

**BREAKING NEWS**

[HUD Announces Start Date for Housing Counselor Certification Examination](#)

# Housing Counseling Benefits Rural America



## Expanding Service Delivery Options to Overcome Barriers in Rural Areas

**Sioux Falls, SD** - A young couple is eager to begin looking for their first home but doesn't know where to start. A retiree needs to refinance a mortgage in order to get out from under a balloon payment, but is told she is too old to apply for a loan. A young man out on his own for the first time needs help setting up a budget. A single mom has gotten in over her head in payday loan debt and wants to find a way out. A young man needs to clean up past credit mistakes and get his student loans back in good standing so he can go back to college and be promoted at his job. A homeowner with an advanced degree has been chronically under-employed and is worried as the mortgage payment is two months behind.

[Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota \(LSS\)](#), a HUD-approved housing counseling agency, has helped members of rural communities in all of these situations. Living in a rural community has its advantages and challenges. It can be great to know all of your neighbors and have a complete understanding of the local resources available in your area. On the other hand, it can be unnerving to feel like everyone around you knows your personal business – especially when you are facing a financial challenge.

LSS began offering housing counseling and education in 1984. It provides housing assistance to those in crisis as well as education and support for those looking to start off on the right foot. Much of its service area is in rural communities where a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Early on, LSS determined that access to housing counseling for rural areas could be a barrier, so it began offering phone counseling as a service delivery option to reach those where the nearest housing counseling office may be hundreds of miles or hours from home. Online and video conferencing sessions have also been added to expand LSS's reach.

Similar to urban areas, technology that allows additional service delivery options has improved assistance for those in rural areas, beyond solving the transportation barrier. In LSS's experience, distance, convenience, schedule and privacy prompt consumers to choose the service delivery method that best fits their need. For example, phone and online options may be used to protect anonymity in small communities; online counseling allows 24-7 access to accommodate schedules, daycare or accessibility issues; video conferencing allows a face-to-face session when distance doesn't allow for a trip to an office.

*(continued on pg. 3)*

# FROM THE DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY



**Sarah Gerecke**  
Deputy Assistant  
Secretary, Office of  
Housing Counseling

Greetings,

The day that we've all been waiting for is finally here! August 1, 2017 is the start date for the [HUD Certified Housing Counselor Examination!](#) It has been a collaborative journey and I want to thank everyone who contributed to reaching this major milestone for the housing counseling profession. Kudos to a job well done!

We are excited about the future of housing counseling and this edition of 'The Bridge,' brings attention to housing counseling in rural America. The U.S. Census Bureau defines 'rural' as: [All population, housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster.](#) As a result, the rural portion of the United States encompasses a wide variety of settlements, from densely settled small towns and "large-lot" housing subdivisions on the fringes of urban areas, to more sparsely populated and remote areas. According to a [Census Bureau report entitled, 'Measuring America: Our Changing Landscape,'](#) there were about 47 million adults 18 years and older living in rural areas between 2011 and 2015. Most adults in both rural and urban areas owned their own homes but the percentage was higher in rural areas (81.1 percent compared with 59.8 percent). Adults in rural areas were also more likely to live in single-family homes (78.3 percent compared with 64.6 percent).



This month, we learn how our HUD-approved housing counseling agencies serve this sometimes hard to reach population in providing housing assistance to ensure that rural communities remain viable and sustainable for all.

I have had the opportunity to visit several HUD-approved housing counseling agencies that serve rural areas, including parts of Maine, Vermont, Mississippi, and Montana that are far from the beaten path. While some of the challenges are unique, many of the solutions are relevant to anyone facing a housing challenge. Housing counselors working in cities can learn quite a bit from the creative models illustrated by the housing counseling agencies featured in this issue of 'The Bridge.'

*Sarah*

# HUD ANNOUNCES START DATE FOR HOUSING COUNSELOR CERTIFICATION EXAMINATION



Washington, DC - On May 31, 2017, HUD published a Federal Register Notice announcing the start of the HUD Certified Housing Counselor Examination on August 01, 2017. A highlight of the Notice was the announcement that the cost for the Housing Counseling Certification Examination has been reduced to \$60.00 on line at the examinee's location and \$100.00 at a proctoring site.

In anticipation of the August 1 start date, housing counselors are encouraged to create a user account now at: [www.hudhousingcounselors.com](http://www.hudhousingcounselors.com). Counselors will need to provide their name and email to create their account, which will enable them to access training materials and track their progress in the online course. The same account portal will provide access to both the practice exam and the certification exam registration when they become available.

For more information about HUD Housing Counseling certification, visit the HUD Exchange website, which also provides helpful training and webinar archives. For questions on Housing Counselor Certification or any housing counseling topic, please email HUD at: [housing.counselors@hud.gov](mailto:housing.counselors@hud.gov).

