Hello Landlords!

Rhode Island Housing
Communications: Integrated Campaign

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As any Public Housing Authority (PHA) can attest, the success of the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program depends on the participation of private-market landlords. For RIHousing, with jurisdiction in 19 municipalities, a lack of participating landlords was severely hindering our ability to assist voucher holders in leasing up apartments and effectively administering the HCV program. Voucher holders struggled to find available apartments and we struggled to attract a sufficient number of landlords to effectively run this critical rental assistance program.

**LANDLORDS: OUR TARGET AUDIENCE**
Landlord participation not only determines the number of units available for HCV participants, but also where those units are located, a PHA’s success in making units available in high-opportunity neighborhoods and alleviating high concentrations of voucher holders in very low-income neighborhoods. Because the success of the HCV program depends on the availability of units in the private market, landlords play a pivotal role.

Our struggle to attract and retain landlords to the program was not new. It had never been easy, but as rental vacancies went down and landlords could get higher rents on the open market, it was becoming critical that we ramp up efforts to attract new landlords.

**SIGNALING CHANGE**
While RIHousing staff had made numerous changes to the HCV program over the last few years, we were having difficulty getting this information across to landlords. We needed them to ‘prick up their ears’ and pay attention to these changes while also viewing us through a different lens. We had reduced the bureaucratic burdens of the program, assigned additional staffing to support landlords and we were committed to helping landlords and tenants succeed. While we had made an extensive overhaul to our program, landlords were unaware of the changes.

RIHousing had little success in previous landlord recruitment efforts. At the start of 2019, we made a decision to commit agency resources to greatly expand landlord participation by bringing together members from our Leased Housing, Policy and Communications teams to create a new outreach and engagement effort to tackle the issue. Additionally, we expanded staffing in our Leased Housing department to more fully support and engage the landlord community.

We created an internal working group who spent months researching and communicating with other PHAs and HFAs to understand what was working elsewhere and how we might be able to apply it to Rhode Island. The working group developed a comprehensive, multi-channel communications and engagement effort that was flexible enough to pivot and develop as other needs or ideas might arise.

**LANDLORDS: GETTING FEEDBACK TO GET FOCUSED**
RIHousing made the commitment to dig deeper and hold landlord focus groups, with participants representing both landlords that had worked with RIHousing and those that had not. This helped us gauge both real and perceived realities from landlords about the program. Landlords with properties in our jurisdictions were invited to participate and provide feedback. We took their feedback to further develop out marketing and outreach approach and implementation methods.

Through a series of Landlord Focus Groups and the development of a Landlord Survey we were able to learn a lot about landlords in our state, what they thought about us, about other PHAs, the HCV program, what resonated with them, as well as their preferred means of communication.

**NEW LOOK, NEW MESSAGE**
Armed with this insight, we were able to develop our new “Hello Landlord!” campaign, a multi-channel and pronged effort to increase landlord participation. New marketing materials were designed under the “umbrella” of “Hello Landlords!” branding, which made use of bold visuals/colors, consumer-friendly messaging and a welcoming and supportive tone. Listening to feedback from the focus groups and surveys, we developed materials that could be shared in multiple ways, including print, direct mail, e-newsletters, video, social media and via a series of in-person events and trainings.

**OVERARCHING GOALS**
The committee developed a series of goals for the outreach effort:

- Increase landlord participation in the HCV Program
- Add additional units available for lease-up by HCVP voucher holders, especially in communities of choice
- Change the way landlords think about us, about the HCVP program and HCVP tenants
- Position RIHousing as an innovative and flexible PHA

The outreach effort would highlight several key features of the HCV program for landlords:

- Guaranteed rent
- Support for landlords and tenants
- Dispelling Myths

**PLAN AND ROLL OUT**
We developed a comprehensive outreach plan supported by a series of marketing and informational pieces that included the following components:

- **Creation of “Hello Landlords!” brand:**
  - Outreach materials under one brand focused on attracting landlords/ Strong brand identity, bright, appealing
  - Less bureaucratic, more engaging and supportive
  - RIHousing and HCVP are ‘not what you think’

- **Outreach/Marketing Materials (both hard copy and e-versions):**
  - FAQs
  - Landlord Participation Guide
  - Powerpoint: overview of the program from landlord perspective
  - Informational video
  - Social Media graphics and messaging

- **Trainings & Events:**
  - Statewide: local libraries, community centers, spaces easily accessible to landlord population
  - Special events and trainings for landlords (new and prospective) as well as participation at industry events (IREM, local realtor boards, etc); community events, etc.
  - Face-to-face meetings and events: allow us to dispel myths, gather in-person feedback, build relationships
  - Well-received “Calling All Landlords” event in November 2019: Open House-style event to introduce Leased Housing staff to current and prospective landlords. Casual style of event to allow for networking and conversation/engagement vs formal event typically given with PPT presentation and handouts. We received rave reviews for this event and it helped us showcase the program and our keen interest in partnering and supporting landlords.

