Tips for Working with Landlords

This page provides tips on recruiting and cultivating relationships with landlords. These suggestions are based on the experiences of organizations around the country that have been providing housing search assistance for hard-to-place individuals.

- **Establish a landlord advisory group.**

Establish a landlord advisory group in your community. Not only will this be an excellent way to get to know some of the landlords in your community, but it will also be a way for you to introduce them to your program. Use the group to discuss landlords’ fears about accepting your clients, and what it would take to get them to change their minds. Ask them for suggestions concerning the best way to recruit landlords. As they become more familiar with your organization, they may also be willing to help promote your program, introduce you to other landlords, and/or serve as references.

- **Attend meetings of your local landlord organization.**

Many communities have a landlord organization or rental housing association to help keep landlords informed of their rights and responsibilities. Contact your local organization and ask if you can attend a meeting and make a short presentation on your program. Be sure to bring some brochures or other marketing materials to leave behind. You may also want to bring one of your former clients (i.e., one of your "success stories") so that he or she can explain the impact that the program has had on his/her life.

- **Target "medium-sized" landlords.**

Targeting "medium-sized" landlords may offer the greatest chance at success. Landlords with few units (1-4 units) may be more risk adverse than landlords with more units, particularly if they live in the building themselves. Additionally, they will not have as much difficulty addressing turnover and quickly filling vacancies because they only have a few units. In contrast, large property management firms have so many units that they can more easily absorb the cost of vacancies. Large property management firms also typically have strict screening policies, and the individuals that work in the rental office have less autonomy to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. This does not mean, of course, that you should not work with landlords of small buildings or large property management firms, especially if they express an interest in working with your program. However, recruiting landlords and building relationships takes time and energy, and some housing search agencies have found that the biggest return on the investment comes from independent landlords of medium-sized buildings. Contact your
local Chamber of Commerce or landlord organization to see if they can help identify landlords according to the number of units owned/managed.

- **Divide and conquer.**

If you are located in a large city and have more than one housing advocate on staff, consider assigning staff to specific neighborhoods or regions. This will allow staff to focus their efforts and get to know specific neighborhoods (and landlords within those neighborhoods). Dividing responsibilities based on geography may also create a greater sense of collaboration and teamwork among advocates, since they must rely on one another for information and leads. Additionally, landlords may prefer having one main contact as opposed to getting repeated calls from different staff within the same organization.

- **Screen your clients appropriately.**

The long-term success of your organization will be dependent on your ability to maintain a good reputation. One problem tenant - or one instance where you do not follow up as promised - will probably discourage a landlord from working with your program again. As a result, it is critical that your agency properly screens clients. Make sure that your clients are, in fact, "housing ready" and have the ability to maintain their housing. Clients with severe barriers (e.g., alcohol or substance abuse problem, severe debt, no employment/income) may need to be referred to transitional housing in preparation for permanent housing.

- **Think like a sales person.**

Your job, as a housing advocate, is to "sell" your program and your clients to landlords. Emphasize the benefits landlords receive from partnering with you. (See the Landlord Benefits Checklist for ideas.) If landlords are concerned about the risks involved with renting to your clients, remind them that they take a risk with any tenant, but that your program mediates those risks. Explain what services are connected to the participant and that staff will be available if any problems do arise. Finally, appeal to the human/emotional side of landlords. Explain that although your clients have had some problems in their past, they are working hard to improve their circumstances. Landlords may be able to relate to your clients more easily than you realize. Remember, most people know someone - whether it be a relative, friend, or coworker - who has struggled with alcohol or drugs, mental illness, a sudden health crisis, an unexpected layoff, or domestic abuse. These are the same issues with which your clients struggle. Remind landlords that they have the opportunity to improve the quality of life for others.

- **Be honest.**

Be as clear and upfront as possible with landlords regarding whom you are housing, but emphasize that your clients are working hard to change their lives and that your
program supports their growth and development. Never hide the facts - if the landlord finds out, you may irreparably damage your organization's reputation. Additionally, encourage your clients to think about why they had the problems they did and what they are doing differently to prevent the problems from happening again. Some landlords have said that they are more willing to give someone a second chance if the person takes responsibility for his or her actions and can demonstrate that he or she has changed.

- **Be strategic about your placements.**

Clients will have a range of individuals with a spectrum of needs and situations. Consider placing your higher-risk clients with landlords with fewer units. One problem situation can be enough to deter a landlord from working with your program again, and you do not want to damage relationships with your largest customers (i.e., landlords with the most units).

- **Remain neutral.**

Remember that landlords are your customers, too. If a problem arises between your client and his/her landlord, it is important that you remain neutral and work to resolve the problem efficiently and effectively. If landlords view you as a tenant advocate (as opposed to an intermediary), they may be less willing to work with you. On the other hand, it's okay to have expectations of landlords. Your clients have the right to expect services equal to those provided to other residents (e.g., routine maintenance, prompt repairs, courteous service), and it's important to ensure landlords follow through on their responsibilities.

- **Practice patience.**

Relationships take time to build. Continue to nurture relationships regardless of whether a landlord initially expresses interest or not. It's possible that a landlord will "come around" over time, after they get to know your organization and your housing advocates on a personal basis. In addition, word gets around, so developing successful relationships with some landlords may actually help you expand your network and build relationships with other landlords. Consider using participating landlords as references. And remember, housing markets naturally fluctuate, and landlords may change their mind if they have units sitting vacant for very long. Housing advocates from one organization indicated that, once vacancy rates in their community began to rise, they had landlords calling them!

Select each tip and its embedded links above to learn more.

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