*(continued from pg. 1- Expanding Service Delivery Options to Overcome Barriers in Rural Areas)*



*Sylvia Selgestad (L) with clients*

Each method of service delivery offers an interactive opportunity to share financial details with a counselor. LSS counselors familiar with the rural community resources respond with options and information to help individuals and families reach their goals.

A financial counselor in a rural setting can utilize the strength of the tight-knit community to form collaborative networks such as organizing or attending inter-agency meetings. Counselors have the advantage of a great understanding of the community they serve and being very familiar with available resources. However, challenges in a rural community may include varied or limited resources. For example, there may be no public transportation, the nearest food pantry or crisis center may be in another county, and housing or employment options may be scarce. These factors can limit the available options when income drops or unforeseen expenses occur.

No matter where people live, there can be a stigma associated with seeking help for financial matters. People may feel they should "just know" what to do. Sylvia Selgestad, an LSS counselor had this response for those feeling uneasy about seeking assistance, "Managing money is a skill that must be learned like any other. For some, it is easier than for others, but everyone can learn the basics. If your car breaks down and you don't know how to fix it, you find someone who does. The same can follow for finances. If someone's finances have 'broken down' the LSS Center for Financial Resources can be the mechanic, helping to figure out the problem and identify solutions."

## PROVIDING REAL HELP FOR RURAL FAMILIES



New Castle, PA - In Western Pennsylvania, the people, towns and community resources are sprinkled across 15,000+ square miles. For years, this meant that some areas had access to many housing resources, while others had little to no services. Lawrence County Community Action Partnership (LCCAP), a HUD-approved housing counseling agency, recognizes that while the housing needs and services might look different in rural areas, the needs of rural residents are the same as those in urban areas. No matter where you come from, all people want safe, affordable housing.

Over the last 10 years, as its services expanded, LCCAP began to recognize that needs of small rural towns and smaller population areas sometimes can be overshadowed by the needs of large, urban areas. To be sure that the residents of Western PA benefit from the services available, LCCAP has created an innovative, regional approach to programming.

Utilizing funds awarded through HUD and the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, LCCAP partners with local organizations within a 20 County service area. This model is built on flexibility and mobility of staff and the use of technology. People in rural areas are often required to travel more than an hour to access services or to find employment, but often do not have reliable transportation. To address this, local partner organizations are centrally located within each County to ease transportation issues and employ case managers who mobilize and meet with families in a variety of settings including diners, social service agencies, homes, etc.

Through the use of technology, such as tablets with internet access and cell phones with hot spots, case managers are able to screen households for services and provide linkages to meet household needs, housing search and placement services, rental and financial assistance, household budget help, and follow up. This allows case managers to capitalize on each meeting with participants and provide real help in each and every encounter.

Recently, LCCAP was made aware of a female Veteran residing with her two preschool aged children in Clearfield County, PA. She had lost her employment, was three months behind in her rent, had no transportation, and was about to lose her home. Her battle with depression also complicated her situation and often left her feeling debilitated. LCCAP dispatched a case manager who traveled 40 miles to meet with the Veteran at her home. As a result of that encounter, this household received Emergency Solutions Grant funds, which stopped her eviction and provided financial assistance over the next four months.

Additionally, the case manager was able to provide her with immediate referrals for food and utility assistance and inform her about Early Learning Programs for her children. LCCAP's case manager will continue to follow up with the client on a monthly basis and will coordinate with mental health services to be sure she is treated for her depression. Had it not been for the flexibility of the programming, this family would not have had the resources to get to services so far away and would have likely ended up in an emergency shelter.

To date, LCCAP's regional housing services have served over 500 households. These programs have provided real help for rural families and has a 90 percent housing placement success rate. As a Community Action Agency, LCCAP is committed to providing opportunities for clients to increase their quality of life and self-sufficiency. LCCAP utilizes HUD funds through its regional Lead Hazard Control Grant, a regional Emergency Solutions Grant, and eight Continuum of Care grants. These funds provide assistance to people residing in unsafe and/or substandard homes as well as homeless and near homeless households. Each year, more than 8,000 households are impacted through the efforts of LCCAP.

## WORKING TO IMPROVE HOMEOWNERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY

Deadwood, SD - [NeighborWorks® Dakota Home Resources of the Black Hills \(NWDHR\)](#) is headquartered in the rural mountain town of Deadwood, South Dakota. Established in 1992 as a community outreach organization and joining the [NeighborWorks® Network](#) in 1998, NWDHR is celebrating its 25th year of service to Western South Dakota with housing counselors at the forefront of this success.

In late 2016, Carol, a HUD- approved housing counselor at NWDHR, started working with Chris, a disabled veteran with 22 years of service in the Navy and a homeowner of an older substandard home. Together they developed a work plan to address his housing issues and improve his homeownership sustainability.

Carol counseled him on a variety of topics including rehabilitation programs that he may qualify for, how the programs work and what would be expected of him. She explained the need for homeowner's insurance, how it works and how to shop for it in the marketplace. They reviewed other social service programs including energy assistance and food stamps and she directed him to rural agencies that help Veterans. Carol and Chris also worked steadily on improving his credit score.

