Message From the CEO

Dear Housing Choice Voucher Property Owners,

As the effect of winter slowly makes its exit in Chicago, it is easy to see neighborhoods becoming a little more vibrant as people finally go outside to take in spring. For many of us, it’s the first time in several months that we have finally been able to enjoy the outdoors and get reacquainted with our neighbors and the community-at-large.

Similarly, we at the Chicago Housing Authority go to great lengths to ensure that our communication with both owners and participants is clear, concise and consistent. Whether we are working to increase knowledge and awareness of a particular program, or to help facilitate a harmonious relationship that benefits everyone, the agency leaves no stone unturned when it comes to transparency.

To do that, CHA utilizes a variety of forums to get the word out about a range of topics. They include:

The Housing Expo: CHA hosted its first Housing Expo on March 5 to connect families with recently-issued vouchers to quality housing. It featured workshops for new participants on topics such as, “How to navigate the HCV process,” “Fair Housing” and “Tenant Rights.” The purpose of the Housing Expo was to not only educate new Voucher Holders, but also assist those who had yet to locate a unit and submit their moving papers to CHA for approval. At the Housing Expo, more than 60 available units were represented by Owner Excellence Program (OEP) Property Owners and Managers. OEP Property Owners attended the Housing Expo and met directly with Voucher Holders, discussed their available units as well as setup appointments for prospective tenants to view units and begin the application process. Other OEP Property Owners who were unable to attend the Housing Expo provided apartment listings and other informational flyers for HCV Participants to take home.

Educational workshops: The CHA HCV Program takes pride in the property owner-focused workshops it has hosted in the past. This year, CHA delved a little deeper, trying to increase an understanding of housing-related topics with an emphasis on HQS inspections. Again, the feedback for these in-depth sessions was tremendous and CHA will continue getting out the word about future workshops.

CHA also provides regular information on safety, enforcement, policies and opportunities such as scholarships in a variety of ways, including: Instagram @chicagohousingauthority, YouTube (youtube.com/chihousingauthority), Twitter (@theCHATweets) and Facebook (facebook.com/CHAonFB). CHA sincerely believes that communication is the key.

As always, we invite you to share in the conversation and provide us feedback on our website at www.thecha.org. We thank you for your continued support of the HCV program.

Sincerely,
Michael R. Merchant
Owner Excellence Program Updates

CHA has made some changes to the eligibility criteria for HCV owners who would like to become a member of the Owner Excellence Program (OEP). See below for updated factors that CHA will now take into consideration for membership eligibility:

OEP Membership Eligibility Process
The following assessment is completed for all vendor accounts listed on the application:

1. Applicant has been an active HCV Owner for at least 24 months.
2. Applicant has had no abatements within the last 24 months.
   - Each vendor account will be reviewed
   - Consideration may be given to large portfolio owners (50+ units) with no other leasing issues.
3. Applicant has had no City of Chicago building code violations within the last 12 months (for each unit/building).

Once the above criteria have been met, OEP staff will send a “Next Steps” email and the following process will begin:

1. Applicant will have 90 days to pass an enhanced inspection.
2. Applicant will have 60 days to complete the OEP workshop.
   - At this time, applicant will be required to submit a property management certificate or Current Brokers License from the State of Illinois.
3. Applicant will have 60 days to provide a Retrofit application submission or assessment.

Once the applicant has completed the requirements, he or she will receive an “OEP Welcome” letter. If the applicant does not complete the requirements prior to the expiration date(s), he or she will receive an “OEP Denial” letter.

OEP Annual Review Process
Current OEP members should also note that CHA will now be regularly reviewing eligibility for continued membership. The following assessment is completed for all vendor accounts:

1. OEP Member must have no abatements within the last 12 months.
2. OEP Member must have paid his or her annual taxes.
3. OEP Member must have no City of Chicago building code violations within the last 12 months (for each unit/building).

For more information about the updates to OEP membership, HCV owners can call the CHA Customer Service Call Center at (312) 935-2600 or contact Owner Services via email at ownerinfo@thecha.org.
CHA’s mission for the HCV Program is to provide low-income families with safe, decent, and sanitary housing opportunities. Naturally, property owners are vital to achieving this goal by ensuring their properties and units meet these requirements. Below are ways that property owners can ensure their buildings are safe for their tenants:

- **Keep interiors and exteriors well-lit.** Property owners are encouraged to maintain well-lit walkways surrounding the property, as well as hallways inside the property, especially at nighttime. Doing so can prevent accidents and burglary.

