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Aligning Emergency Rental Assistance with Other Eviction Prevention Interventions

Emergency rental assistance (ERA) can prevent a significant share of evictions, but it will not unilaterally address all evictions or every case of housing instability. Cities and their partners should therefore work to align ERA programs with other eviction prevention interventions to comprehensively and strategically address evictions taking place at the local level.

With the overarching goal of meeting a wide range of individual needs and circumstances, cities should develop additional eviction intervention programs or policies that complement and enhance local ERA initiatives. By applying a racial equity lens in deploying a suite of targeted programs, cities will be able to address the root causes of evictions.

This brief offers a menu of possible eviction prevention interventions — including both programs and policies — for cities to consider as complements to an ERA program.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Beyond ERA: Eviction Prevention Programs, Policies and Resources

Cities can rely on a variety of eviction prevention programs, policies and resources to complement local ERA programs. These include the following:

Eviction Diversion

Eviction diversion programs bring together a range of services and supports that aim to divert landlord-tenant disputes away from an eviction filling or court proceeding. A holistic eviction diversion program may include rental assistance, mediation, and access to legal representation and other supportive services. To achieve the greatest impact, eviction diversion services should be available — or mandated — prior to an eviction being filed in order to reach households and landlords before they have hit a crisis point.

TIP: Consider forming a local Eviction Prevention Taskforce. Members should span both governmental and community-based service providers and stakeholders. The taskforce should meet regularly (e.g., monthly) and with a clear agenda that covers newly available data, insights into the local eviction landscape, program or benefit updates, funding opportunities, and areas of concern. Participants can explore and document how households are falling through gaps in the local support service network. The taskforce can also work to achieve consensus and clarity among participants about what supports are available, how to provide effective client referrals, and how to improve collaboration on these issues across the city.

Eviction Mediation

Eviction mediation is an alternative to filing or prosecuting a court-based eviction. With assistance from a neutral and trained mediator, landlords and tenants can reach mutually agreed-upon terms to resolve a potential eviction dispute. An eviction mediation program establishes a more equal balance of power between the landlord and tenant, increases communication between the parties, facilitates agreement on additional payments to the landlord as appropriate, diverts eviction cases away from overloaded court dockets, and can preemptively prevent an eviction record for the tenant.

TIP: Landlords may be more likely to participate in eviction mediation if cities and their partners emphasize that ERA funds can be used to assist eligible tenants in making payments.

Eviction Navigators or Housing Navigators

Eviction or housing navigators are non-lawyers who help tenants navigate an eviction or housing challenge by guiding them to appropriate financial and legal resources. These navigators are often equipped to connect tenants to both government and community-based assistance depending on a household's unique needs and eligibility criteria. Navigators can also help tenants understand their rights and responsibilities during an eviction, while providing emotional support during a challenging and often traumatic time.

Eviction Record Masking, Sealing or Expunging

Having a record of an eviction — even in cases where an eviction filing was dismissed — can present an enormous challenge for tenants in accessing future housing. To limit who can access an individual's eviction records, cities may look to mask, seal or expunge eviction filings and eviction court order histories. City policies may establish a period after which the court record of an eviction filing or judgment will be sealed (e.g., immediately expunging the record if a case is dismissed or if the tenant won, expunging after a tenant complies with all terms reached in a court agreement, expunging after three years if no other evictions are filed against the same party, etc.). Cities also can prohibit leases from requiring that a sealed eviction record be disclosed.

"Just Cause" Eviction Laws

Cities may require landlords to have a "just cause" or "good cause" when evicting a tenant. A "just cause" for eviction can mean that the tenant has not paid rent, has damaged the property, or has violated the terms of the lease. However, just cause policies also can protect tenants against arbitrary, retaliatory or discriminatory eviction filings by assuring that landlords have a valid legal reason for filing.

Outreach to Tenants and Landlords

Providing information about eviction prevention resources to all relevant stakeholders — including landlords, tenants, courts and community-based organizations — is a critical step. Outreach efforts can take the form of events, paper-based resources, online resources, partnerships, commercials, social media, and public service announcements (PSAs). No matter the outreach method or platform, cities and their partners should seek to reach households with the greatest level of need. Outreach and information sharing should be carried out in top-spoken languages and via community platforms and channels that reach high-risk residents, including those with limited access to the internet or limited English-language proficiency.