Some believe that counseling in rural areas is more time consuming and difficult than in urban and suburban settings. For example, distance between the client and the counselor can be burdensome for the client, especially if he or she is a senior or disabled. Documents that need to be signed during the loan and grant process require multiple sessions that cannot be done over the telephone. Rural areas don't provide public transportation as in larger metropolitan areas so clients need family members or friends to get them to and from counseling sessions, this is true for Homebuyer Education as well.

As a result of Carol and Chris's teamwork, he received a loan in the amount of \$6,000 from the South Dakota Housing Development Authority coupled with \$905 from the NeighborWorks® Dakota Home Resources Neighborhood Lending Services Fund. With these funds Chris replaced substandard windows and repaired a major foundation leak at his home.



In the spring of 2017, NeighborWorks® Dakota Home Resources sponsored and supported Chris as a recipient for a \$13,000 grant from one of their working partners, Housing Foundation Grant Program. The Foundation works with nonprofit organizations like NeighborWorks® to create affordable and sustainable housing initiatives serving low- and moderate-income households, including those for seniors, veterans, and under-served families. Its mission is to build stronger communities by investing and volunteering in support of neighborhood revitalization efforts.

Chris has been granted the Foundation funds and will fix the damage in his basement caused by the leak as well as install a handicap walk-in shower and new kitchen cabinets.

Rehabilitation can be expensive in rural areas due to the scarcity and noncompetition of contractors. In rural South Dakota, many contractors are not licensed or properly insured because of the unsteady flow of work and expense. However, NeighborWorks® Dakota Home Resources lending counselors and rehab specialists have developed good relationships with contractors ensuring that clients get quality workmanship at a decent and affordable price from a licensed and insured contractor.

## HOUSING COUNSELING IN DEMAND IN RURAL TOWNS & COMMUNITIES

Raleigh, NC – “When we started planning the successful Renters Program with other community partners, we did it because the need was so great for housing counseling and financial education,” says Jennie Shriner, Housing Counselor in a branch office located in eastern West Virginia. “One of the local judges told us he was seeing more than 40 evictions each week and that many times it was because tenants didn’t understand their responsibilities and rights.” Her story is like many throughout the rural communities and towns served by [Telamon Corporation](#), a HUD-approved national intermediary whose mission is to provide educational services that lead to better jobs, better lives, and better communities.

Although many programs and initiatives are aimed at metropolitan areas where needs tend to consolidate creating the greatest demand for action, those needs are often equally present in the towns and communities that make up the rural landscapes in America. For more than 50 years, Telamon has worked in collaboration with other stakeholders offering solutions to affordable housing, financial education, and opportunities for upward mobility in rural towns and communities. More than 50 percent of Telamon’s counseling population reside in these areas.

In Virginia, Program Coordinator and Housing Counselor, Tytiana Dennis, works with individuals and families to make homeownership a reality. “You do better when you know better. The one thing that we see here is that people just don’t know. They know that people own homes, but it’s as if it never occurred to them that they too, could own a home,” said Dennis.

“When I’m doing outreach and teaching these workshops in the community, my goal is to change mindsets from just paying rent at the same house for 20 years, to investing in homeownership, having fixed payments, and moving towards economic stability.” The homeownership program in Virginia targets low-to moderate-income populations throughout seven counties with nearly 80 percent of participants purchasing their first home within one year of beginning the program.

In rural Indiana, counselors with Telamon and its affiliates work across 35 counties combatting a foreclosure crisis that still



lingers outside of major metro areas like Indianapolis. “We still see it here in full force. When businesses shut down back in the housing crisis, we never saw them come back to these areas. So here are our customers, stuck in homes that can’t sell with a mortgage they can’t pay,” said Clena Smith, Program Coordinator for housing programs in Indiana. For these families, Smith and her team work to transition them from homeownership to affordable rentals. “Trying to help families transition is difficult. Rental housing becomes limited the further you get from Indy.”

In 2016, Telamon and its network of affiliates and sub grantees prevented 1,335 foreclosures in rural service areas. Throughout Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and the eastern shore of Maryland and Delaware, Telamon provides housing counseling services targeting rural farmworkers. “It’s hard to communicate the need that exists with these populations,” said Brandon Bell, Housing Director for Telamon. “Often times, we’re working with families that have very limited knowledge of managing finances and understanding their rights as tenants. In many cases, just getting customers banked is an accomplishment. From there, we go to work on teaching mindsets that ultimately lead to homeownership and upward mobility.”

In 2016, Telamon assisted more than 1,100 individuals and families with understanding their fair rights and responsibilities as tenants and avoiding eviction. This was accomplished through three lines of business and programs in: Workforce & Career Services, Early Childhood & Family Services, and Housing & Financial Empowerment.

