



HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHERS:

Expanding Property Owner Participation



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INTRODUCTION

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, funded through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and operated by housing authorities all over the country, allows income-eligible families and individuals access to affordable housing in communities where they want to live. The program bridges the gap between what a tenant is able to pay, and the maximum fair-market rent of the house or apartment they've selected.

Its success depends on partnerships with local landlords.

The most effective housing authorities find ways to make their HCV programs as user-friendly as possible, addressing landlord concerns and lowering barriers to make participation easy, dependable, and profitable. By going a step further and offering incentives, they can attract landlords who may need extra encouragement to rent to voucher-holders. REALTORS® are uniquely well-positioned to spread the word among property owners about the benefits of partnering with HCV programs: from tenant-matching to guaranteed rental income to inspection standards that help to maintain and increase a property's value, it can make good business sense.

Here, we've collected case studies highlighting best practices of a few housing authorities that are advancing fair and affordable housing through HCV programs. Read on to learn how REALTORS® can help.

ATLANTA HOUSING (AH)



One of the largest housing authorities in the country, **Atlanta Housing** prides itself on supplying affordable housing to nearly 25,000 households. The **Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP)** is at the heart of its housing solutions, and the partnerships that AH maintains with property owners are vital to its success. In order to keep the voucher program robust and efficient, AH has implemented key incentives and innovative resources for landlords. Several of these originated with the AH Landlord Advisory Group – which was established because a local REALTOR® stepped up with constructive suggestions.

That REALTOR® was Amy McCoy, a member of the West Georgia Board of REALTORS® with experience in property management and clients who were willing to accept vouchers. Having grown up in military housing, with extended family in Section 8 housing, she also understood the tenant side of the equation. When she approached Atlanta Housing in 2014 with feedback from a landlord’s perspective, her offer dovetailed neatly with the organization’s effort to understand the position of the property owners they were trying to attract, says Ryan Creech, Atlanta Housing’s Manager of Landlord Services. “We formed the Landlord Advisory Group, and their input gave rise to some of our core best practices.”

The volunteers helped AH identify and dispel some of the prevailing housing-voucher myths that were keeping landlords away. “We heard it all, from ‘They don’t pay market rates’ to ‘It takes months to get paid’ to ‘When you call customer service, you never speak to the same person.’ We addressed each one of these real and perceived barriers,” says Creech. “We also began to offer incentives to attract more landlords. From our Advisory Group, we learned that we needed to be giving them the kind of attention we were giving our participants.”

ATLANTA HOUSING (AH)



AH Resources for Property Owners:

- **Property Owner Portal:** The pandemic accelerated the shift to an entirely paperless system for landlords: personalized accounts now facilitate applications and management of HCVP properties, including an e-signature platform built right into the portal.
- **Dedicated Account Managers:** In response to a common frustration voiced by the Landlord Advisory Group, AH brought in additional staff so that every HCVP landlord is assigned a specific contact person. A 'buddy system' ensures continual coverage: if a portfolio manager is out of the office, a familiar colleague is on hand to help.
- **Up Front Rent Estimate Tool:** A simple online method for property owners to find out what to expect in terms of rent payment before they submit paperwork.
- **Property Protection Program (PPP):** Another popular idea that emerged from the Landlord Advisory Group, PPP is an insurance-like program that covers excessive tenant damage up to \$2,000 per claim after a \$250 per-claim deductible. While the program provides the assurance that property owners need, it has not proven to be costly: since its establishment in 2017, fewer than 1% of Atlanta Housing's HCVP landlords have submitted claims.
- **Home Tours** and **Housing Fairs:** AH actively connects property owners with prospective tenants, maximizing efficiency and minimizing vacancies.

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AH Property Owner Incentives:

- **Leasing Incentive Fees:** AH grants landlords a cash bonus in lieu of the tenant paying a deposit, for signing with HCVP tenants who meet one of two requirements: those experiencing hardship, and applicants who have submitted a Request for Tenancy Approval within 30 days of receiving a voucher.
- **Investor Referral Incentive:** With the approval of each new property owner referred to the program, current HCVP landlords receive a \$100 cash referral incentive.
- **Energy Efficiency Rent Boost (EERB):** This award-winning incentive went into effect in 2021, marking a win-win-win for landlords, tenants, and the environment: property owners who upgrade the energy efficiency of their units, from window sealing to new appliances to major systems boosts, not only increase the value of their property and help drive down utility payments for their tenants, they receive a tiered increase in rent or “Boost,” from Atlanta Housing.
- **First-time Pass Bonus for Single Family Homes:** Single-family homes that pass the HCVP inspection on the first attempt earn their owners a one-time cash bonus of \$250.
- **Expedited Lease-Up for Multi-Family Properties:** Multi-family properties that AH has designated ‘High Performing communities’ are granted an expedited lease process of 5 to 7 days based on a Property Assessment score. This streamlining enables property owners to self-certify that their housing units meet AH’s Enhanced Inspection Standards and entitles them to an Expedited Lease-Up Package. AH High Performing communities must have at least 25 units and meet several other inspection and owner-eligibility standards.

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Following years of service on the AH Landlord Advisory Group, Amy McCoy went on to serve on NAR's 2022 Housing Choice Voucher Work Group and is now on the board of the Housing Authority of the County of Douglas, Georgia. She advises REALTORS®, "Get to the root of any given housing problem and address it directly. Do Landlords worry that tenants won't take care of the property? Create an insurance program. Do affordable housing programs need stronger funding? Find legislators who are willing to listen. Does the housing authority not have an advisory board? Go start one! As housing advocates, it's important that REALTORS® ask where our most vulnerable are having challenges, and work to create solutions."

According to Creech, REALTORS® are critical allies of the housing authority. "They are on the front lines of the industry, ideally positioned to promote our programs through word-of-mouth. Whether they're letting clients know that AH needs units to lease or educating investors about our incentives and the guaranteed rental income that our voucher program provides, when landlords and property owners see all the ways we offer compensation, it helps. And, of course, their feedback is invaluable. REALTOR® efforts can go a long way to advancing affordable housing solutions."

To learn more about how Atlanta Housing is attracting property owners to its Housing Choice Voucher Program, visit www.atlantahousing.org.

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