

## **Alternatives for Accessing and Expanding Housing Opportunities for People with Disabilities**

As discussed in the Housing Options Training module 2 (HOT 2), local public housing agencies, sometimes referred to as public housing authorities (PHAs), are the gateway to many housing-subsidy programs. You should identify which PHAs serve your community and then gather as much information as possible in order to understand their policies and programs. The following are some key facts about PHAs in Pennsylvania and questions you can ask to better inform yourself and be prepared to take advantage of available resources.

### **Pennsylvania Laws Governing PHAs**

**Fact:** Pennsylvania law provides legislation enabling each county or city to establish a PHA with the mission of building and managing housing for lower-income families, seniors and people with disabilities. As a result, some counties have only one PHA and others have multiple PHAs. In addition, some counties have joint housing authorities that cover two or more counties. You can locate your PHAs at the following link:

[https://www.hud.gov/program\\_offices/public\\_indian\\_housing/pha/contacts](https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/pha/contacts)

### **Questions to ask:**

- How many PHAs are located in our county?
- Where are they located, who is/are the current Executive Director/s, and what is the current contact information for each?

### **PHA Basic Information**

**Fact:** PHA's manage several types of programs:

- Conventional public housing, which is located in specific buildings in the community;
- The Housing Choice Voucher Program (previously known as Section 8), which provides rental assistance for eligible households living in homes throughout the community;
- Some PHAs have nonprofit affiliates that develop and manage housing.

### Questions to ask:

- Conventional Public Housing
  - ✓ Does the PHA administer conventional public housing units?
  - ✓ What is the total number of public housing units?
  - ✓ Where are they located?
  - ✓ How many units are accessible?
  
- Housing Choice Vouchers
  - ✓ Does the PHA have a Housing Choice Voucher program? If so, how many vouchers is it currently managing?
  - ✓ How many households are currently on the Housing Choice Voucher waiting list?
  
- Other Housing Programs
  - ✓ Does the PHA have any other housing programs or projects?
  - ✓ Where are they located?
  - ✓ Are they targeted to specific populations? (e.g., individuals over 55)

### PHA Waiting Lists

**Fact:** Many PHA's have long waiting lists for both public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher program.

### Questions to ask:

- Conventional Public Housing
  - ✓ What is the current number of households on the PHA's public housing waiting list?
  - ✓ How long is the average wait?
  - ✓ Are there any vacancies?
  - ✓ If so, what size units are vacant and where are they located?
  
- Housing Choice Vouchers
  - ✓ What is the current number of households on the waiting list for Housing Choice Vouchers?
  - ✓ How long is the average wait?
  - ✓ Does the PHA maintain a list of accessible units for the Housing Choice Voucher program?
  - ✓ Is the list currently open for new applicants?
  - ✓ If not, how often does the waiting list generally open?
  - ✓ When do they expect the waiting list to open again?
  - ✓ How can I be notified before or when the list will open?
  - ✓ Is the waiting list ever purged? If so, how often?

## Eligibility Requirement and Waiting List Management

**Fact:** PHA housing programs operate under multiple funding programs and therefore they have a myriad of eligibility requirements. Some are set by the federal government and others are based on local discretion.

### Questions to ask:

- What are the income and other eligibility requirements for each program?
- What portion of their income would an eligible household have to pay each month for rent under each program?
- Would this payment include utilities?
- What is the application process for each program? (where and when does it occur?)
- How are the waiting lists for public housing managed? Is there one waiting list or do households apply for each project separately?
- How is the Housing Choice Voucher waiting list managed?
- Is there a separate waiting list for people with disabilities?

## PHA Preferences

**Fact:** PHAs can include local preferences for admission to their public housing and Housing Choice Voucher programs in their U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD) required Administrative Plans. These preferences enable individuals who qualify to move up more quickly on the waiting list and also to apply for the program even if the waiting list is closed to other new applicants. For example, the PHA can establish a preference in its Housing Choice Voucher program for individuals with disabilities.

### Questions to ask:

- Does the PHA currently have any preferences in its Administrative Plan for either public housing or the Housing Choice Voucher Program?
- If so, what are the preferences and how might they benefit people with disabilities?
- How would an eligible household apply under a preference?

## Public Hearings and Community Input

**Fact:** PHAs are required to create a Five-Year Plan with annual updates as well as an Administrative Plan that sets out their policies and procedures. In developing these plans, the PHA is required to hold public hearings to obtain input from the community. You should make sure to review these plans and to attend these hearings. You can take the opportunity to make the PHA aware of the type, location, and extent of need for housing for people with disabilities in their community.

