Tennessee Housing Development Agency
Applying for Assistance on Their Time

Category: Management Innovation

Tennessee Housing Development Agency administers the Housing Choice Voucher program in 75 Tennessee counties. Managing a statewide Voucher program presents distinct challenges, including management of waiting lists. THDA has opted, with HUD's permission, to maintain 75 separate waiting lists so that Tennesseans from rural, urban and suburban communities have equal opportunity to access assistance. Pre-applications are ordered by date and time received, and the receipt of the pre-application determines when an applicant will be served. Historically, THDA has allowed its nine field offices the option of either collecting pre-applications in their offices or by mail. Once the paper pre-applications were gathered, THDA staff manually entered the data into THDA's computer system of record.

The Primary Challenges
1. Crowd Control: THDA accepted pre-applications for HCV waiting lists for many counties in person at its Rental Assistance field offices or other public locations during business hours. When popular urban county lists were opened, hundreds or thousands of applicants would come to apply. It was difficult for the elderly, disabled and those who were working to apply. Often, THDA asked for police assistance to control the crowds, and it was virtually impossible to determine the order of applicants.
2. Postal Delays: When THDA sent and accepted pre-applications by mail, some pre-applications were sent back as undeliverable. Also, rural applicants with unreliable mail service were at a disadvantage because their pre-applications were not received as quickly as others.
3. Potential for Fraud: By accepting paper pre-applications, THDA exposed itself to the risk of waiting list fraud. It was possible for the date and time of pre-application received to be falsified either on the paper pre-application or in THDA's computer system, ensuring that some applicants would be served out of order. It was also possible for pre-applications to be submitted during times that waiting lists were not open (falsifying the date).
4. Data Entry: staff members manually entered pre-applications. There were significant data entry errors, making applicants unreachable. This data entry took a significant amount of time, overburdening employees and interfering with other critical tasks.

The Solution
In 2007, THDA sought ways to remedy the challenges while maintaining 75 waiting lists. THDA learned of WaitList Check, HAPPY Software's online system, to collect pre-applications. THDA worked with HAPPY to modify the product for the 75 lists. In January 2008, THDA tested in select HCV waiting lists. THDA posted instructions for using the online system on its website (www.thda.org) and linked to WaitList Check through the site. The first list opened online was Montgomery County (Clarksville, TN), and more than 1,300 pre-applications were collected in one business day. The next list opened was Shelby County (Memphis, TN), and

more than 3,100 pre-applications were accepted in one day. By March 2008, THDA began collecting online pre-applications only.

How It Works
THDA field offices request to open lists by the 15th of each month for the following month. Central office management staff compile waiting list opening requests, enter the information in WaitList Check, and update waiting list information on THDA's website. In addition, THDA places an advertisement for the waiting list opening in the rental housing classified ad section of the county's newspaper (HUD only requires a public notice). Waiting lists are usually opened on the first business day of the month and remain open depending on the number of pre-applications received. Every list opens at 6:00 a.m. and remains open for pre-applications through 11:59 p.m. on the closing date.

Individuals who wish to apply to a waiting list may go to THDA's website at any time and apply for any open list. On the waiting list pre-application page, there is a drop-down menu showing all open lists. Individuals complete the simple pre-application, which takes about five minutes for a person with limited computer experience. The pre-application collects basic family, eligibility and preference information. If a required field is left blank or filled out incorrectly, the system will not accept the pre-application, dramatically cutting down on errors. Duplicate entries are not allowed for the same list. When someone successfully applies for a list, he receives a confirmation with a message from THDA, a confirmation number and a copy of the pre-application. When THDA is ready to call in applicants from the waiting list, applicant information is available in the computer system. Clients may verify their status on a list by going to www.WaitListCheck.com, and they may update their mailing address by emailing the appropriate THDA field office (email address is given on the confirmation page).

Operational Improvements
Since January 2008, THDA has accepted over 11,000 pre-applications online. Clients have reported they can more easily apply, and they no longer must wait for pre-applications to be mailed, wait in lengthy lines or take off work. Because pre-applications are accepted through THDA's website, anyone may submit a pre-application on their time. THDA's staff have saved a significant amount of time since implementation. They are no longer distributing pre-applications or entering pre-applications into the computer system. Since data is entered by the applicants themselves (or their representatives), the data going into the waiting lists is much more accurate. Staff members do not mail out waiting list confirmation letters since applicants print out a confirmation page with confirmation number upon successful admission to a list. Furthermore, because it is now easier to open and close a waiting list, lists may be opened frequently for short periods of time to ensure that the lists are current. This ensures a greater participation rate by those on the lists.

Along with adopting an online waiting list system, THDA is encouraging applicants and clients to submit household changes through email boxes set up for each field office. Information sent

by email is received instantly, and both the client and THDA have written record of the change. THDA hopes that individuals who apply online will begin using email as a form of communication with the agency to promote better and more responsive customer service.

Benefits and Costs
The online system has saved staff thousands of hours since implementation. Applicants and nonprofit groups have reported that it has been much easier for them apply because the process is consistent statewide and information and the pre-application are easily accessible through the Internet. The process has been easier for the elderly and disabled, despite initial concerns, because their representatives may apply for them and they are no longer required to stand in lines or await postal delivery. The process is now more accessible for the working poor because they may apply for rental assistance as their schedule allows.

When the system was first launched, there were concerns that individuals would not have adequate access to the Internet. In particular, THDA was concerned that the elderly and disabled would not have access. To combat these concerns, THDA placed special ads in newspapers alerting the public. Applicants are encouraged to find friends, family members or case workers to help. The agency also reached out to other organizations to notify them. During opening of high-demand waiting lists, THDA contacts libraries to alert them since many people use computers there, and THDA staff have helped staff these libraries during waiting list openings to ensure that individuals were assisted. Finally, THDA offers in-office appointments for those requesting a reasonable accommodation.

Since all pre-applications are taken electronically and are date and time stamped by the computer program, the risk of waiting list fraud has been greatly reduced. No one may apply unless the waiting list administrator has opened the list through WaitList Check. The date and time received cannot be changed. Also, since applicants enter their own information, the data entered is more likely to be correct, cutting down on data entry errors.

One unintended consequence is that THDA is seeing a higher volume of out-of-state applicants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals are applying in hopes of obtaining a voucher and carrying the assistance to their home state. THDA has recently adopted a residency preference so that those who already live in the local community are served first.

Another concern was the ability to serve victims of natural disaster. THDA offers a natural disaster preference and has decided to offer a paper pre-application to those rendered homeless by natural disasters to ensure that they are assisted immediately (as long as funds are available).

THDA's effort to collect Housing Choice Voucher pre-applications only through the Internet has lightened the burden on THDA staff, made the process more accessible for more applicants and helped ensure data integrity. More effort is being placed now on continuing to improve THDA's website and effectively market waiting list information to individuals in need and organizations who assist needy families.