Metro

Regional long-term rent assistance program update

Regional long-term rent assistance (RLRA) is a key strategy for achieving the goals of the supportive housing services (SHS) measure approved by the region's voters in May 2020. Long-term rent assistance is a critical tool to ensure housing stability in supportive housing placements for households who experience long-term homelessness and others who experience or are at risk of homelessness.

The RLRA program will work as both a tenant-based subsidy that increases housing choice for households to find housing on the open market, and a project-based subsidy that helps households who need on-site supportive services in the building. The program's design is based on best practices and pilot programs in the region, with special attention to improve access to achieve equitable outcomes for communities who have been disproportionately impacted by homelessness and restricted from housing opportunities.

In January and February, Metro and its partners invited stakeholders to provide feedback on draft policies for the RLRA program to help ensure that the program effectively advances equitable housing outcomes. More than 110 respondents shared their input through an online survey, focus groups and email. Respondents included people with lived experience of homelessness, culturally specific organizations, service providers, housing providers, the business community, faith leaders and other interested community members.

The feedback was analyzed, summarized and carefully reviewed by Metro and its jurisdictional partners. The partners incorporated the feedback into an updated RLRA policy framework, and the feedback will also help to inform each jurisdiction's implementation of the RLRA program moving forward.

RLRA policy-related feedback
The key policy-related themes that emerged from the feedback and were incorporated into the updated RLRA policy framework include:
- Ensure eligibility guidelines are low barrier, flexible to meet the various needs of people exiting or at risk of homelessness, and accessible to specific high-barrier populations.
- Simplify and streamline application, documentation and reporting requirements.
- Ensure that referral pathways are equitable, inclusive, and effective at connecting eligible participants with appropriate housing options and supportive services.
- Require landlords to reduce screening barriers and follow fair housing, equity and non-discrimination guidelines in exchange for accessing the full RLRA landlord guarantee.
- Create additional flexibility in the amount of time voucher holders are given to secure an appropriate housing unit.
- Create additional flexibility to accommodate changes in household size and composition and to enable tenants to move as needed.
- Align rent assistance with other critical SHS program components including:
    - *Outreach*: Street outreach and in-reach services, relationship building, peer support, service navigation and housing placement.
    - *Housing navigation*: Support with housing search, applications, fees, security deposits, appeals, reasonable accommodation requests, and enforcement of fair housing laws.

- *Supportive services*: Case management, tailored wraparound services and flexible funds to support long-term housing stability, including connections to clinical services as needed.
      - *System capacity*: Investments in culturally specific service capacity and resource allocations that ensure all SHS service providers have the capacity to effectively implement SHS services.
  - Clarify key information in the policy framework, such as what is meant by "long-term" and how the framework will apply to tenant-based vs. project-based subsidies.

Input that will help to inform RLRA implementation

Much of the stakeholder feedback focused on the details of RLRA implementation. This input will help to inform the counties' RLRA implementation planning and the development of regional templates to support RLRA administration. The feedback included a range of detailed suggestions which have been shared with RLRA partners through thematic summaries that highlight the common themes as well as unique ideas that are relevant to RLRA implementation. Most of the feedback and suggestions relate to the following core themes:

- Increase the supply and accessibility of long-term rent assistance vouchers to better meet community needs.
- Design the RLRA program to increase the availability of housing units that meet program guidelines and provide appropriate choices for voucher holders.
- Provide clear and accessible information to landlords and tenants about program guidelines and procedures.
- Ensure that all eligible populations (particularly the most vulnerable and those that are not well served by existing programs) are able to access RLRA, develop tailored guidelines to ensure specific populations' needs are met, and use targeted strategies to connect specific high-barrier populations with vouchers and units.
- Address the current limitations of the coordinated access system and engage a wide range of organizations as referral partners, including culturally specific organizations and organizations that aren't part of existing homelessness systems of care.
- Provide voucher holders with comprehensive support to find appropriate housing options, obtain required documentation, complete applications, appeal denials, and submit reasonable accommodation requests.
- Provide voucher holders with access to fully funded, fully aligned supportive services as needed, including case management, flexible funds, wraparound supports and connections to clinical services.
- Provide service partners with sufficient resources to enable them to effectively meet tenants' needs while compensating staff fairly and adequately and supporting organizational capacity building needs.
- Work proactively to build relationships with landlords and engage them in the program to increase voucher holders' access to appropriate housing options.
- Implement strategies to reduce landlord and property management screening barriers, eliminate bias and discrimination in the screening process, and ensure compliance with landlord-tenant and fair housing laws.
- Require landlords and service partners to communicate regularly and work collaboratively to address issues before they result in lease violations.
- Make strategic choices about the programmatic allocation of tenant-based and project-based vouchers in order to maximize cost effectiveness while best meeting participants' needs.
- Evaluate the RLRA program by tracking key metrics using disaggregated data and an equity lens.

- Gather regular input from participants, referring agencies, service providers and landlords to inform continuous program improvement.

What's next?

The RLRA program will launch in July 2021 with the goal of providing rent assistance opportunities to eligible households across the region as quickly as resources will allow. The program will be administered by Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington county governments and their housing authorities, guided by consistent regional policies and procedures. As implementation moves forward, the program will receive ongoing monitoring and oversight through the counties' SHS advisory groups and the tri-county advisory body to ensure it is working as effectively as possible. Stakeholders will have opportunities to provide continued feedback through each county's local implementation advisory structure. Insights and lessons from the initial roll out will inform modifications and improvements over time.