

Staffing Your Program

The human resources (HR) function includes a variety of activities, including determining your organization's staffing needs, recruiting and hiring employees, providing training and professional development opportunities, and addressing performance issues. There are several websites that provide information and sample forms to help small organizations with HR activities, including the *Free Management Library's* [Human Resource Management](#) page and *Idealist's* [HR Resource Guide](#). This page, however, focuses on staffing a housing placement program, including finding the right person for the job and determining what type of training may be needed.

Defining What You Want: Writing a Job Description

You've heard it before: your employees are your most important asset. Recruiting the right employees can be a challenge, but it all starts with drafting a detailed job description.

Developing a job description will help you carefully think through the role a housing advocate will play in your organization. Providing a clear description of the tasks, responsibilities, and skill requirements for the job will narrow the pool of applicants, thus making the hiring process easier for your organization. Ultimately, the job description also provides a basis for evaluating staff. By having a clearly defined role for a housing advocate, a supervisor can then assess performance based on whether he or she is fulfilling these responsibilities.

So what should a job description include? There are four key elements:

- **Explanation of the job**

The first paragraph should contain a brief description of your program, the type of clients you serve, and the role of the housing advocate. In describing the role of the housing advocate, specify whether the housing advocate simply provides information about housing options or actually helps clients find, move into, and remain in permanent housing.

- **Tasks to be performed**

The job description should include a list of the tasks you expect the person to do during the course of his or her job, including core tasks that are related to the position and general tasks that are not unique to the position but expected of everyone in the organization. You may also want to include a catch-all - for example, "performs any other duties required by the Director" - to provide the flexibility to add to the position's duties, if necessary.

- **Qualifications**

Qualifications include education and other formal credentials; previous experience; job-specific skills or knowledge; general skills that are not specific to the position (e.g., communication skills); and key personality traits. Specific qualifications might include a Bachelors degree in a human services field and two years of relevant experience or a Masters degree. You might wish to specify experience with the type of clients your agency serves; knowledge of related social service programs may also be desirable.

Tip: Carefully think through and differentiate between those qualifications that are required and those that are preferred. To answer this, you need to determine which skills or traits are critical to the job from day one, which could be learned in a short timeframe, and which are unnecessary (delete those). Be careful not to lock yourself into strict requirements that may prevent you from considering qualified candidates. Also, remember that attitude, personality, and interpersonal skills can be more important than technical skills or knowledge, especially when working with a difficult-to-serve population.

Staffing the Position: Key Qualifications

A housing advocate position is similar to an outside sales position. Accordingly, an organization should seek an individual with the skills and attributes of a good salesperson. An ideal candidate will be creative, outgoing, and connect easily with people. The person should also be detail-oriented, perceptive, and willing to take risks in contacting people. Finally, the person should be resilient and not deterred by hearing "no." If you find a candidate that fits the personality profile but lacks sufficient experience, training is always a possibility. In some cases, organizations have hired formerly homeless people and found that they truly understand the needs and issues clients face.

- **Hours, salary, and benefits**

If you have a great deal of flexibility in the salary you are willing to offer and the amount of training you are willing to provide to a new employee, you probably would not want to include a specific salary or even a range. In so doing, you leave open the option to offer a higher salary to someone with a great deal of experience or, conversely, a lower salary to a less experienced person who could learn on the job. However, if there's an official salary range for a position, it should be included.

Tip: Be sure to specify expectations concerning hours in the job description. For a housing advocate, occasional evening and weekend hours are a near certainty. Because units move quickly in a tight housing market, housing advocates need to be able to help clients respond to opportunities promptly (which may mean viewing a unit during the evening or on the weekend). Additionally, to build and maintain good relationships with landlords, they need to know that your staff is responsive, reliable, and committed to quickly addressing any problems that arise - whether it's Monday afternoon or Saturday evening. In other words, finding someone who's both flexible and reliable will be key to your program's success.

For additional assistance, refer to this [sample job description](#).

Training Your Staff

To provide clients with the best services possible, a housing advocate must be knowledgeable about a wide range of topics. While your staff may have some experience, your organization should provide training on key topics such as fair housing law and tenants' rights and responsibilities to ensure that staff have the most current information available.

Depending on the size of your organization, your training budget, and the complexity of the topic, training may take different forms. For specialized topics, your organization may need to bring in outside trainers. For example, you could ask your local [legal services agency](#) to conduct an annual training for staff on a range of legal issues such as understanding fair housing law, appealing denials of government benefits, reviewing eligibility requirements for government subsidies, etc. Similarly, you may want to invite a [local mental health expert](#) to provide training on how to define boundaries between staff and clients to ensure appropriate interaction. Other training topics, such as how to

conduct a client assessment or implement successful housing search strategies, may be provided in-house or in conjunction with partner agencies.

Training Topics

Provided below are a list of topics on which your staff may need training. Each topic includes a brief description of key issues as well as online resources to get you started. This is not intended to be a complete list of training topics.

Fair Housing Law. Your staff should be able to educate your clients about housing discrimination. They should know how to identify housing discrimination, what groups are considered "protected classes" under state and Federal law, what actions are covered under the Fair Housing Act and state or local law, and how to file a housing discrimination complaint with HUD or a local fair housing agency.

