Transmitting the Message: 
Housing Counseling Works!

Washington, DC - The Office of Housing Counseling’s (OHC), Office of Outreach and Capacity Building, is set to launch its latest “Housing Counseling Works” campaign to promote services offered through the Comprehensive Housing Counseling program.

This campaign ensures compliance with Dodd-Frank congressional mandates noted in 12 U.S.C. § 1701x (g)(4)(A), which call for conducting national public service multimedia campaigns designed to make persons facing mortgage foreclosure, elderly persons, persons facing language barriers, low-income persons, minorities and other potentially vulnerable consumers aware that it is advisable, before seeking or maintaining a residential mortgage loan, to obtain homeownership counseling from unbiased and reliable sources including through programs offered by HUD.

Increasing Visibility of Housing Counseling Benefits

This campaign will focus on advertising and outreach to the general public to increase visibility and awareness of the benefits of housing counseling services. OHC will focus its advertising efforts on a digital online national campaign that will run for 120-days. The campaign will expand its target audiences to include millennials and renters by releasing a separate banner ad in both English and Spanish to key vendors that specifically target rental audiences.

Bilingual banner ads in both English and Spanish will be posted with online service providers and websites including: Google, Yahoo, Bing, MSN, Facebook, Zillow, Realtor.com, Rent.com, CNN.com Apartmentfinder.com, Telemundo.com, Military Officers' Association of America (MOAA.com) and the National Newspaper Publishers’ Association-Black Free Press (www.nnpa.org).

These banner ads will link directly to the Office of Housing Counseling’s homepage, where the OHC will offer additional links to bilingual video advertisements, the housing counseling agency locator, specific information for first-time homebuyers, renters, reverse mortgages, and the downloadable OHC and Fair Housing apps.

This will provide viewers information on the housing counseling program, including the OHC’s toll-free number and webpage to locate a HUD-approved housing counseling agency at www.hud.gov/housingcounseling.

Marketing Tool Kit for Housing Counseling Agencies

The overall “Housing Counseling Works” campaign also includes a marketing toolkit for partner agencies to access downloadable banner ads, flyers, and fact sheets on each of the housing counseling target service areas. A link to the marketing toolkit will be provided on the OHC’s homepage.
Greetings,

The benefits of technology are all around us. From our smart phones to the latest apps and software upgrades, technology can increase our productivity and keep us connected across multiple channels to reach greater audiences.

The Office of Housing Counseling and many of our HUD-approved housing counseling agencies have embraced technology in our day-to-day business activities, marketing and outreach efforts, and training. There are an increasing number of agencies hosting webinars and utilizing videoconferencing to connect with their clients. Last month’s launch of HUDhousingcounselors.com is a prime example of how the OHC is utilizing technology to provide additional resources for housing counselors to prepare for the upcoming Certification Exam.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, one in four students pursuing higher education took at least one distance education course. Online education and virtual learning provides an efficient way for housing counseling agencies to reach more clients and provide greater access especially to those living in rural communities and remote households. This edition of The Bridge features housing counseling agencies that use innovative technology to market and promote housing counseling programs and initiatives.

Another Office of Housing Counseling technology tool is our HUD Housing Locator, a free mobile iPhone app for users to search for counseling agencies based on location and available languages. The app provides valuable information at your fingertips.

Past issues of The Bridge also have featured technology for both clients and agencies such as Hope LoanPort, Virtual Counselors Network, and Juntos - Clarfi’s text messaging service.

Used wisely technology can benefit us all. Although it doesn’t replace the one-on-one personal touch of a housing counselor, it provides an opportunity to spread information and resources to those who may need it the most.

Sarah
Washington, DC - Technology has proven successful for agencies marketing housing counseling programs and initiatives, new services, upcoming events and overall community resources. Not only do these technology tools help agencies reach potential clients, they help agencies to:

1. Increase efficiency of administrative and reporting tasks,
2. Save time and resources,
3. Increase the number of clients served, and
4. Improve data management.

Some examples of how agencies can leverage technology to market housing counseling services are:

**eMail Marketing:** Ask clients to sign-up for agency newsletters that are produced and distributed through an email marketing system. The newsletters are easily formatted, published regularly and can provide timely information about upcoming training, new initiatives, success stories, events and more.

