

# Going L.E.A.N. To Innovate During a Pandemic

## **Rhode Island Housing**

Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

### **HFA Staff Contact**

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### HOW GOING LEAN HELPED US SUCCEED

While no one could have predicted the challenges we would face in 2020, RIHousing was fortunate to have completed a comprehensive, multi-year LEAN process in our Leased Housing and IT departments. *The LEAN effort pushed us to re-think our work through the lens of creating efficiencies, reducing redundancies and being the most impactful in our work.*

Before the COVID-19 health crisis hit Rhode Island, we had already committed to eliminating wasteful practices and improving efficiency. As part of our LEAN efforts, we spent a considerable amount of time reviewing all programs, processes, protocols, technologies and practices relating to our asset management and renter services programs. *We viewed LEAN not just as a way to reduce costs, but as a way of thinking and as a long-term approach to how we operate.*

### STREAMLINING PROCESSES TO SUPPORT PROPERTY MANAGERS/AGENTS AND TENANTS

Working with state and federal partners, RIHousing staff developed streamlined processes and creative ways to administer millions of dollars in federal funding while supporting over 17,000 residents and countless landlords and property managers. Staff were able to implement a number of processes to reduce the administrative burdens on landlords, tenants and property managers, including allowing owner certification of units, alternative verification of repairs to units, and voucher extensions where needed.

Using a variety of techniques and technologies, we were able to:

- Immediately establish and implement a remote file review process for all LIHTC compliance audits, allowing monitoring reviews to continue as previously scheduled (physical inspections were postponed)
- Establish and propose remote Management Occupancy Reviews (MORs) to HUD for our PBCA portfolio. *Our proposal was recognized by the Boston HUD office and was recommended to HUD headquarters as a model that could be replicated throughout the country.* HUD ultimately issued a moratorium on all MOR's until June 2020. When the moratorium was lifted, we were able to resume MOR's immediately using the model designed in March. *We were recently recognized by HUD headquarters as the Contract Administrator that has completed more remote MORs than any other PBCA in the country.* Something that we are especially proud of!
- Establish a dedicated webpage for multifamily owners and managers. This page contains links to RIHousing and Federal COVID-19 related guidance and continues to be updated regularly.
- Design an electronic reporting system for owners and managers to communicate all known COVID-19 cases at their properties. Collected data has been summarized and provided to our Executive Director for her monthly report to the RIHousing Board of Directors.
- Develop an online "ChatBot" application to provide automated customer service to PBCA families

Additionally, for our Housing Choice Voucher Program, we've utilized technology to develop:

- A fully electronic certification system for our HCVP families
- An online portal for our HCVP Owners/Agents to update payment account information and get reports on payments issued to them

- Full utilization of HUD’s streamlining rule and waiver options giving PHAs discretion to reduce recerts and inspections:
  - Biannual HQS inspections – only for new, empty units
  - Use of waiver notice to streamline income verification process
  - Expedited recertifications for families with income reductions
- Since closing our offices to the public, we worked with limited staff on the HCVP side and managed to complete interims for income changes for almost 12% of the families participating in the program
- Live online Chat with HCVP landlords and tenants

### **BOLD AND INNOVATIVE RESPONSES TO CHALLENGES OF COVID**

While we’re proud of the fact we’ve been able to roll out so many effective responses to the challenges created by COVID-19, we want to share a bit more details about one in particular:

#### **MOR POLICY**

*We consider our new MOR policy to be one of the most innovative and bold changes we’ve made.* As part of our LEAN efforts, Leased Housing staff had been working with our IT department to develop remote MORs prior to COVID-19 in response to HUD’s draft notice from late 2019. Fortunately, we had begun this process prior to HUD’s suspension of in-person MORs.