Resources:

- Visit HUD's [Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity](#) for information on Federal fair housing law and to learn how to file a fair housing complaint.
- For a brief overview of fair housing issues, visit the [Consumer Action website](#).
- Consumer Action offers a guide entitled "[Stop Housing Discrimination](#)" to aid staff in educating their clients about housing discrimination. The guide discusses what housing discrimination is, how to identify it, and how to fight back. Consumer Action also offers a variety of [fact sheets](#) about housing discrimination in Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese.
- To find public and private fair housing organizations in your community, visit the [National Fair Housing Advocate](#) website.
- For legal resources, including statutes, regulations, and case law, visit the [National Fair Housing Advocate](#) website.
- Media tools and posters can be downloaded from the [National Fair Housing Alliance](#) website.

Tenant Rights and Responsibilities. Your staff must be able to educate clients about their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Staff training should cover such topics as leases and rental agreements, types of tenancy, required payments, security and pet deposits, landlord access, repairs and maintenance, evictions and lease terminations, and moving out.

Resources

- For basic background information on Tenants' Rights, visit the [Find Law](#) website.
- Because landlord-tenant law varies from state to state, it is important to understand the law in your state. The Find Law website offers a list of [state-specific resources](#) (including handbooks and frequently asked questions), while the Mr. Landlord website provides links to the [landlord-tenant statute](#) for each state. Tenant.net, which focuses primarily on New York City, has also compiled a list of [state-specific resources](#).
- If possible, you may want to partner with a [legal services agency](#) in your area and have them conduct an annual training on this important topic.

Housing Options and Housing Search Strategies. To maximize your clients' chances of finding housing, your staff should be able to navigate public, subsidized, and private housing markets and develop working relationships with private landlords and local Public Housing Agencies (PHAs).

Resources

- Training under this topic should include eligibility and application requirements for [Public Housing](#) and the [Housing Choice Voucher Program](#). (Note: There are a number of different types of vouchers available, including conversion vouchers, family unification vouchers, homeownership vouchers, project-based vouchers, tenant-based vouchers, vouchers for people with disabilities, and welfare-to-work vouchers. Your staff should contact your local PHA to learn more about the programs in your community.)
- For specific information on using the Housing Choice Voucher Program to assist people with disabilities, download the Technical Assistance Collaborative guidebook entitled "[Section 8 Made Simple](#)." The revised guidebook includes an updated list of PHAs with vouchers targeted to people with disabilities
- Training should also provide guidance on how to market your program to landlords and local PHAs so that your organization develops a strong base willing to work with your program. Review the tips and tools in the [Landlord Outreach and Recruitment](#) section of this Toolkit for more information.

Making the Most of Mainstream Service Resources. Staff should be familiar with mainstream service systems so that their clients can access all of the benefits and

services for which they are eligible. Depending on the model your community uses to provide housing search services and the division of labor between case managers and housing advocates, helping clients access mainstream services may be the responsibility of case managers. Still, it will be important for housing advocates to be familiar with mainstream programs since not all clients may have a case manager (i.e., low-barrier clients that are referred directly for housing placement). Similarly, housing advocates - particularly those responsible for providing follow-up services - will need to understand program eligibility requirements to help clients navigate mainstream service systems as their situations change.

Resources

- [FirstStep](#) is an interactive, online resource designed to help case managers assist their clients in accessing benefits from Federal mainstream benefit programs.
- Visit the following program websites to learn more about eligibility criteria and application processes and to locate state and local agencies in your area:
 - [Medicaid](#)
 - [State Children's Health Insurance Program \(SCHIP\)](#)
 - [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families \(TANF\)](#)
 - [Food Stamps](#)
 - [Supplemental Security Income \(SSI\)](#)
 - [Social Security Disability Insurance \(SSDI\)](#)
 - [Veteran's Health Care](#)
 - [Workforce Investment Act \(WIA\)](#); state and local employment and training resources
 - [Mental Health: State Departments/Divisions of Mental Health; mental health agencies \(by state\)](#)
 - [Substance Abuse Treatment: Projects for Assistance in Transition for Homelessness \(PATH\); PATH providers and state contacts](#)

Training and Technical Assistance

Some organizations provide training and technical assistance to housing search organizations and other types of homeless service organizations. Brief descriptions of the training topics they cover or actual training curriculum have been included below.

- HomeStart runs a monthly group that brings together housing advocates and case managers from around the Boston region for information sharing, training, and

networking. HomeStart also offers a Housing Search Training Series to teach new housing advocates and other providers of homeless services successful housing search strategies. Visit [HomeStart's website](#) or contact them at homestart@homestart.org to learn more.

- The Technical Assistance Collaborative (TAC) offers customized training and technical assistance on a number of different topics. One workshop that may be particularly useful for housing search staff is "[Making the Most of Mainstream Service Resources for People who are Homeless.](#)" The training provides an overview of key mainstream programs, including who is eligible, how to access benefits or services, and where to get more information. Visit [TAC's website](#) or contact them at info@tacinc.org for additional information.
- The Corporation for Supportive Housing has developed a curriculum entitled "[Making the Transition to Permanent Housing.](#)" The course targets direct service staff and managers who are helping people with histories of homelessness transition into permanent housing (including scattered site housing and congregate models). It covers topics such as understanding the impact of homelessness, assisting residents in the transition process, and addressing obstacles to permanent housing placement. Visit the [CSH website](#) or contact them at info@csh.org to learn more.

Select each aspect of staffing a housing placement program and its embedded links above to learn more.