**Broadcast Text Messages:** According to the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association, on average, it takes 90 minutes for someone to respond to an email and 90 seconds to respond to a text message. While not everyone checks their emails and even when they do, they might not respond right away, text messages have a nearly 100 percent open rate.

**Virtual Housing Counseling:** For some agencies that serve rural areas, it can be difficult to meet clients in-person. For others, work schedules or transportation challenges may hinder clients from meeting in the office. During these instances, it may be more convenient to counsel clients via phone or using web/video conferencing technology such as zoom, SKYPE or WebEx. HUD intermediaries that provide direct counseling services or operate through a network of affiliates, may consider virtual housing counseling to increase the number of clients served, services offered, and capacity. In order to ensure the success of virtual housing counseling, it is important to conduct training, due-diligence, quality control, and IT security assessments including protocols to protect confidential data.

**Social Media**

Social Media is among one of the most popular and cost effective ways housing counseling agencies can create, share, and exchange information and ideas with existing and potential clients in virtual communities and online networks. Here’s how agencies can benefit from the most popular social media sites:

- **Twitter:** Use as a microblogging service to keep clients up-to-date and encourage feedback on events and training using up to 140 characters.
- **YouTube:** Upload a short training video on the largest video sharing site. Agencies can set-up its own channel and embed or link to videos from its main webpage or other websites.
- **Facebook:** Agencies can upload photos, videos, and send client messages from the most popular and widely used social networking website.
- **Google+:** Share information, photos, and videos in Circles and Communities. Use Hangouts to video chat with clients and/or groups.
- **LinkedIn:** Reach professionals on this networking site.
- **Pinterest:** Pinboard-style photo-sharing site where users create and manage theme-based image collections such as events, interests, and hobbies.
- **Instagram:** Acquired by Facebook, this online photo-video-sharing network allows users to take pictures and videos with their cell phones, apply digital filters, and post to multiple sites.

While there is no substitute for a dedicated, in-house housing counselor, leveraging these technology and social media tools can benefit housing counseling agencies by enabling them to reach more families in less time.
Richmond, VA - Housing counselors can help people make wise decisions about finances and housing ... but many people don’t know they even exist!

In January 2014, the Virginia Housing Development Authority (VHDA) sent a survey to all 32 HUD-approved Housing Counseling Agencies in Virginia that receive funding through the HUD grant administered by VHDA.

The survey found that housing counseling agencies hope to increase their client base by improving public awareness of their organizations and the programs offered.

Although a full range of marketing is being used by the various agencies including social media, websites, public TV, press releases, referrals from lenders and others, events, surveys to clients and assessment meetings, the individual agencies cannot sustain a long-term marketing effort or expend enough capital to be successful in their communities.

Since every agency shares common goals, VHDA was able to aggregate the needs expressed in the survey in order to facilitate an efficient and more effective result: a statewide advertising campaign. The campaign raised awareness of housing counselors and encouraged Virginians to visit a new page on vhda.com to learn more about housing counseling and to ultimately find a housing counselor in their area using HUD’s agency search tool.

The webpage also contains information about the various types of housing counseling available such as: pre-purchase, post-purchase, foreclosure/loss mitigation, rental, budget and credit counseling and homeownership education. In addition, the page includes a checklist of items consumers should bring to their first meeting with a Housing Counselor.

Since the campaign focuses on more than just pre-purchase counseling, the image selected for communications materials is one that effectively represents all the different types of housing counseling. It illustrates the concept of “Making Wise Decisions.” The above image was used in web banner ads that link to a landing page at: www.vhda.com/HousingCounselors.

Professional media buying firms prepared the media plan which included:

- Newspaper Ads,
- Radio Ads,
- Ads on Realtor.com,
- Facebook Ads and Boosted Posts, and
- Google’s Pay-Per-Click and Display Network.

The new campaign webpage received over 8,200 unique page views from June 1 to July 6, 2015.