# COMMUNITY-BASED HOUSING COUNSELING STRATEGIES FOR RURAL AREAS



Washington, DC - According to mortgage application data, credit history is the most frequent reason for home purchase loan denials. In 2014, approximately 47 percent of denied mortgage applications in rural and small town areas were based on negative credit history or a high debt to income ratio. Similarly, a recent review of mortgage applications from [USDA's rural homeownership program](#) indicated that 45 percent of denials were based on unfavorable credit history.

Nonprofit housing providers have long commented that in order to find qualified borrowers for affordable homeownership programs, they must often consider hundreds of applicants, largely because of credit problems and debt load. Poor credit histories, especially when combined with low incomes, put homeownership out of reach for many rural residents. Housing counseling can teach these potential homeowners how to resolve credit problems and improve their financial management.

[The Housing Assistance Council \(HAC\)](#) is a national nonprofit that has helped local organizations build affordable homes in rural America since 1971. The organization emphasizes local solutions, empowerment of the poor, reduced dependence, and self-help housing strategies. While HAC works across rural America, it has traditionally placed special emphasis in high-need areas including: Appalachia, the Colonias (unregulated settlements) along the U.S. and Mexico border, the lower Mississippi Delta and rural Southeast, and Native American communities.

Over its 46-year history, HAC has increased the capacity of hundreds of rural organizations across the nation to efficiently combine private investment and federal, state, and local programs to leverage private funds and significantly expand their impact.

Here are examples of two rural organizations that have improved its housing counseling capabilities with HAC's help.

1. [Hale Empowerment & Revitalization Organization, Inc. \(HERO\)](#) works as a catalyst for community development in areas of the Alabama Black Belt. As a HUD-approved housing counseling agency, HERO provides homeownership, loss mitigation, aid to reduce homelessness, reverse mortgage counseling, rental and repair options to its communities.

HERO has provided comprehensive housing counseling in Hale and surrounding Alabama counties for over 10 years, serving over 500 people per year through its counseling program. Families can participate in education workshops for homeownership, financial literacy, energy efficiency, fair housing, fair lending, and loss mitigation. Clients can also choose support from a housing counselor for pre-purchase, reverse mortgage, rental, down payment assistance, and homeless counseling.

2. [Southside Outreach Group \(SOG\)](#) has served the south side of Virginia for more than 20 years. Initially, the organization was comprised of volunteers and provided rehabilitation for owner-occupied homes. SOG discovered that many clients had no money saved to address home maintenance or repairs. The organization began to offer financial literacy classes and budgeting assistance with the goal of helping homeowners to afford repairs as soon as the need arises, when they are less costly to address.

As SOG's service area and housing development activities expanded, so did its need to provide an array of housing counseling services. In 2013, SOG became a HUD-approved housing counseling agency. Since then, SOG has increased its partnerships with both USDA Rural Development and [Virginia Housing Development Authority](#). Both lenders now regularly refer clients to SOG for pre-purchase counseling and assistance.

HAC strives to understand and expand successful counseling approaches to work in rural communities. One thing is clear: as highlighted by the success of HERO and SOG, successful counseling strategies are always community-based.

# SUCCESS STORY

## Realizing a Dream Never Thought Possible

**Morgantown, WV** - With a targeted area that includes Monongalia County, Marion County, Preston County, Taylor County, the City of Fairmont, and the City of Morgantown in West Virginia, [Fairmont-Morgantown Housing Authority \(FMHA\)](#) primarily serves clients from areas that are identified as rural areas by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Much of FMHA's target population is also characterized as living in poorer economic conditions, having lower incomes, and reaching lower levels of educational attainment. In addition, the local housing stock is plagued with a lack of safe, affordable and accessible housing. Housing counseling services provided through [FMHA's HomeOwnership Program](#) seeks to address these issues by helping clients to improve their credit scores, develop and maintain household budgets, implement a family savings account, and assist in resolving credit report disputes. FMHA also provides group education to help attendees gain an overview of the home buying process and to provide home maintenance training.

While FMHA has assisted many rural area housing counseling clients throughout the years, one noteworthy client FMHA recently helped to achieve her housing goal is named Felicia. Felicia spent her youth growing up in the foster care system and living in various group homes. The experience of enduring such an unstable childhood left her wondering where she would end up in the future. As an adult, Felicia was able to find valuable assistance and support at the [Disability Action Center \(DAC\)](#) in Fairmont, West Virginia. She was even able to gain employment by working for the DAC. It was during this time that she first became familiar with the housing counseling and education services provided through the FMHA's HomeOwnership Program.

After several bad experiences left her feeling dissatisfied with renting, Felicia came to realize that she had a strong desire to purchase her own home. To pursue this goal, she enrolled in FMHA's housing counseling program. Her FMHA housing counselor, Theresa Nichols, educated Felicia on how to keep track of her finances by accurately maintaining a household budget. She also taught Felicia about the importance of establishing and building good credit to obtain approval from lenders for a home loan purchase.