- **Website:**
  - Creation of webpage specific to landlords
  - Overview of the HCV program
    - Answers to frequently asked questions
Hello Landlords!

- Guides and resources for landlords
- Promotion of programs and resources helpful to landlords: LeadSafe Homes program, Landlord Mitigation Program, HousingSearchRI to promote available units

**E-blasts and e-newsletters:**
- Series of ongoing landlord e-news with information relevant to landlords
- Special e-blasts promoting the program, impact of COVID-19, etc.

**Surveys:**
- Feedback loop: gather feedback to improve program, identify preferred outreach channels
- Gather info on landlords. What compels them to participate in HCV program? What makes them wary? What do they want/need from RIHousing? to inform future outreach efforts

**Partnership Outreach:**
- Partnering with other local and statewide organizations to expand outreach
- Inclusion of partners at “Calling All Landlords” event
- Promotion of partner programs via e-news and participation at their events

**Live Chat**
- In lieu of in-person events/trainings, currently planning a series of “live” chats, trainings and “fun” events for landlords

**IMPACT OF COVID-19**
A series of in-person outreach events had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 health crisis. Fortunately, the Hello Landlords! effort doesn’t rely on just one means of outreach and communications. We have been able to continue with ongoing e-newsletters, mailings, updates to our website and staff is currently planning a series of online events and engagement activities. In April we were able to hold our first-ever “Live” Online event for Landlords, providing an opportunity for landlords to get answers to their questions in real time.

**OUTCOMES**
We’ve received high marks for the creativity of the new design and messaging from both partner groups and landlords. The number of landlords who have attended our trainings, events and followed up on our outreach has necessitated our team developing some “automated” messaging and supporting Leased Housing team members more fully in their responses. With new landlords (and current landlords who have been re-engaged) we have been able to increase the number of available units 130 units (or 8.4%) since January 2019. In a state the size of Rhode Island, this increase is impressive and impactful!

**WHY IT’S AWARD-WORTHY**
- **Replicable:** utilized existing communications and outreach channels and partner engagement opportunities can be accomplished by other HFAs
- **Engage targeted audiences:** feedback loop and opportunities to “hear” from landlords provided a focus to the design and outreach efforts to effectively target landlords
- **Achieve measurable results:** increase both in number of participating landlords and the number of available units have already had measurable results and an impact on the HCV program
- **Provide benefits that outweigh costs:** with jurisdiction in 19 municipalities, it’s critical that our voucher holders can find and access affordable rental units; this has been a relatively low-cost way of achieving our objectives
- **Demonstrate effective use of resources:** utilized existing outreach and communications channels (e-blasts, social and website posts and survey tools) as well as in-house staff to develop the campaign
- **Achieve strategic objectives:** more landlords, more units, and creation of outreach materials to continue to inform and engage
Hello Landlords!

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Fresh Design and User-Friendly Format and Tone
We developed a series of outreach tools and information pieces all using a new design with messaging and tone that is welcoming and supportive with less technical jargon.

Hello Landlords!
Under the umbrella of “Hello Landlords!” all materials have a strong brand identity, are attention getting, fresh, and bright.
Hello Landlords!

Palm Cards highlight aspects of the program that are important to landlords: such as guaranteed rent. From Proxy emails and vanity URLs, everything signals this information is for Landlords and we are ready to help.

New Owner/Landlord Participation Guide
Walks landlords through the process in a helpful and engaging way

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New Materials are Easy-to-Digest and Less Bureaucratic

Designed materials highlight incentives and important aspects of the program and provide important information in an easy-to-digest manner.

Video

New, fun, lively and animated video showcases the highlights of the program and can be shared via email, social media, website, and at events.
Landlord Webpage

Answers to frequently asked questions and landlord resources all in one place,

VISIT PAGE

Webpage includes ability to enter in vacant/available units and request more information

Use of automated emails improves our customer service and responsiveness to the landlord community
**Calling All Landlords**

Special event for both existing and prospective landlords in our jurisdictions

Vibrant and engaging invitations and posters (both hard copy and e-versions) as well as social media posts.

All event materials reinforced and supported the branding and messaging.
Hello Landlords!

Quarterly landlord e-news keeps prospective and current landlords engaged and informed.

Live Online Event
Recognizing not all landlords can attend an event and may find it easier to connect online, we launched a “live” online event with members of our Leased Housing team available to answer questions about the program for landlords.

Feedback Loops
We share surveys via email and also at Landlord Engagement events to ensure we have an ongoing feedback loop from Landlords to better inform our program and outreach efforts.
Engage and Inform

We could keep sending emails, postcards, etc. but sometimes getting face-to-face with your audience, getting to know them, hearing their thoughts and responding to their questions is a critical component for success.

Our Thanks!

Showing our appreciation to landlords: designed ‘Thank you’ notes (can be personalized by Leased Housing staff)