- **Ensure locks and bolts on doors and windows are secure.** Property owners should make sure such items are tamper-proof.

- **Keep an eye out for suspicious persons lurking around the property.** Tenants can also help by reporting sights of unfamiliar individuals loitering or lurking about the property. Property owners can encourage tenants to follow the policy “if you see something, say something,” by reporting to the property owner/manager and/or the police.

- **Clear walkways of plants or shrubs.** Property owners are encouraged to make sure walkways leading up to the property entrance are clear. Plants that screen the entrance make it possible for robbers to break in without being seen by tenants, other neighbors or even the police.

- **Use curb appeal as an advantage.** Property owners can plant thorny bushes such as roses or bougainvillea under windows and along fences. Doing so can deter intruders from hopping fences or breaking into windows.

- **Don’t showcase items in front of the property.** Leaving certain things, such as bikes or toys, in front of the building or in plain sight can lure thieves onto the property. Property owners are encouraged to advise tenants to clean up after themselves to avoid theft.

By adopting some of these tips, property owners can help prevent damages by burglars as well as make their property safer for tenants and families.

### Q1 Owner Workshop Recap

The CHA HCV Program has hosted educational workshops for property owners in the past, covering various housing-related topics. This year the focus in conducting workshops has been to increase owner program knowledge and understanding, along with increasing communication between CHA, the owners and the participants.

During the first quarter of this year, HQS Inspections Director Ken Fuqua presented the topic, “HCV Basics: HQS Inspections”. The presentation focused on various components of HQS Inspections, including the inspections dispute process, lead based paint certification, weather-related and non-weather related inspection extensions, and the top ten fail items.

Furthermore, Matt Niezgoda from the Department of Homeland Security, Office of the Inspector General gave a brief presentation on FEMA fraud cases. Additional topics such as lease enforcement, rent determination, and the HAP contract were covered by HCV staff members as well.

Overall, HCV property owners found the information to be very helpful, and several attendees were able to receive assistance with more personal issues regarding the HCV Program, with the help of staff members on-hand. CHA will continue to hold these workshops throughout the year, and property owners are advised to keep an eye out in their email inbox, signage in the regional offices, and the news feed on the Owner Portal for more information about future workshops.
Housing Expo Recap

The Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) hosted an informational HCV Housing Expo on March 5, 2015 for new Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) participants. The purpose of the Housing Expo was to not only educate new voucher holders, but also to assist those who had yet to locate a unit and submit their moving papers to CHA for approval.

Owner Excellence Program (OEP) property owners attended the Housing Expo to meet directly with voucher holders, discuss their available units, and set up appointments for prospective tenants to view units and begin the application process. Other OEP property owners who were unable to attend the Housing Expo provided apartment listings and other informational flyers for HCV participants to take home.

In addition to face-to-face interaction with property owners, attendees also enjoyed presentations throughout the day. HCV-related topics included the moves and voucher extensions process, CHA special programs, mobility counseling, and the Family Self-Sufficiency program. CHA partner organizations, Heartland Alliance and Housing Choice Partners, spoke directly with attendees and provided resources for HCV Participants interested in the organizations’ services. Community organizations, Metropolitan Tenant Organization and Community Investment Corporation, gave presentations on “Understanding Your Lease Agreement” and “How to Find a Unit,” respectively. Furthermore, Citizens Utility Board (CUB) and Sinai Urban Health Institute (SUHI) met with HCV participants and provided many useful resources as well. CUB provided energy-efficient lightbulbs, and SUHI provided information regarding common household chemicals that are harmful to children, lead-based paint, and information for people dealing with asthma.

During the Housing Expo, CHA staff was on-site to directly assist voucher holders. HCV participants who were in need of a voucher extension or needed a resolution for other issues were able to receive immediate assistance at the Housing Expo. Overall, all parties were satisfied with the success of the event and CHA looks forward to planning similar events for HCV participants in the future.

Attention HCV Owners

Do you have vacant units that need to be occupied immediately?

Are you interested in taking advantage of HCV Program benefits with more units?

Invest more units with the HCV Program!