VHDA also produced a YouTube video, “Marketing 101,” which provides ideas and guidance for all Housing Counseling Agencies on marketing their programs and services.
Boston, MA - The Housing Partnership Network (HPN) is a peer network and business alliance of 100 regional nonprofits that develop, manage and finance affordable homes to revitalize communities and provide opportunities for lower-income and working families.

HPN was one of the first HUD housing counseling intermediaries in 1995 and has since worked with its member housing counseling agencies to ensure high quality delivery of federal housing counseling resources across the spectrum of consumer needs. Through its network, HPN members have delivered homeownership education and guidance to more than 750,000 families.

Framework® is HPN’s flagship social enterprise in the homeownership space. The company emerged out of a commitment to the idea that communities will be strengthened when education is as natural as part of the homebuying process as finding a Realtor. The measure of success is simple: creating a new generation of smart, confident and prepared homebuyers.

Framework prioritizes the customer experience.

Nine out of 10 customers would recommend it to a friend, Nine out of 10 customers report increased understanding of the homebuying process – with significant gains in the areas of mortgage loans, purchase agreements and loan closing.

Designed by a team of housing counseling and online education experts, Framework addresses a growing demand for online homebuyer education services from diverse customers – rural populations, working families, and millennial homebuyers. Its goal is to make sure every consumer can gain access to high quality homebuyer education and counseling services.

In 2014, Framework embarked on a digital marketing campaign to reach larger homebuying audiences. Through its digital and social media campaigns, Framework ensures that the next generation of homebuyers is connected to the counseling industry and the tools they need to become successful homeowners.

For more information visit: frameworkhomeownership.org.
COLLABORATING TO SERVE CLIENTS

Philadelphia, PA - The Urban Affairs Coalition’s Community and Economic Development (CED) committee is an effective, cross-sector collaboration bringing impactful change and improvement to an under resourced, yet highly valuable local foreclosure counseling industry.

The Committee directs its foreclosure prevention work through its Housing Counseling Roundtable Initiative (HCRI), which includes representatives from leading counseling agencies, government, banks, regulatory agencies and intermediaries.

The Initiative's work is focused on identifying solutions to stresses within Philadelphia's nonprofit housing counseling industry and ensuring access to high-quality counseling services. The Initiative has facilitated the adoption of national industry standards by the City of Philadelphia's Office of Housing & Community Development, which now requires each of its 24 funded agencies to adopt these standards.

This collaborative initiative was developed in response to the 2012 Hylands report, a Philadelphia Federal Reserve study, and a subsequent conference detailing the challenges faced by Philadelphia's Foreclosure Counseling industry. Following these efforts, the Urban Affairs Coalition convened the Foreclosure Prevention Task Force, which developed a set of 12 recommendations to address challenges related to consistent quality across agencies such as:

- overburdening reporting requirements,
- adequate funding and pay scales for counseling work,
- inefficiencies due to outdated modes of operation.

A broad range of stakeholders were convened to further analyze the needs of foreclosure counseling agencies and to develop strategies to address the recommendations of the Hylands report.

Stakeholders formed the Housing Counseling Collaborative to address the funding needed to implement several of the Hylands' report recommendations. Three working groups were organized under the Collaborative to implement the task force strategies including enhanced technology tools and scholarship recommendations. The Collaborative has leveraged commitments from Wells Fargo, Bank of America, M&T Bank and other banks along with the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency to operationally fund housing counseling agencies and the report recommendations.

The Collaborative awarded scholarships to more than 35 housing counseling agencies and 60 housing counselors. Grants have assisted 48 housing counselors within 11 agencies to provide 24 high-speed scanners, 30 notebooks and tablets, and technology to enable counselors to provide timely and effective advocacy in Philadelphia’s Diversion Court. The ability for counselors to access supporting documentation during court mediation cannot be underestimated.

Making an on-the-spot substantiation of claims and providing documentation to servicers can make the difference between resolution of a foreclosure proceeding and continued delays resulting in a greater risk of home loss. Since 2008, the Diversion Court Program has helped 8,447 homeowners successfully avoid foreclosure resulting in $100,674,319 in property taxes to the City of Philadelphia and saving hundreds of thousands in social services when families relocate or become homeless.

