms with electronic signature
- Download 1099 tax forms

Whether the product of a vendor or designed by the PHA, access to the portal and content on the portal must be accessible for persons with disabilities, in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA. The obligation to ensure web content accessibility for persons with disabilities includes, but is not limited to, ensuring that all images, including graphs and charts, include appropriate alt-text..



Procurement

PHAs must follow their procurement policy if they contract with a vendor.



If the PHA implements any feature that allows for the submission of forms or inquiries, the PHA will need to plan for staff to process the forms and requests in a timely manner. It will also want to ensure that the feature provides the landlord with a confirmation that the item was submitted. Ideally, the confirmation should provide the landlord with a brief message about what he or she can expect as next steps. These actions help to build satisfaction for the user, in this case, the landlord.

Whether a portal is developed using vendor software or in-house IT resources, the PHA must develop and implement policies and procedures to ensure the security of data on the portal. Data requiring security includes, for example, personally identifiable information and bank account information of tenants and landlords. The PHA should post information in the portal to let landlords know what these policies and procedures are.

In-House Portal Development

Some PHAs develop their own landlord portals if they have robust IT support and specific items they want to share with landlords that commercial vendors do not provide. To ensure that development costs, including updates and modifications to the initial version, are kept within a budget, the PHA will need to invest substantial time in planning to ensure that the portal can access needed information from other PHA computer systems and operate in an intuitive manner for landlords. A portal that serves the entire housing authority may be most cost-effective, since costs can be spread among departments, but, naturally, the planning process is more extensive. At the same time, creating a budget for a project that spans departments could also be quite complex since different departmental funding sources could have varying commingling constraints. It is important to allocate adequate staff time to planning so that the portal meets expectations, is useful to landlords, and does not require costly frequent changes. There will, of course, be operational

updates that are regularly or periodically needed and the PHA will need to budget for these.



Tip: Some PHAs develop their own portal. One PHA noted that they chose this approach because they wanted the portal to serve their entire PHA and their departments were organized differently than vendor software allowed. It is important to note that the development time and financial investment were significant.

Training

Introducing a portal as an information resource may be a big change for PHA staff and landlords. Although the increased access to information is likely to improve landlord satisfaction in the long term, in the beginning, staff and landlords may experience some confusion and frustration. Offering training to familiarize landlords, including some initial intensive hands-on assistance, may lessen the learning curve – just be sure that PHA staff members are also comfortable accessing the features of the portal. If the PHA uses vendor software, be sure to explore all of the virtual webinars or other training opportunities available through the vendor.



REMINDER: Report on the implementation of a portal in the PHA newsletter or post on the PHA's website. This is an opportunity to highlight the PHA's commitment to landlord support and how the portal can increase PHA staff's ability to provide requested information more quickly and effectively than in the past. If the PHA decides to implement a portal based on a discussion with another PHA, briefly profile that PHA's experience in the newsletter or in social media.

Staff needs and concerns should be thoroughly addressed prior to introducing the portal to landlords. Staff members need to understand what landlords will see and experience to be able to offer the best assistance. When the portal is new, it may not always function as imagined, and staff will be able to meet expectations better if they can confidently say, “I don’t know the answer, but let me check and get back to you.”

Some training options include:

- In-person trainings: PHAs can include portal demonstrations in large and/or small group trainings. This may be offered as part of an already-scheduled education and outreach event. Staff should test the portal in the training location prior to the event to ensure smooth access. Staff should be prepared to walk landlords through the log-in process one by one and answer questions. Individual meetings can also be beneficial for landlords who may have limited experience with technology.
- Webinars: Hosting a virtual event through a webinar is a cost-effective way to train groups and individuals. A benefit of virtual events is that they can be filmed or recorded and, thus, available for landlords to review on their own timeframe.
- Pre-recorded demonstration: The PHA can post a video demonstration of a staff person logging in (password hidden) as a landlord, navigating through the features in the portal while explaining what she or he is doing, and providing tips such as noting whether log-in or password information is case sensitive or how to search on the portal, if appropriate.

No matter what option the PHA chooses for providing training, landlords will have questions when they access the system for the first time. During any training session, PHAs should provide information on how to contact the PHA for assistance, specifying contacts that are appropriate for portal questions. Ensure that

replies and assistance are thorough and prompt to overcome reluctance or concerns.

Although support needs will lessen as landlords become used to the portal, there will always be some support required, particularly for new landlords that join the program. PHAs that currently have portals noted there can be challenges with staff turnover, especially at large property management companies, and new staff may need assistance with new passwords and usernames.



Benefits of a Portal

To encourage the use of the portal, PHAs may consider highlighting incentives related to portal use like receiving payment more quickly through direct deposit or quicker access to inspection results. When landlords log into the portal for information that was typically mailed – HAP history, for example – landlords may have access to other useful features of the portal. They will have the opportunity to discover information that might replace the need to call the PHA. The PHA should balance these benefits against the risk that some landlords might be unable or unwilling to use the portal and may be deterred from participating in the HCV program.