TIP: Tailor messaging and materials to the specific audience you are trying to reach. When seeking to engage tenants, employ clear problem and action statements based on the assistance that is available (e.g., "Are you behind on rent? Apply to get your rent and utilities paid." "Are you having problems with your landlord or facing an eviction? Let a housing navigator help you for free."). When reaching out to landlords, emphasize the role that landlords play in helping tenants secure rental assistance and the direct benefit to property owners. Leveraging success stories from tenants and landlords who have had a positive experience with a service or assistance program can also be a powerful tool; these "trusted messengers" will often make a stronger case with targeted audiences than a city spokesperson or service provider.

Rental Registry

A rental registry is an information repository set up to effectively enforce life and safety standards and collect property registration information from landlords operating rental units in a municipality. Required information can include apartment building addresses, names and contact information for all owners, and names and contact information for operating managers in all buildings.

TIP: Use property owner contact information and rental unit addresses collected through the rental registry to target eviction prevention resources to both renters and landlords. This information can be used for mailers showcasing the range of services available, including ERA.

Right to Counsel

During court eviction proceedings, landlords typically have an attorney present while tenants do not, which often results in cases being decided in favor of the landlord. Right to counsel programs provide free legal representation services to tenants experiencing an eviction. Enshrining a tenant's right to counsel through local laws and policies can help address the inherent power and resource imbalance in the eviction court process, leading to more balanced court decisions and improved housing security for tenants.

Supportive Services for Tenants

In most cities, tenants have access to a variety of supportive services that can help prevent an eviction and ensure long-term housing stability, including social, legal and financial resources. Supportive services for tenants can include case management, benefits counseling, trauma-informed care and treatment, peer support, access to cash assistance, services for non-English speakers, services for persons with disabilities, healthcare consultations and referrals, employment assistance, and behavioral health services. In addition to providing information and services specific to housing, cities and their partners should work to ensure that tenants are aware of and can access these additional support services.

Suggested Resources

Cities should reference the following resources while developing and implementing eviction prevention interventions that complement available ERA programs.

Designing for Housing Stability

Released by the Harvard Negotiation and Mediation Clinical Program and the American Bar Association, this report analyzed court-based and court-adjacent eviction prevention and/or diversion programs across the United States to uplift programmatic interventions that have successfully reduced evictions and eviction fillings.

Eviction Innovation

A project of the Stanford Legal Design Lab, Eviction Innovation is a website that profiles current initiatives to address the eviction crisis across the United States. The website provides a database of programs and recommendations to assist governments and nonprofits in the development and implementation of more effective responses to eviction.

Eviction Prevention: A Guide for Local Governments

This publication, developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab, guides local governments through a step-by-step process and menu of program offerings to develop effective interventions that are responsive to community needs.

National Center for State Courts Eviction Resources

The National Center for State Courts provides several eviction resources to assist state and local courts with implementing eviction diversion programs or with changing how state and local courts docket and manage evictions. Resources cover topics such as eviction diversion planning, court processes, and resources for attorneys and the public.

Tenant Protections and Emergency Rental Assistance During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

This report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition provides an analysis of tenant protections and emergency rental assistance-related policies enacted or implemented by local and state governments in 2021.

Tenant Right to Counsel

Developed by National Coalition for Civil Right to Counsel, this webpage provides state and local governments with research and resources on tenant right to counsel initiatives, including talking points and details of right to counsel legislation passed at the city and state levels.

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Collaborating with Courts on Emergency Rental Assistance and Eviction Prevention Programs

The court plays a pivotal role during formal evictions. Once a landlord decides to file a lawsuit against a tenant, the court is the main contact with both parties. It defines the process for how parties bring claims, tell their story, work out a resolution, or proceed toward a forcible set-out with a court order. The court also can give both tenants and landlords guidance about available services to help prevent an eviction and reduce housing instability.

This worksheet provides guidance on initiating conversations with court personnel about emergency rental assistance (ERA) programs. It can be used by ERA providers seeking to expand awareness of available services among court staff and judges. It can also serve as a resource when foraging a specific partnership with courts to provide more holistic and preventive services.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Establishing Connections with the Court

Courts and court staff can play a crucial role in eviction prevention efforts because they have a direct line to both parties involved in an eviction case. People working in the courts are well positioned to make sure tenants and landlords are aware of emergency rental assistance and other programs available to them. Court personnel also can ensure that procedures are in place to reduce housing instability and ensure equitable and fair outcomes for all parties.

Establishing a working relationship with the relevant court starts with conducting research to identify the right people to speak to and ensuring that the city's messaging is in sync with the court's priorities. Next, cities and their partners can begin reaching out to judicial leadership or court staff with information about available assistance and other local eviction prevention services. It can also be helpful to share national standards on due process in eviction court cases and how other courts in the region are operating. This informational outreach, in turn, can lead to deeper conversations about ongoing partnerships and coordination opportunities aimed at reducing housing instability.