This put us in a position to quickly adopt a number of tools and technical solutions to allow us to continue the business of conducting MORs during these unprecedented times. We developed the following materials and presented them to our HFA and industry peers, as well as representatives from our regional HUD office:

- RIHousing interim MOR policy
- Screenshots to SharePoint site
- External guide to the SharePoint site
- Employee guide to the SharePoint site
- SharePoint site correspondence for Owners/Agents at roll out

### **ENSURING DATA SECURITY AND INTEGRITY**

Knowing that data security would be of the utmost importance as we transitioned to remote MORs, staff worked closely with our IT and data security staff. RIHousing’s SharePoint site is hosted on Microsoft’s secure Azure Government Cloud, which offers security, protection, and compliance services generally suitable for government purposes. Particular security features include data encryption; virus detection; and control of access, permissions, and sharing. Azure Government uses datacenters and networks located in the U.S. only.

#### **IMPACT TO DATE**

While many other HFAs/PBCAs may have been reluctant to pursue remote MORs, due to data and technology capacity as well as confusion over interpretation of HUD rules, we ***moved forward with immediate implementation.***



With 179 contracts in our PBCA portfolio, and an average of 9-10 MORs each month, remote MORs allow RIHousing the ability to significantly reduce the staffing needed to conduct these specialized reviews (typically, 2-3 staff may conduct on-site MORs, with remote, we can cut this down to one staff person). We can reallocate staff to the management of our portfolio and during the health crisis, we are effectively ensuring the safety and protection of our employees, management staff and tenants, especially as many of our developments house the elderly. We're excited to share that **staff were conducting 9 MORs/per month prior to the pandemic, we're now doing 11 to 13 MORs/month!** And we've done this utilizing existing capacity and technology—with no additional cost!

**RESPONSE**

Property staff have been incredibly receptive to remote MOR policies as it allows them to continue MORs while limiting staff exposure. Additionally, our online SharePoint site was developed to also allow us to better service properties in our portfolio as we will also allow uploads of annual files, tenant selection plans, etc. to the site.

We are proud to note that our protocols and policies have received high marks from the regional HUD office, who have noted that our MOR policy helps us to keep staff and residents safe while still fulfilling our obligation to conduct reviews under the PBCA ACC Contract. The effort uniquely positions us for a post-COVID world as there will likely be trepidation in the industry about visits to properties. We are now prepared to navigate future challenges as a result of this initiative and agency resourcefulness.

RIHousing was fortunate to have a strong foundation in place, and strong leadership from our Board of Commissioners, to allow us to be responsive to the changes and challenges currently faced. The last year has shown us just how flexible and innovative we can be during these unprecedented times. We're proud that we've lived up to our mission and have continued to support thousands of Rhode Islanders through these difficult months.

**...And our work has paid off:**

“Rhode Island has performed more MORs using the hybrid remote model than any other PBCA. The additional effort put forth to continue to complete MORs during these challenging times is laudable and appreciated. Thank you for your continued efforts and commitment to quality.”

**--U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development**

**WHY IT'S AWARD-WORTHY**

<b><i>Are innovative</i></b>	Our new remote MORs for PBCA properties establishes a new model to respond to the challenges created by COVID-19
<b><i>Respond to an important state need</i></b>	Responds to many of the challenges created by COVID-19
<b><i>Achieve intended results</i></b>	We are able to continue to administer millions of dollars in federal rental assistance programs and meet our oversight and administrative duties all while keeping staff, managers/agents and tenants safe
<b><i>Provide benefits that outweigh costs</i></b>	We were able to utilize existing staffing and technology to deploy these new efforts



Special Achievement: COVID-19

*Going L.E.A.N. To Innovate During a Pandemic*



*Invest.*

*Build.*

*Believe.*



# Dedicated COVID-19 Webpage

Buyers Owners Renters  Partners About Us Mortgage Login 

## PROPERTY MANAGERS / AGENTS COVID-19 RESOURCES

Please see the following page for the most recent COVID-19 guidance for multi-family properties. We understand that the situation, and guidance, is changing frequently. We ask that you check this webpage regularly for up to date information. [Visit our general COVID-19 information here.](#)

### IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS


- [HUD Multifamily FAQ](#)
- [Quarantine Advisory](#)
- [Quarantine Addendum for Lease or Rental Agreement](#)
- [Annual and Interim Recertification Protocol during COVID-19](#)
- [IRS Guidance regarding LIHTC Program](#)

### COVID-19 Confirmation


Report confirmed cases of COVID-19 on site to RIHousing by accessing the form below. Please report each unit separately.