*Felicia (L) on her front porch*

After agreeing upon an individualized action plan with Ms. Nichols, Felicia worked diligently to accumulate her savings and improve her credit score. She also attended FMHA's homebuyer education class to gain additional knowledge about the home buying process and receive home maintenance tips. Determined to achieve her goal, Felicia completed the items listed in her housing counseling action plan within six months of her initial appointment with FMHA.

After reviewing her financial situation, Ms. Nichols, deemed Felicia ready to pursue homeownership. On the advice of her housing counselor, Felicia applied for and received approval from a home mortgage lender. With additional support from the DAC and FMHA's HomeOwnership Center, Felicia was able to achieve her goal and become a first-time homebuyer, an opportunity that was hard for her to imagine as a youth.

Thanks in large part to the assistance that she received from the FMHA, Felicia finally feels safe and secure for the first time in her life as a new homeowner. When asked what words of advice she would offer to someone else that wants to purchase a home, Felicia said, "Take advantage of the community resources that exist."

The housing counseling and education services provided by FMHA gave Felicia the confidence that she needed to pursue her goal and help her realize a dream that she never thought would be possible.

## SUCCESS STORY

### Finding Solutions to Keep the Family Farm

Gahanna, OH - [Apprisen](#) is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization and HUD-approved housing counseling agency that has been helping rural homeowners reach and maintain their dream of homeownerships for over 60 years.

Apprisen is constantly evolving and adapting to the personal financial needs of families in its communities. Traditionally, Apprisen's clients seek out the agency in times of financial crisis. For many rural Americans, this means they are struggling to maintain their monthly mortgage payments or find affordable housing in their town. The problems faced by rural Americans are unique and Apprisen works one-on-one with individuals and families to help them find solutions.

One such individual was Todd, who initially fell behind on his mortgage due to a disability that prevented him from performing his manual labor tasks. Todd was determined not to lose his family farm. When he initially began to fall behind, he started to apply for assistance options. He was told not to make payments while his file was under review. After months and years of review and myriad mailings of documents, Todd's file was either denied or closed out before a review could be completed.

During this time his mortgage fell further and further behind. By the time Todd came into Apprisen, he was not even looking for housing information; he was filing Chapter 7 bankruptcy to save his home and farm. Apprisen strongly recommended that he try again for a modification with its help. Todd and Apprisen persisted through multiple denials and appeals to finally get him approved for a modification that balanced his budget, avoided bankruptcy and allowed him to keep the family farm that he loved.

While many in the housing industry often hear about lingering effects of the housing recession and the new affordability crisis that is occurring in cities nationwide, there is less talk about the real struggles facing rural homeowners. Poverty is high in rural areas and much of the affordable housing inventory is in need of repair.



Many homeowners find themselves unable to maintain their homes and new inventory is often rare and unaffordable. [National Rural Housing Coalition](#), Executive Secretary, Bob Rapoza said, "In smaller, poorer areas, it's very difficult to get the private sector to come in and pay for housing...the federal programs that have been lifelines for these areas have really been cut back. Development funding for these areas has been cut by 75 percent over the last 40 years." In addition, the changing structure of the American economy means that many jobs are leaving rural America. Job loss can quickly lead to financial and housing insecurity.

Through partnerships with HUD and state housing coalitions, Apprisen provides counseling and coaching to help rural individuals maintain housing security, find affordable housing, and build their overall financial health. A recent housing coaching program demonstrated the positive effects coaching can have on homeowners. Coaching clients showed increased levels of savings, reduced levels of debt and increased mortgage equity. By the end of the program, 94 percent of participants were current on their mortgage.

Through organizations like Apprisen, rural homeowners can find solutions to their unique financial and housing concerns.

# PROMOTING EDUCATION, SELF-EMPOWERMENT AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY



**Yakima, WA** - [Catholic Charities Housing Services \(CCHS\)](#) is a faith-based, non-profit corporation established in December 1998 to offer locally-based affordable housing solutions to communities in the seven-county jurisdiction of the Catholic Diocese of Yakima. This area includes Klickitat, Yakima, Benton, Kittitas, Grant, Chelan and Douglas Counties in Washington State. CCHS provides affordable housing options to meet the continuum of housing needs in the communities it serves.

Working with local Catholic parishes, community groups and others sponsors, CCHS develops, owns and manages a variety of affordable housing developments that serve low-income, vulnerable and underserved populations. These affordable housing options include workforce, senior and special needs housing, and single-family homeownership. In addition to housing, CCHS provides a service-enriched living environment at each development where education, self-empowerment and self-sufficiency are promoted to benefit all residents and clients.

CCHS also promotes partnerships with local communities, collaborates and networks with other housing and community development entities as well as advocates for affordable housing and other issues; giving voice to the clients CCHS serves at the federal, state, and local policy levels.