Thousands of HCV applicants and their families are waiting for Property Owners like you to provide more housing opportunities in Chicago.

Visit the CHA HCV website to get started today! www.thecha.org/hcv
The Enforcement Corner

From time to time, Owner News will feature information regarding criminal prosecution matters that were investigated by the CHA Office of the Inspector General (OIG), which resulted in criminal indictments against individuals who have committed fraud against CHA. CHA wants to continue to educate HCV participants regarding their rights and responsibilities as agreed to by the HCV family obligations, in an effort to prevent violations and empower participants to be successful in the HCV Program.

OIG Case #1
A CHA OIG investigation of an HCV participant determined that she and the property owner were married. The property owner received a monthly Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) of $1,218 for the participant’s unit. The investigation results indicated that the participant rented the unit to a third party and did not occupy the unit. The investigation led to a 2013 four-count indictment by a Cook County Grand Jury of both the participant and the property owner for felony theft of CHA funds. Both were arrested and released on bond.

OIG Case #2
A CHA OIG fraud investigation that was initiated in October 2013 revealed that the HCV participant was married to her property owner and he resided jointly in the subsidized unit. From April 2007 until November 2012, the CHA paid a total of $61,028 in Housing Assistance Payments. In June 2014, the Cook County Grand Jury returned a multiple count felony indictment, charging the participant and the property owner with Continuing Financial Crime Enterprise, Fraudulently Obtaining Money from a Financial Institution, and two separate counts of Theft from the CHA. Both were arraigned in late June 2014. The next court date for both was scheduled for early February 2015.

OIG Case #4
A CHA OIG fraud investigation was initiated in February 2014 based upon an allegation that the HCV participant benefited from Housing Assistance Payments for over ten years while residing in a different property, which he owned. The participant also failed to disclose a marriage and a not-for-profit business operated from the residence he owned. From December 2002 until June 2014, the CHA paid $102,070 in Housing Assistance Payments. In August 2014, the Cook County Grand Jury returned a multiple felony count indictment, charging the participant with Continuing Financial Crime Enterprise, Fraudulently Obtaining Money from a Financial Institution, and two separate counts of Theft. The participant was arraigned in August 2014. The next court date was scheduled for January 2015.

Overview

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and CHA OIG Joint Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Fraud Initiative
In 2013, the OIG partnered with DHS. As of December 2014, 119 CHA Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) recipients had been identified by DHS OIG as having submitted fraudulent claims to FEMA for storm-related housing assistance. CHA OIG acted on this information and investigated the fraudulent claims. As a result, 32 vouchers were terminated and 15 HCV participants have been charged with fraud. Three of the indicted have pled guilty to Theft by Deception (Class 2 Felony) and received two years’ probation. Additionally, based upon information supplied by DHS, the CHA OIG initiated three investigations of HCV participants. The results of the investigations determined that participants defrauded the CHA, independent of the FEMA fraud. One of those investigations resulted in the prosecution of the HCV participant and another in the prosecution of both the HCV participant and the property owner. Those two cases are pending in the Circuit Court of Cook County.

Note: Updates are as of late January 2015 and further information regarding the results of such cases is not available at this time.
Inspections Corner

Unit Maintenance – Being Proactive

One way that property owners can be successful in the HCV Program is by being proactive when it comes to HQS inspections and unit maintenance. While current HCV owners know they must pass an annual HQS inspection, they should also try to ensure that the unit meets HQS requirements all year round.

In other words, property owners shouldn’t wait until they receive a complaint from the tenant. They can conduct their own walk-throughs to stay up-to-date on the condition of their units.

Below is a list of guidelines property owners can follow in order to be proactive with maintenance of their properties:

- All state and local codes must be followed.
- All utilities must be on and operating safely.
- Repairs, cleaning and punch-out work must be completed.
- Windows and exterior doors must function properly and be weather-tight and lockable.
- Bathrooms must have either a window that opens or a working ventilation system.
- Stairs, porches and rails must be structurally sound.
- For buildings with centralized gas-fired boiler heating units, there must be a carbon monoxide detector present in the room where the boiler is present.
- City-approved refuse disposal must be provided.
- The stove and refrigerator must function properly.

A full list of guidelines can be found in the Property Owner Reference Manual, along with the HQS Inspections Guidebook. For more information about HQS Inspections, please visit the CHA website at www.thecha.org.