### Questions to ask:

- How often and when are these public meetings held?
- How can I be notified of these meetings?
- What information on housing needs of people with disabilities can I provide that will be helpful in developing the PHA plan?

## **Project-Based Vouchers**

**Fact:** Rather than giving Housing Choice Vouchers to individual households to rent scattered site homes in the community, PHAs can assign or “project-base” the Vouchers to specific units in the community after requesting proposals from landlords and property owners. Eligible households can then move into these units and pay the subsidized rent. However, if the household moves out of the unit, the household will lose the subsidy.

### **Questions to ask:**

- Has the PHA project-based any of their Housing Choice Vouchers?
- If so, where are they and is there a specific target population?
- Would any of these units be appropriate for people with disabilities?
- If a landlord or developer of housing needed this rental assistance to ensure affordability of new units, would the PHA consider this option and are funds available?
- Are there are developments currently in planning or development that might benefit from this resource?

## **Expanding Housing Resources for People with Disabilities**

In many communities the supply of existing resources is extremely limited. Actions can be taken by individuals with disabilities, their family members and supporters to foster the expansion of affordable, accessible housing in their communities. The following are a number of actions that can be taken in this regard.

- **Join or Attend a Local Housing Options Team (LHOT) or Housing Coalition Meeting:** In many PA communities there are already groups meeting to address the issue of affordable housing. You can find out about the meetings in your community and contact the coordinator to see about attending either on a regular basis or one time. At the meeting you can inform them about the housing needs of people with disabilities and also find out about available local housing resources and events.
- **Advocate at Public Hearings and Other Public Meetings:** As described above, PHA’s are required to hold public hearings on their Administrative Plans. Other public agencies are also required to hold public hearings on their housing programs, including for the Community Development Block Grant and HOME programs. You can attend these hearings and advocate for more housing for people with disabilities, including the type and location of housing you prefer. You

can also request meetings with local housing agency staff in order to express your needs.

- **Join a Community Group:** In addition to public housing authorities, many communities have other groups that address housing, such as housing and community development agencies and redevelopment authorities. If you are not sure how to identify the appropriate housing agencies in your community, you can contact your county commissioners or city officials. The following are some strategies you can advocate for that will expand affordable accessible housing opportunities for people with disabilities:
  - ✓ Set-asides- to designate a specific number or percent of units in a housing project for a specific sub population, such as people with disabilities
  - ✓ Preferences- for people in designated groups to receive extra points or consideration to give them priority on a waiting list (e.g., people transitioning from institutions to the community)
  - ✓ Special Purpose Vouchers- HUD periodically issues new housing choice vouchers targeted for a specific purpose or population (e.g., HUD Mainstream vouchers designated for non-elderly people with disabilities)
  - ✓ Apply for new funds- encourage your local housing agencies to respond to requests for proposals and notices of funding availability that will bring additional housing resources to your community. Information on upcoming resources is often shared in the LHOT and housing coalition meetings.
  
- **Explore Non-Traditional Housing Options:** Several counties in Pennsylvania are working with the PA Department of Aging to expand housing options such as shared housing and Elder Cottage Housing Opportunities (ECHO). The Shared Housing & Resource Exchange (SHARE) matches a host or homeowner with extra space in his/her home with a home-sharer seeking affordable housing. Elder cottages are manufactured homes for an older adult that are placed on the property of a related host family. Other innovative housing options are being provided by “microboards” or “miniboards”. For more information on these and other options for people with disabilities go to: <http://www.dma-housing.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Housing-Options-for-Adults-with-Autism-Report.pdf>
  
- **Join or Form a Nonprofit Organization:** There are many nonprofits in Pennsylvania dedicated to expanding affordable accessible housing that are willing to target people with disabilities in their projects. The Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania ([www.housingalliancepa.org](http://www.housingalliancepa.org)) or your Regional Housing Coordinator from Self Determination Housing of Pennsylvania may be able to direct you to the appropriate housing agency that is either located in or serving your community. If there is not an existing local organization, you might consider forming one with other individuals in your community that have similar housing goals. Although this effort will require considerable time, energy and expertise, it

will provide you with the platform to address your specific housing goals and objectives.

**Finally Home** is a demonstration project of Values into Action funded by the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council (PADDC) to assist individuals with disabilities from rural communities in meeting their goals to access and maintain control of their own homes. Diana T. Myers and Associates, Inc. (DMA) and Values Into Action created the **Finally Home Housing Toolkit** as a user-friendly resource providing housing information and tools for advocates, Housing Service Providers, Supports Coordinators, Supports Brokers, family members and other interested parties to support people with disabilities in securing the housing of their choice.

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