## Serving Those Most in Need

CCHS offers development assistance for multi-family and single-family housing. Working with development consultants, CCHS offers full housing development services including: feasibility analysis, pre-development technical

assistance, housing needs analysis, land assembly, development technical assistance, securing pre-development and permanent financing, design and total cost assessment, construction monitoring and draw processing, compliance assurance for financing requirements, assistance with marketing and rent up, ongoing management of rental facilities, resident services and homebuyer education.

CCHS always seeks to develop its housing with attention to energy efficiency and quality, durable materials given the budgeting parameters. This includes a preference for the highest life-cycle value for all materials with a priority for "green" and sustainable building methods to create the best service-enriched and resident-friendly environment possible.

Through its ["New Life Homes"](#) self-help, homeownership program, CCHS is providing lower income, first-time home buyers the chance of a lifetime to own their own home at an affordable cost. Through this innovative program, CCHS offers families a way to purchase their home with financing that is commensurate with their income, as well as become educated on all the elements of homeownership such as budgeting and home maintenance. Families also work on their homes investing "sweat equity" that further helps them buy their home at an affordable cost.

CCHS mutual self-help requires households to contribute 65 percent of the labor towards the construction of their homes. Currently, CCHS is building homes in Prosser, Sunnyside and Tieton in Washington State.

CCHS is one of the largest developer of affordable single-family housing in central Washington State; to date, more than 150 single family homes have been built. All of the families served are below the 80 percent Area Median Income and most are first-time home buyers who work in farming.

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## INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW



One of the critical functions for the Office of Housing Counseling (OHC) focuses on reviewing agencies for compliance with HUD Housing Counseling Program standards. The Bridge Team reached out to the Office of Oversight and Accountability, which oversees OHC's performance review activities, to find out what are the most frequent findings identified by HUD staff. The segment below discusses these findings and provides resources to find out more about each topic.

**Q: What are the most common performance review findings identified by HUD staff?**

**A:** The most frequently cited findings are:

1. Supervisory reviews not documented.
2. Disclosure statement missing or not compliant with HUD regulations.
3. Reported 9902 impacts not supported by documentation in client files.

**Q: What is required by HUD for supervisory review of housing counseling staff?**

**A:** HUD Handbook 7610.1, Chapter 6, Paragraph 6.1 K requires that supervisors of housing counselors must monitor the work of the housing counselors by reviewing client files with the housing counselor to determine the adequacy and effectiveness of the housing counseling. This requirement applies to all agencies participating in HUD's Housing Counseling Program including subgrantees and affiliates of intermediaries and state housing finance agencies (SHFA). Each agency must document these monitoring activities and make the documentation available to HUD upon request.

HUD Housing Counseling Program Comprehensive grant agreements also list monitoring requirements. Intermediaries and SHFAs should carefully review each grant agreement for more information. In addition, HUD has developed a [Quality Control Plan Toolkit](#) for intermediaries and SHFAs that oversee a network of affiliates and subgrantees, which outlines best practices for network oversight and can be found at the HUD Exchange.

**Q: Why does HUD require an agency disclosure for housing counseling clients and what are the key components of a disclosure?**

**A:** HUD requires all participating agencies to provide a client disclosure as part of the Housing Counseling Program's conflict of interest regulations and handbook guidance (24CFR214.303(f) and HUD Handbook 7610.1, Rev-5, Chapter 6, Paragraph 6-2). Agency staff shall avoid any action that might result in, or create the appearance of, administering the housing counseling operation for personal or private gain. The disclosure statement explicitly describes the various types of services provided by the agency as well as any exclusive, financial or other relationships between the agency and any other industry partners that are relevant to the client's service plan. Disclosures must clearly state that the client is not obligated to receive, purchase, or utilize any other services offered by the organization or its exclusive partners in order to receive housing counseling services.

Disclosure statements must be retained in the counseling or group education file. For clients with whom the agency meets face-to-face, a written disclosure must be provided. For clients receiving counseling by another format, for example telephone counseling, the agency must verbally or electronically provide a disclosure that meets the disclosure requirements. Review OHC's [Disclosure Toolkit here](#).

*(continued on pg. 13)*

## SUCCESS STORY

**Washington, PA** - Ed, a 70-year old disabled man confined to a wheelchair, paid his rent every month but still faced eviction after minor disagreements with property management over maintenance. Additionally, after living there 10 years, the property manager attempted to interfere with Ed's ability to find new, affordable housing.

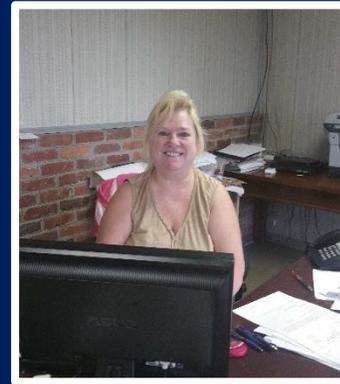
Ed came to Southwestern PA Legal Services (SPLS) for help with an eviction case. Instead of only engaging in a court action that could result in Ed scrambling for housing if eviction was granted, Washington County Paralegal Ron Lanning negotiated a delay in Ed's move to other affordable housing for low-income residents while helping Ed to secure that new home and transition there.