The newest initiative of the Collaborative is an effort to streamline data entry for housing counselors by securing agreement from funders on a single data entry system. RxOffice/Home Loan Port would replace the two systems currently in use to reduce the burden of data entry and allow counselors to spend more time assisting homeowners to avert foreclosure.
Washington, DC - The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Housing Counseling Program supports the delivery of a wide variety of housing counseling services to homebuyers, homeowners, low- to moderate-income renters, and the homeless. The primary objectives of the Program are to improve financial literacy, expand homeownership opportunities, improve access to affordable housing, and preserve homeownership.

Recent research from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and the Urban Institute continues to find substantial benefits to housing counseling for families who purchase their first homes and those struggling to prevent foreclosure.

"Whether you're a first-time buyer or trying to keep the place you've always called home, knowledge is the key to financial empowerment," said HUD Secretary Julián Castro. "We're proud to support our housing counseling partners as they help American families achieve stability and prosperity."

In 2010, the Dodd-Frank Act amended the Housing Counseling Statute by requiring that all individuals that provide counseling for HUD Programs must be HUD-certified by way of passing a new written examination: The HUD Housing Counseling Certification Examination.

To prepare for the Certification Exam, candidates can access training materials online using the www.hudhousingcounselors.com website. Users can choose from numerous study methods to include an interactive online training course and a downloadable Study Guide for people who prefer a text-based accessible alternative. A practice exam and the Certification Exam will be available at a future date. The testing methodology for the Certification Exam will include options to take the exam online or in person. Both options will be proctored.

The HUD Housing Counselors Training section of the website offers housing counselors assistance in preparing for the Certification Exam, but it is not required for certification. The training is not limited to housing counselors and users are not required to work for a HUD-approved housing counseling agency.
This month’s segment focuses on grant awards under a HUD Housing Counseling Program grant and marketing and outreach.

Q: My organization received a FY 2015 HUD housing counseling grant in the awards announced on June 15, 2015. Now what?

A: HUD mailed grant award packages to grantees on June 24, 2015. The packages included signed grant agreements and HUD-1044 forms as well as instructions for additional documentation that must be submitted as part of the grant execution process. Grantees must submit the following documents as instructed in the award letter:

1. Indirect Cost Rate Documentation
2. Financial Management Systems Documentation
3. Audit
4. Code of Conduct
5. Projected Budget
6. Projections for Housing Counseling Grant Activities
7. Sub-allocation list (Intermediary, Multi-state Organization, and State Housing Finance Agency grantees only)
8. Client Management System documentation
9. Signed Form HUD-1044 and grant agreement signature page

Please see the award letter and grant execution checklist included in the grant award package for further details. If your agency is a FY15 grantee but have not yet received a grant award package, please send an email to: housing.counseling@hud.gov and notify your point of contact in the Office of Housing Counseling.

Q: What information do grantees need to input in HUD’s Housing Counseling System (HCS)?

A: Grantees need to input their yearly budget, administrative funds, indirect costs, clients served projections and if applicable, information on subgrantees or branches. HUD has available step-by-step guides for inputting this information.

- Budget and cost information can be found in the HCS Suballocation Guide and
- Instructions for submitting projections are available through the 9902 Projection Training Guide.

Q: May I charge marketing and outreach expenses to my FY 2015 HUD housing counseling grant?

A: Marketing and outreach initiatives are eligible expenses under both the FY 2014 – 2015 NOFA and the FY 2015 Supplemental NOFA. This includes providing general information and materials about housing opportunities and issues, conducting informational campaigns, advocating with lenders for non-traditional lending standards and raising awareness about critical housing topics.

To charge marketing and outreach initiatives to a HUD grant, marketing must be included as an itemized expense on your approved grant budget. Note that marketing and outreach initiatives should follow affirmative marketing principles and be directed at those populations least likely to seek counseling services or the information marketed, including those of racial, religious or national origin groups not normally served by the sponsoring agency, as well as persons with disabilities and persons with Limited English Proficiency. For more details, see the Eligible Activities section of the applicable NOFA.

(continued on pg. 9)
CFPB Helps Consumers Find a Housing Counselor

Washington, DC - Housing counselors throughout the country can provide advice on buying a home, renting, defaults, foreclosures, and credit issues.