[COVID-19 CONFIRMATION FORM](#)


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**RiskShare/Tax Credit/HOME/Mortgagee/UPCS Inspections and/or Monitoring** 


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**Real Estate Assessment Center (REAC) Inspections** 


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**Replacement Reserve Inspections** 

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**Tenant Evictions** 

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**Financial Support for Multi-Family Owners and Renters** 

Dedicated COVID-19 webpage for multifamily owners and managers allows us to share information, updates and resources to this audience.

# Series of e-newsletters

Series of e-newsletters with important updates and information.



## You Are Invited!

The [Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#) is hosting a webinar that will focus on cleaning and disinfecting to protect individuals residing in HUD-assisted multifamily properties.

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A representative from HUD's Multifamily Housing in conjunction with representatives from the CDC and Washington State Dept. of Health will deliver presentations on their interim guidance on facility cleaning when a person with coronavirus infection is present or suspected.

Representantes de HUD OLHCHH y el CDC conversarán sobre las guías interinas para la protección de los residentes en propiedades multifamiliares cuando existe o se sospecha que hay una persona infectada con el coronavirus.


<b>ENGLISH</b> Monday May 4, 2020 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm EST	<b>ESPAÑOL</b> Miércoles 6 de mayo del 2020 1:00 pm - 2:00 pm EST
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[REGISTER HERE!](#)

[REGÍSTRESE AQUÍ!](#)

**Advance Questions**  
[Submit questions here](#)

**Preguntas**  
[Submit questions here](#)



[Para leer este correo electrónico en español, por favor desplazarse hacia abajo.](#)

We hope you and your family remain safe and healthy. Here at RIHousing we are committed to supporting the families we serve during this health and economic emergency.

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## Information on Evictions

We wanted to share this important information with you regarding evictions. At this time, until after April 17<sup>th</sup>, Rhode Island courts have stopped hearing all non-essential matters, including evictions. Even if a landlord files an eviction, the courts are not hearing them until after April 17<sup>th</sup>.

Below please find links to an FAQ in both English and Spanish that provides more information on evictions:

[HOMES RI English FAQ](#)      [HOMES RI Spanish FAQ](#)

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## Community Resources


The Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless have compiled an extensive list of community resources. Please click [here](#) to review this list, and please share widely.

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## RIHousing HCV Program Updates

As you may know, the HCV Program is working remotely with limited staffing but we are here to help you with the following:

[Partnerships to landlords and utility payments to families](#)



**Dear Property Managers:** Please share the below information with your residents.

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**Do you receive SSI benefits?  
Do you have children under 17?**

**Act by **MAY 5** to get your stimulus payment and the payment for your children.**

You've heard that adults receive \$1,200 in stimulus payment and \$500 for each child. SSI recipients will get their payment automatically, but **to get the stimulus payment for your children right now, you need to register on the [IRS website](#) by May 5.**

If you don't register, you will get your payment, but *you won't get the payment for your children until 2021* – after filing a 2020 tax return.

**It's simple to register.**

<https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus/non-filers-enter-payment-info-here>

**¿Recibe beneficios de SSI?**

# Site Reporting

Electronic reporting system for owners and managers to communicate all known Covid-19 cases at properties.

