



OPTIMIZING THE HEALTHY HOMES GRANTS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

In 1991, the Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes (OLHCHH), under the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was created to champion HUD's efforts to protect children and families from health hazards in their homes. HUD awards grants that enable organizations to control lead-based paint hazards, allergy-inducing dusts, and radon, among an expanding catalog of hazards and contaminants that trigger health conditions and illnesses. These grants also include public outreach efforts to educate communities on how to make their homes safe and healthy. Other OLHCHH grants, for research, help develop better methods for identifying and controlling those hazards and contaminants. In the past several years, OLHCHH has innovatively leveraged technology to streamline its grants management system, allowing grantees and HUD employees alike to focus on the mission at hand: protecting families in their own homes.

What was the challenge?

OLHCHH's grants processes follow a linear timeline: HUD announces the funding opportunity, applicants submit the application, and HUD rates the applications and notifies the applicants whether or not they have been awarded a grant. Once the grant is executed, a grantee must meet all applicable requirements, including complying with the grant's objectives and submitting progress and final reports, until the grant is closed out. When OLHCHH began issuing grants in 1993, it used paper applications and basic computer programs to collect and store information. When applying for a grant, applicants would need to submit three copies of their paper application by mail. HUD employees rating the applications would enter the application information and rating results into Excel and Word documents and, for grants that were awarded and executed, enter information to track the accomplishments of the grantees.

Manual data entry has always posed a high risk of error; therefore, OLHCHH searched for tools that would handle the more basic data entry tasks on behalf of its employees. In 2001, OLHCHH introduced the Quarterly Progress Reporting System (QPRS) to manage the grant-tracking portion of the process. The program generated basic reports on the grantee's performance in meeting grant benchmarks; the reports were sent to the grantees by email. Although QPRS was a considerable upgrade from the original paper process, it had other limitations. The system did not include any application data, which would have been useful as an overview of the application from the time of submission. It also lacked the capability for grantees to input data into the system, which meant that HUD employees were still responsible for manual data entry.

Early on, OLHCHH saw the value in having a grants *reporting* database. However, OLHCHH came to see the desirability of broadening the system's capabilities and developing a grants *management* database. As part of this process, the office invited grantees to provide input. Grantees expressed great interest in being able to provide grant management data, performance descriptions, and explanations directly to HUD electronically; some of them already had such systems for dealing with their own performance, contractors, and subgrantees.

What was the solution?

Developing a system that meets the needs of OLHCHH and its grantees has been a work in progress through several years and multiple programs, and it remains under continuous improvement. Starting in 2010, OLHCHH partnered with a software vendor to develop the Healthy Homes Grants Management System (HHGMS ["higimz"]). This online data management and tracking system allows HUD employees to process administrative and technical actions, and it also enables quarterly reporting between the grantee and HUD. In a major shift from the one-way reporting method that required manual input by HUD employees, grantees can now access the system, and enter and review their own data, descriptions, and explanations.



What was the result?

HHGMS simplified the grants management process and made it less time-consuming, while also improving on the quality of information that can be accessed from the system. HHGMS interfaces seamlessly with other software, such as GrantSolutions.gov, which HUD uses to manage application and grant data, and Grants.gov, where applicants search and apply for funding opportunities. HHGMS has also been optimized for mobile use, improving accessibility for grantees who have limited access to their computers when they are out in the field inspecting work at individual homes, and for HUD employees monitoring the grants when they are out in the field conducting site visits.

Those HUD employees are now able to spend more time analyzing quantitative and qualitative data instead of manually entering it into a database. For example, HHGMS generates data analysis reports for each grantee, for the monitor's grantee portfolio, and for the Office as a whole. These reports glean quantitative data that shows how well grantees are meeting benchmarks in various categories, which helps HUD employees identify grantee roadblocks and weaknesses, and, when grantees have performed work successfully, approve payments to them. The reports also provide qualitative information about a grantee's operations, and how it works within its own organization and with external partners. HUD employees can assess the challenges a grantee may be facing, and are more efficiently able to follow up with grantees by phone calls, emails, and performing on-site monitoring.

Future Steps

OLHCHH will continue to host new grantee and previous grantee conferences, along with a program management school, to continue educating their stakeholders about the new system. During these sessions, HUD presents the most recent iteration of HHGMS. The Department collects feedback and new grantee ideas at these conferences, from emails and blogs, and during on-site monitoring visits. This will ensure that HHGMS remains current as a useful tool for grantees and HUD employees.