SPLS offers free civil legal services to those who cannot afford an attorney and have essential needs related to abuse, parental rights, housing, income, employment and debt. Located in the rural southwestern corner of Pennsylvania outside of Pittsburgh, its four counties' demographics resemble much of rural Appalachia:

- 92 to 95 percent are Caucasian
- Poverty is as high as 20.2 percent, in Fayette County
- Elderly comprise as much as 21 percent in Somerset County (national rate is 14.9 percent),
- Veterans range from 8.6 to 9.1 percent, with the national rate at 6.4 percent and
- Residents in two counties have college degrees at half of the national rate of 29.3 percent.

For elderly, disabled client Ed, SPLS did not wait for an eviction complaint to get involved. Ron negotiated a delay with the property manager, convincing her that they might avoid court if Ron could help Ed to secure new housing. Ron made a direct pitch to housing authority management in a community in the same county while working with Ed on his housing budget plan.

Two weeks later, Ed, two friends and Ron arrived at the new apartment with a U-Haul. Upon opening the door, Ed hugged Ron and said, "Son, you did me well."



*Sharon Kreger*

Ron and Ed still talk about once a week to discuss his current home and future opportunities.

Ron stated, "There just doesn't seem to be the level of compassion needed by property owners and managers to understand the devastating impact an eviction can bring upon individuals and families. Also, property owners and managers often don't know the legal procedures required to evict a tenant. So, this adds to the problems even more."

Somerset County Paralegal Sharon Kreger, a former Community Action Housing caseworker, has counseled many homeowners going through foreclosure and tenants facing eviction. Sharon stated, "The program that our agency provides for foreclosure counseling has saved many homes throughout the years, not only by assisting with loan or grant applications to pay the amount in default but also with modifications to lower the amount of the existing loans or their interest rates. Our agency has helped many families stay in their neighborhoods and their homes. I am proud to be part of an agency that can help people in so many ways and continue to live the American Dream!"

Executive Director Brian Gorman explains, "We don't want to just use words like 'collaborative' and 'holistic.' Programs like housing counseling bring those words to life. Paralegals complement attorneys with budget and housing plans and they work hand-in-hand with social workers to make sure that clients have safe, affordable housing. It allows us to broaden the focus beyond the problem right in front of us so that clients can stop thinking about days, weeks and months and start thinking about years."

## SUCCESS STORY

(continued from pg. 10 – Promoting Education, Self-Empowerment and Self-Sufficiency)

**Yakima, WA** - One of [Catholic Charities Housing Services \(CCHS\)](#) featured participants of its mutual self-help program is Herlinda Alcocer, a 39-year old farmworker, who has been farming since she was a teenager.

She works primarily picking grapes, apples and hops depending on what is harvesting at any given time. In the winter, temperatures can dip into the single digits and during the summer months, they can reach over 100 degrees. During the peak of the harvesting season, Herlinda sometimes works 10 -12 hours daily in less than ideal conditions. At the moment, there are days when she is working close to 15 hours between her regular job and the contribution of at least 30 hours of sweat equity each week as required by CCHS's mutual-self-help program.

Herlinda has been dreaming of becoming a homeowner since she had her first child, who is now 21 years old and living away from home. She is extremely excited about the opportunity to finally own a home, even when working under the scorching sun. She is very upbeat and thankful for having the opportunity to learn new home building skills. "I am very proud about the fact I will be the first homeowner in my family," said Herlinda.

It hasn't been an easy road for Herlinda, she had to overcome many challenges along the way such as not knowing where to find information, fixing and establishing credit, and qualifying for affordable housing.

In farming communities the information is not readily available and in most cases there isn't enough housing inventory. "After renting for over 20 years, I am looking forward to having a place I can call my own," said Herlinda. She is planning to spend her first holidays with her six children and celebrating in their new home.

CCHS is proud to serve families every step of the way. Some of the families receive CCHS counseling for two to three years while they work on repairing and establishing credit, consolidating debt and eventually going through the mortgage application process.



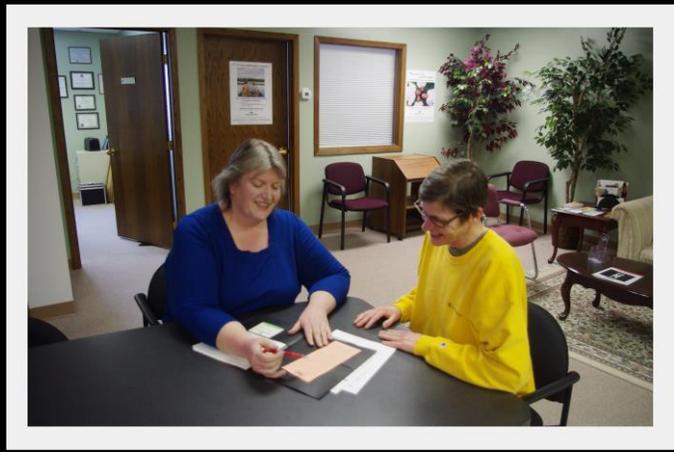
Herlinda Alcocer (C) & family

(continued from pg. 11 – Inquiring Minds Want to Know)

**Q:** What guidance is available for completing Section 10, *Impact and Scope of One-on-One Counseling Services* on HUD form 9902, *Housing Counseling Agency Activity Report* and what file documentation should be included in client files when reporting outcomes under Section 10?

