

Tarrant County Housing Assistance Office

CRITERION #2

Expanding Housing Opportunities

Tarrant County Housing Assistance Office (TCHAO) provides area-wide expanding housing opportunities, beyond those required by federal law or regulation to all participants and new voucher holders and is highly successful in those efforts. 90.08% of all current Housing Choice Voucher program participants reside in units outside of a concentrated minority population area. 99.86% of all current Housing Choice Voucher program participants reside in units outside of a concentrated poverty area.

I. Housing Counseling

TCHAO provides group and individual housing counseling for families that want to move to low-poverty or non-minority areas. These services help to enable clients to realize their options when seeking an appropriate unit for the participant family. During all briefing sessions, time is dedicated to discussing the areas available in which clients may seek housing. Clients receive also receive multiple maps of the TCHAO jurisdictional area. One map is a general overview of TCHAO's jurisdictional area, providing a list of all cities covered and showing where in Tarrant County each specific city id located. Also included are several maps pinpointing schools, medical facilities, and transit routes throughout Tarrant County.

During the briefing sessions, clients are also encouraged to begin their housing search immediately. Clients are urged, often by both the briefing staff and the Agency Director to visit possible new residences several times at different times of the week and day. Attention is given to a discussion of the different environments one may find on a weekday morning as opposed to a weekend night. Clients are reminded they are seeking not a dwelling, but a family home, which must be safe and comfortable.

Program participants are also encouraged to contact landlords who may have previously been involved with a Section 8 or Housing Choice Voucher program and who may have negative connotations regarding the program participants. TCHAO staff advises clients regarding appropriate dress and behavior when viewing potential properties. Clients are reminded that although landlords who have properties in higher income areas may not want to participate in the Housing Choice Voucher program, but do want a tenant who will care for the property, pay the rent timely, and be a generally "good" tenant. TCHAO staff spends time discussing how clients can impress landlords who have previously not accepted Voucher participants, thereby persuading the landlord to "take a chance" on the program because of the faith he places in the applicant seeking to lease his unit. Clients are reminded that being a good tenant results in better housing opportunities.

TCHAO also seeks to counsel and educate clients about the opportunities that may allow them to move out of a high poverty area. Concerns such as transportation, moving expenses, security deposits and more may prevent a family from moving out of a high poverty area. TCHAO seeks to build relationship with community organizations for referrals and partnerships to address the non-housing needs of our clients. Clients are additionally encouraged to participate in programs designed to assist them in improving their current situations. Programs such as Family Self Sufficiency and Home Ownership allow TCHAO clients to take positive steps for themselves and their families. TCHAO sponsors a series of Life Skills Seminars with topics such as budgeting, debt management, relationship skills, interview skills, education, and more.

II. Mobility Assistance

A large concentration of initiatives have been implemented by TCHAO that have resulted in expanding housing opportunities for program participants in areas that do not have undue concentrations of poverty or minority families.

Clients further receive handouts, telephone assistance and other information on TCHAO's Mobility Assistance Program. Clients are advised how to make an appointment for mobility assistance for one-on-one help in finding safe and decent housing. A client seeking mobility assistance informs TCHAO staff of any hindrances he or she is encountering in his search. TCHAO staff inquires about any special accommodation requirements, as well as the needs to live in close proximity to employment, transportation, schools, or other necessary services. Once TCHAO staff understands all the needs and hindrances of the client seeking housing assistance, TCHAO will recommend any housing developments and/or landlords that may be able to accommodate the family. The client will leave the Mobility Assistance appointment with housing options of which he or she may not have previously been aware and are specifically not in areas with undue concentrations of minority or poverty families. Other staff members are also often involved in Mobility Assistance. The client's specific needs will be e-mailed and discussed with the Inspections Supervisor or Housing Inspector who can often make referrals from their experience in TCHAO's jurisdictional area. Inspectors have first hand knowledge of which areas have high concentrations of a specific minority population of high poverty levels, allowing TCHAO to advise a client against leasing in such areas and inform the client of expanded housing opportunities outside of these concentrated areas.

Every time a client receives a Voucher, he or she is given a list of available properties in TCHAO's jurisdictional area. TCHAO staff strives to provide the most up-to-date listings for our clients. The "Courtesy List" is updated weekly. Any property that has been on the list for more than 30 days is removed unless the landlord has specifically requested it to remain. When receiving a new listing, TCHAO specifically asks for information such as proximity to schools, transportation and shopping, amenities, and accessibility. Landlords are reminded they have the opportunity to advertise their property without cost, and therefore are encouraged to provide as much detail as possible. Clients are encouraged to request updated Courtesy Lists, which can be obtained in our office, via e-mail, or via US Post. Furthermore, areas in the TCHAO office lobby have been dedicated to advertising by potential landlords. Landlords have the option of bringing brochures and advertisements for their properties to be posted in the lobby.

New landlords who are interested in leasing to a Housing Choice Voucher program participant are required to attend a Landlord Briefing session. This briefing session has many goals, but one discussion topic is how TCHAO and participant landlords can partner

together to provide expanded housing opportunities. Landlords learn that TCHAO's mission is to provide decent, safe and sanitary living conditions for assisted families, promote social and economic upward mobility, and provide incentives to private property owners/managers to rent to low-income families by offering timely and reasonable payments.

Through individual housing counseling, group briefing sessions, and agency initiatives, TCHAO clients experience success in expanded housing opportunities. TCHAO clients have opportunities far outreaching the poverty-stricken areas they may have once thought of as their only residential option. By expanding a participant family's housing opportunities, the family may be able to recognize opportunities in areas such as education, training, employment and more that can help break that family's personal cycle of poverty, and therefore help break the cycle of poverty in Tarrant County.

III. Use of HCVs to Create a FUP-like Program

Several years ago TCHAO was awarded one hundred vouchers for FUP. With the exception of these 100 Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), the philosophy of the agency is to utilize all vouchers in such a way as to assist families and youth in unifying a family wherever possible.

To the greatest extent possible agency employees work with youth and families to meet their needs in any way possible. TCHAO staff assist families and youth on a case-by-case basis that is consistent with HUD regulations and the agency Administrative Plan. Many, if not most of the families are headed by African American females. Connections are made that affect a family's coming together in the areas of housing, transportation, employment and case management.

Through the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program we have been able to establish and create a FUP-like program. While homeownership is one goal of many families, most have other basic and fundamental immediate needs, that include re-uniting with out-of-home youth family members, employment and transportation as well.

These efforts are often detailed and span a period of from weeks to months and some even more than a year or two before successful results are obtained. However, staff is not deterred by the complexities and intensity of these efforts and are encouraged by the achievement of success, even if the numbers are not as large as we would hope.

IV. PHA Partnerships

A metropolitan-wide or combined waiting list does not exist in the area, however, TCHAO uniquely participates with other Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) via referrals, communication, and all other means possible to broadly reach out and attract participants to the HCV program. Additionally, the TCHAO waiting list has been closed for the past several years due to the great demand garnered from the response to the last time the waiting list was opened.

Through daily inquiries TCHAO staff assist families via referrals to other PHAs and housing agencies in an effort to assist them in obtaining proper and adequate affordable housing for extremely low and very low income individuals and families.

TCHAO seeks other ways beyond the constraints of a closed waiting list to help families due to the dire, critical need. Employees do not simply turn applicants away without taking the time to explore other possibilities based upon the individual needs.

