



Good Neighbors

San Diego
Housing Commission

- ◆ 1625 Newton Avenue
- ◆ San Diego, California 92113-1038
- ◆ 619.231.9400
- ◆ FAX: 619.544.9193
- ◆ www.sdhc.net

INFORMATIONAL REPORT

DATE ISSUED: February 24, 2006

REPORT NO: HCR06-04

SUBJECT: Rental Assistance Department Call Center

NO ACTION IS REQUIRED ON THE PART OF THE HOUSING COMMISSION

SUMMARY

During Fiscal Year 2004, Congress significantly reduced funding for both housing assistance payments and administrative fees. This change in funding levels necessitated a series of program changes as well as the reevaluation and streamlining of some of the rental assistance program processes. This report provides information on the current status of the Housing Commission's most recent re-engineering project, the Rental Assistance Department's Call Center.

BACKGROUND

The Section 8 Program experienced major growth over the last four years. Currently, more than 12,000 families receive subsidies to rent units owned or managed by 5,000 owners. The Department staff includes 65 housing assistants who handle all case management activities, paperwork and phone calls for the households currently assisted as well as for families and/or owners who are interested in the rental assistance program. Each household's eligibility for the program must be recertified annually, and units inspected. In addition, several hundred new families are briefed by Housing Commission staff to prepare them for program participation as voucher funding becomes available.

The average number of incoming calls to the department is over 6,500 each month. The type of information disseminated is based on program procedures and is often repetitive in nature. Rental owners, community agencies, and assisted households have, until recently, left hundreds of messages each week for Rental Assistance staff. This inefficient system often lead to "phone tag," lengthy messages and frustration for everyone involved.

Discussion

To address the problem related to telephone assistance, Housing Commission staff began to look for a solution. An idea was presented to create a call center with dedicated, full time staff that would

answer incoming phone calls. This would allow the remaining staff to focus on processing paperwork required to effectively manage the rental assistance program.

A call center committee was established to develop a planning and implementation strategy based on available data. Initial tasks undertaken by the committee included:

- Evaluation of phone records, review of type of information sought and provided, and identification of peak phone volume times;
- Contracting with a consultant to provide technical support and design specific to establishing a call center;
- Review and evaluation of other Housing Authorities' call center operations: Santa Clara and Fresno.
- Review and evaluation of information from Yellow Cab, the Veterans Administration and GEICO, on the successes and challenges of their call centers.

After careful analysis of the level of technical and administrative support needed for a successful Call Center operation, the SDHC staff established Call Center protocol. A training curriculum was developed for staff and the Call Center was marketed and explained to owners and families. Letters were sent to all participants and landlords explaining the call center idea and process; follow up communication continues as staff seeks input for improvement and feedback on this new system.

The overall goals for the Call Center include:

1. Elimination of "phone tag" and unanswered messages. Callers receive immediate technical support and program information because phone attendants have access to current on-line client files.
2. Reduction of complaints from owners and families about their inability to reach staff and access information or solutions.
3. Creation of a working environment that allows Housing Assistants time to focus on family case files and decrease the number of processing errors.
4. Preparation for future reduction in funding and/or significant changes in program regulations, e.g., Flexible Voucher program.

After six months of planning, the Call Center "went live" in early October. When an incoming call is initially picked up by the automated attendant, the caller can choose from several prompts that provide routine information, including:

- General Information
 - Location, website, fax number, etc.
- General Owner/Landlord Information
 - Vacancy list, ownership change information, inspection, information on how the program works.
- Information Regarding Leasing Process
 - Rent limits, rental information, process information regarding Request for Tenancy Approval.

- Information on Change of Income
 - How to report family/income increases and decreases.
- Waiting List Information
 - How to apply
 - Phone number
 - General waiting list information

Should a caller opt to speak with a call center attendant, the average wait time is approximately 18 minutes; wait time occasionally reaches 30 minutes during peak times. Currently the Call Center is staffed by six phone attendants. Due to the volume of calls, an additional staff member was assigned to the Center. It is expected that this additional support will reduce the waiting time.

In summary, SDHC staff considers the Call Center an evolving project. On a daily basis, primary staff review, evaluate and modify the protocol and procedures of the Call Center to continue to meet the needs of the Housing Commission and its stakeholders.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Zamora
Director of Rental Assistance

**Signature on File
With Original Document**

Approved by,

Elizabeth C. Morris
President & Chief Executive Officer