The screenshot displays the 'COVID-19 Site Reporting' interface. On the left is a blue sidebar with the 'rhousing' logo and the text 'COVID-19 • Site Reporting' and 'Please complete one form for each unit or employee that you are reporting.' The main content area is divided into two sections:

- Property Information:** A form with fields for 'Development Name', 'Development Type' (a dropdown menu), 'Address', 'City', and 'Total Number of Tenants in Development'.
- COVID-19 Event Information:** A dashboard titled 'COVID-19 Portfolio Summary' and 'Case Summary'. It features several data points and bar charts:
  - COVID-19 Portfolio Summary:** 47 Number of Sites with Confirmed Cases (left), 68 COVID-19 Confirmed Cases (right).
  - Case Summary:**
    - Site Staff:** 3 Number of Site Staff Affected (left), Sites with Confirmed Staff Cases (bar chart), 0 Number of Site Staff Hospitalized (left), Sites with Staff Hospitalized (bar chart), 0 Number of Site Staff Fatalities (left), Sites with Staff Fatality (bar chart).
    - Residents:** 64 Number of Households Affected (left), Sites with Confirmed Tenant Cases (bar chart), 21 Number of Residents Hospitalized (left), Sites with Hospitalized Residents (bar chart), 3 Number of Sites with Resident Fatalities (left), Sites with Resident Fatality (bar chart).

Collected data has been summarized and provided to senior management and partners.

The success of these efforts would not have been possible without the team effort that went into collecting Site Contact Information earlier this year. Management agents were provided with an online form to submit their current contact information.

Without this tool (which took much effort to complete after most of the team was sent home in March), we wouldn't have the comprehensive dataset that can be easily updated. We share the link to the tool via emails as well as posting to our agency website, allowing for "real-time" reporting and updates. Previously, we had to shuffle through property-specific files for that contact information if we weren't familiar with the property.

# Online Tools

## Fully electronic certification system for our HCVP families

Online portal for our HCVP Owners/Agents to update payment account information and get reports on payments issued to them

The survey form includes sections for Cooling Information, Cooling System Details, Unit Cooling Details, Common Area Cooling Details, Who pays for electricity in the units?, A/C Fee Paid by Tenant?, and Annual A/C Cost. Below the form is a data dashboard for 'Summertime Cooling' with the following data:

Category	Yes	No	Blank
Cooling System in Place	137 (83%)	113 (68%)	7 (3%)
Cooling System Details	84 (28%)	22 (9%)	94 (37%)
Unit Cooling Details	16 (9%)	121 (47%)	16 (6%)
Common Area Details	40 (18%)	43 (17%)	5 (2%)

The dashboard shows user information (Jeff Johnson - 430 South Fairview Ave), quick links (My Certifications, Apply to Waiting Lists, My Waiting List Status, PHA Custom Page), and upcoming events (RENTCafé PHA Applicant Workshop, Housing Choice Voucher Waiting List Opening). An announcement states: 'Attention Applicants! Waiting List Purging In Process. Dear Waiting List Applicant, The Yardville Housing Authority has recently purged the following waiting lists: Housing Choice Voucher (HCV), Public Housing (PH), Project Based Voucher (PBV)'. A 'Save My Spot' icon is mentioned as a way to remain on the waiting list.

The dashboard shows search filters and key metrics: 22 Applications Are Pending, 0 Letters Are Unanswered, and 8 Applications Have Unreviewed Docs. A 'Refresh Dashboard Data' button is also present.

The application form shows a 100% completion progress bar and a 'Welcome to your annual recertification' message. A sidebar menu includes options like Language Selection, Welcome Page, Household Members, Emergency Contact, Income Information, Asset Information, Expense Information, and Final Review & Submission. Buttons for 'Upload Documents' and 'Take me to the Summary' are visible.

The dashboard displays workflow statistics for Tuesday, June 30, 2020:

Workflow	Count
Initiated	354
In Progress	63
Pending	276
Submitted	821

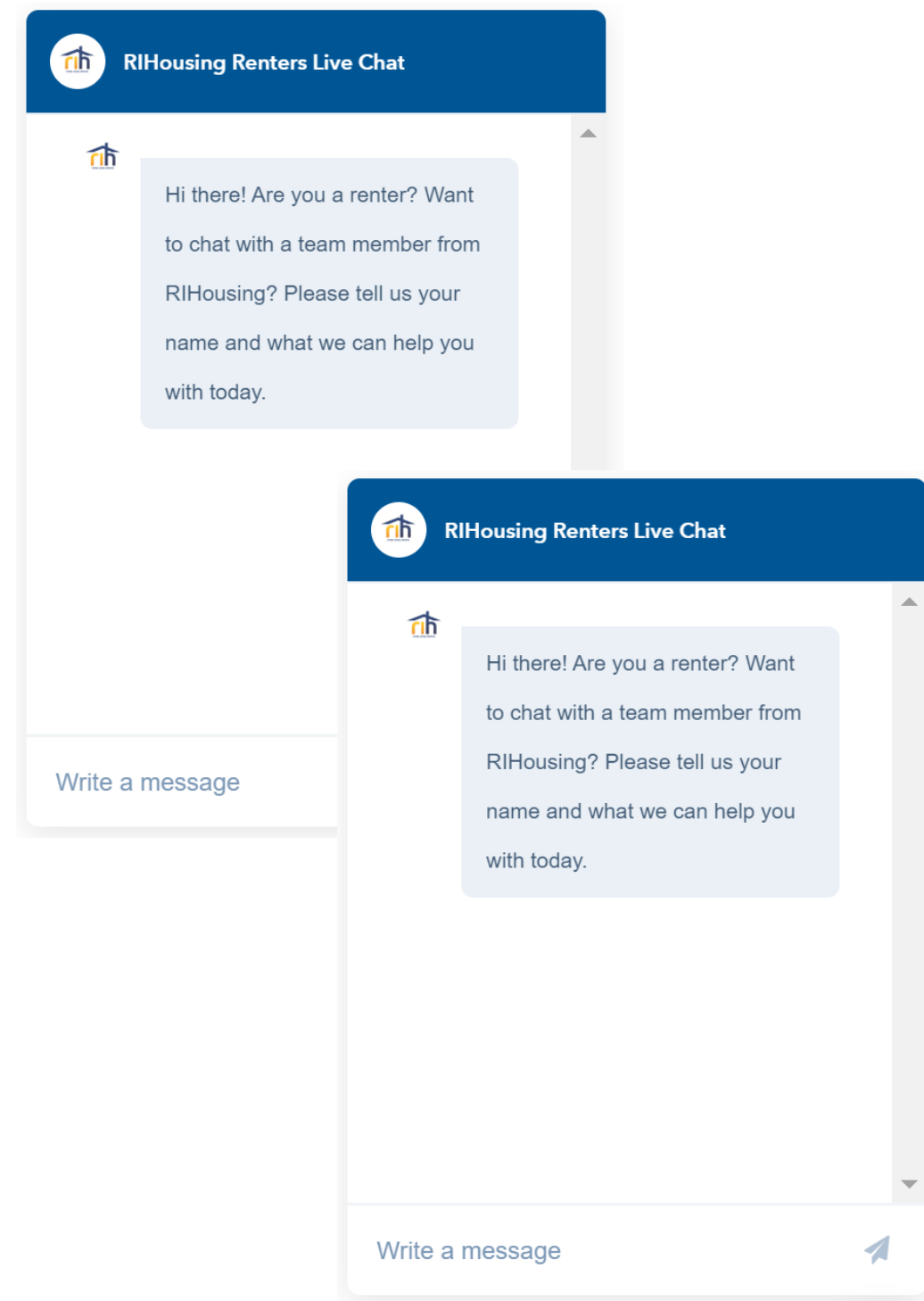
Additional fields include Prop/List, Tenant, Caseworker, Workflow (set to Recertification), Waiting List, Batch Id, Status Eff. Between, and Reexam Due Between.

Designed and facilitated an online survey related to the cooling amenities at multifamily properties. Data from this survey is being used by various state agencies to assist in designing programs to aid residents (particularly elderly) with securing cooling systems in their living units.

# Online Tools

## Live Online Events for HCV Landlords and Tenants

In lieu of in-person meetings and trainings, we launched “live” online Chats for HCV landlords and tenants with members of our Leased Housing team available to answer questions.



## Multiple ChatBots on our website to provide customer service.

- HCV Program Renters
- PBCA Section 8 Contract Administration