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) defines a legitimate housing counselor as someone who is “specially trained to help you assess your financial situation, evaluate options if you are having trouble paying your mortgage loan and make a plan to get you the help you need.” The CFPB continues by stating that “unlike a broker, servicer, or another representative of your mortgage loan company, a housing counselor can offer independent advice.”

Visit www.consumerfinance.gov/find-a-housing-counselor/, which allows users to search for housing counselors by entering a ZIP code in the search field and clicking on the “Find a Counselor” button. The counseling agencies are HUD-approved and can offer independent advice about whether a particular set of mortgage loan terms is a good fit based on the user’s objectives and circumstances, often at little or no cost to the user.

Q: Where can I find training on Marketing and Outreach strategies?

A: Check out Marketing and Outreach courses and resources from HUD’s Housing Counseling Program Training grantees including:

1. NeighborWorks® America offers an online course, ML162el Marketing Your Programs and Organization.

2. National Council of La Raza’s Homeownership Network Learning Alliance offers a webinar, Program Sustainability Marketing and Funding your Non-profit.

3. The Virginia Housing Development Authority also has available a YouTube video, Marketing 101 for nonprofit entities.

More information on training resources can be found on the OHC’s Training Resources webpage.
There are a variety of technology tools that help housing counseling agencies and their clients save time and resources, as well as attain positive outcomes for homebuyers, homeowners, renters, and consumers facing financial challenges.

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<th>Tool/Resource</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>HUDhousingcounselors.com</strong></td>
<td>Designed for HUD-approved housing counseling agencies, offering free online training covering a broad range of topics including how to prepare for the upcoming, mandatory HUD-certified counselor examination.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>HUD Housing Locator iPhone App</strong></td>
<td>Free iPhone app providing efficient and reliable information for users to search for counseling agencies based on location and available languages.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hope LoanPort®</strong></td>
<td>A mega-repository of case information allowing servicers, homeowners, or their authorized third-party representatives to maintain consistency and transparency for the life-cycle of processing a foreclosure alternative application.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Homeowner Connect</strong></td>
<td>Provide consumers with educational materials and housing counselor resources when seeking mortgage assistance information.</td>
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<td><strong>Virtual Counselors Network</strong></td>
<td>Delivers tailored solutions by linking services that provide near-instant response to client needs via online, phone, or on-site.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>IndiSoft</strong></td>
<td>An interactive platform to ensure organizations remain compliant with ever-changing landscapes of external regulations. Provides flexibility to utilize existing processes to avoid major overhauls of current corporate workflows.</td>
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<td><strong>Juntos Clarifi’s Text Messaging</strong></td>
<td>Helps clients save money by sending weekly motivational and reminder texts to keep them on track to reach their stated goals. <strong>Standard text messaging rates and charges apply.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Freddie Mac - LoanProspector</strong></td>
<td>Quickly and objectively determine whether your client is ready to apply for a mortgage through this easy-to-use, online assessment tool for housing counselors.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Virginia Housing Development Authority Marketing 101</strong></td>
<td>This YouTube video provides ideas and guidance for Housing Counseling Agencies on marketing their programs and services.</td>
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<td><strong>“Fannie Mae - HOME”</strong></td>
<td>Guides homebuyers through the process of buying and owning a home. Enables counselors to walk consumers through a customized set of action steps that move the client toward a stated objective.</td>
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<td>August 03-31, 2015</td>
<td>Small Business Teaming: an Overview - Pre-recorded. By NCRC.</td>
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<td>August 03-31, 2015</td>
<td>Essential Legal Documents for Effective Small Business Teaming - Pre-recorded. By NCRC.</td>
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<td>Oklahoma City, OK. FHA Servicing &amp; Loss Mitigation Training. By HUD's National Servicing Center.</td>
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<td>San Francisco, CA. IRS Educational Training for Exempt Organizations.</td>
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<td>August 18, 2015</td>
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<td>August 26-27, 2015</td>
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Visit the [Office of Housing Counseling Training webpage](#) to keep up-to-date on the latest training, events, and webinars. If you missed a webinar, visit the [Webinar Archive webpage](#) to access previously recorded sessions.

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