**A:** Please review [HUD Form 9902 Desk Guide](#) for guidance and tips in completing Section 10. The desk guide describes under what circumstances a specific outcome should be reported for one-on-one clients. The client file notes must also support the outcome. For example, under *Section 10 e., Households that gained access to resources to help them improve their housing situation after receiving Housing Counseling Services*, the desk guide notes "To record a household in this category, at a minimum the counselor must provide referral to a resource or assist with an application for a resource AND confirm the household applied for the resource. HCAs do not have to obtain proof that the household actually received the resource. Simply providing the household a flyer or referring them to another entity is not adequate." The tip indicates this information would be confirmed through follow-up. The client file notes should document that the client was provided information on resources and also note that follow-up contact confirmed the client applied for the resource.

## CHAMPION OF SERVICE



**Sioux Falls, SD** – Sylvia Selgestad has provided housing counseling and education at Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota since 2011. Her primary South Dakota service area is the community of Yankton (population under 15,000) but she also provides services to individuals and families in Vermillion (population under 11,000) as well as surrounding rural areas.

Sylvia's supervisor Sara Ramirez complimented her work: "Sylvia has a very good understanding of the unique challenges our rural clients face. These may include limited housing or employment options, or higher commuter costs, for example. She is very knowledgeable and is able to help clients locate resources and assistance agencies. She also works to partner with other service providers in the communities we serve to collaborate on ways to deliver and promote financial resources, education, and counseling."

As a counselor for LSS, Sylvia provides a variety of housing counseling and education. Serving a rural area, Sylvia has an in-depth knowledge of a variety of options, services, referrals and topics to ensure she can address housing issues at all levels for those seeking services. The full array of housing resources she provides includes:

- Counseling and education for renters on Tenant Rights and Responsibilities.
- First-time homebuyer sessions, with partners like Habitat for Humanity.

- Homebuyer Express, a homebuyer education workshop.
- Foreclosure prevention, providing guidance through the complicated arena of options.
- Collaborating with partners in her community working to find housing for those who have credit or criminal histories.

Teaching these classes is one of the parts of her job that Sylvia enjoys the most. "It can be daunting to walk into a room of inmates, all sitting there with arms crossed, daring you to teach them something. There is not much more satisfying than the moment they uncross their arms and lean forward to engage with the lesson."

Sylvia challenges herself to approach each client with a fresh perspective, recognizing that while situations may be similar, each client has their own story. This approach helps her connect and build rapport with clients and with the communities that she serves. One client recently commented on a satisfaction survey,

*"I want you to know that even before I knew about this survey I was planning on contacting you on Sylvia Selgestad's behalf. I honestly do not think I've ever met with a nicer person in my life! You hear about people like her in the world and it helps regain faith in humans everywhere. But to see such a person myself act as genuine as her raised my belief that there are people in this world meant to work in the people business. Please let her know that I could not wait to tell my family and friends that I just met the nicest person in my life at my session with your company. Thanks."*

**CONGRATULATIONS SYLVIA SELGESTAD,  
YOU ARE A CHAMPION OF SERVICE!**

# TOOLS AND RESOURCES



## [HUD Rural Housing & Economic Development](#)

Supports capacity building at the state and local level for rural housing and economic development and innovative housing and economic development activities in rural areas.



## [U.S. Census Report – Measuring America](#)

New Census Data Show Differences Between Urban and Rural Populations



## [USDA Rural Housing Programs](#)

Committed to helping improve the economy and quality of life in rural America.



## [Virginia Rural Housing Initiative](#)

Housing Virginia has completed a full narrative report on the state of rural housing in Virginia. Find the full report and a 4-page research brief here.



## [HUD Emergency Solutions Grant Funds](#)

May be used for five program components: street outreach, emergency shelter, homelessness prevention, rapid re-housing assistance, and HMIS; as well as administrative activities.



## [HUD Rural Housing Stability Assistance Program](#)

To re-house or improve the housing situations of persons who are homeless or in the worst housing situation; stabilize the housing of individuals and families who are at risk of becoming homeless; and improve the ability of the lowest income residents of the county to afford stable housing.



## [Rural Rental Assistance](#)

To reduce the rent paid by low-income families who live in eligible Rural Rental Housing (RRH) and Farm Labor Housing (FLH) projects financed by the Rural Housing Service.



## [The Housing Assistance Council \(HAC\)](#)

National nonprofit organization that helps build homes and communities across rural America.