Finding the Right Contacts

Begin by researching the people within the court system who are involved in eviction and housing, as well as personnel who set the broader policy of the court. The latter group can include those with influence over the adoption of new court pilot programs, court funding decisions, and procedural or courthouse changes that could result in tenants and landlords accessing helpful assistance and programs.

Begin with online research through the court website to identify the appropriate contacts for each of these roles. Partners who regularly interact with the court, such as local legal aid groups or landlord attorneys, may also have helpful insight into who would be open to talking about eviction prevention.

Key contacts in the courts (local and statewide) could include:

- **Local judge, magistrate, or judicial officer**
  People in this role may have different titles, such as judge or magistrate, depending on the jurisdiction. This person will have influence over what happens in an eviction hearing, but they may also be able to influence other policies and partnerships. Some courts have a single judicial officer assigned to eviction proceedings. Other courts may have a rotating set of officers who do not necessarily work on evictions regularly.

- **Court executive officer and administrator**
  Members of the court staff who oversee core operations and know details about funding, data, courthouse spaces, and partnership possibilities.

- **Judicial clerks**
  Judicial clerks assist the judicial officer in managing cases; they likely will have strong insights into current judicial processes and behind-the-scenes operations.

- **Court clerks**
  Court clerks are front-line staff who interact with landlords and tenants; a head clerk may oversee other clerks.

- **Self-help center director**
  Some courts have special, public-facing centers that help people with court filings and navigating their case. The center director is typically an attorney who will have extensive experience working with community members on a range of legal challenges.

- **Statewide access to justice commissioners**
  Many states have strategy groups or commissioners focused on improving access to justice, including through court reforms. These commissioners may have insights into local court dynamics as well as connections to statewide leaders who can encourage local change.

- **State supreme court justices**
  Each state court system has a supreme court with a chief justice and associate justices. Justices can set policy and encourage changes among local courts.

Once these roles are identified, explore who may be interested in eviction prevention issues, access to justice, or court innovations. People serving in each of these roles can contribute in varying and important ways to forge strong, cooperative relationships between the court and ERA providers or the local eviction prevention network.

Speaking the Court's Language

ERA and eviction prevention service providers should be familiar with how an eviction lawsuit works in the local court system. Having a basic understanding of the local process, timeline and requirements can help cities and their partners create stronger working partnerships with courts and clarify opportunities for process improvements.

ERA and eviction prevention service providers should consider the following questions:

- **What's the proper terminology?**
  What is eviction called in your jurisdiction? Is it "unlawful detainer"? "Forcible entry and detainer"? Something else? Make sure you know the local terminology, as well as the acronyms that courts might use (e.g., UDs or FEDs).

- **What is the basic court process and timeline for eviction?**
  What is required of landlords filing for eviction? Do tenants have to file a formal answer in order to get a hearing? Is a hearing scheduled automatically when the plaintiff files? Do tenants have a "right to cure" by paying back rent before a case is heard? How long does each step take?

- **What programs exist for tenants?**
  Does the court have programs aimed at helping self-represented litigants or improving access to justice? (E.g., self-help centers, court navigators, justice advocates or collaborative courts). Programs currently operating in other legal areas might be easily adapted to eviction cases as well.

With these questions answered, reach out to court leaders to have a conversation about what is happening with housing and eviction in the region.

Sending the Right Message

In preparation for an introductory conversation with court leaders, consider what messages and framing will resonate. Effective messages are rooted in court values and priorities such as:

- **Neutrality**
  The court must not have bias toward one side over another (e.g., defendants over plaintiffs). The more the team can present its work as neutral and mutually beneficial for tenants and landlords, the more likely courts will be willing to partner.

- **Following precedent**
  Court leaders often want to understand how other courts have approached similar eviction prevention efforts. It can be easier to engage in work already underway and uncontroversial in other jurisdictions, especially neighboring or similar jurisdictions.

- **Efficiency**
  Many courts are overwhelmed with lengthy dockets, overpacked calendars and rising costs for adequate staffing. Identify ways that ERA or eviction prevention can promote more efficiency in the court system — for example, by resolving cases before they go to trial, or even prior to a filing.

Different courts will bring different values and perspectives to the conversation. Some judicial officers or state supreme court justices may be eager to embrace court innovations or to pursue partnerships and strategies that can improve social outcomes for community members. Check with colleagues who work frequently with the court, or read statements, remarks or opinion pieces authored by judges. This individualized research can help you tailor outreach to the values that motivate key court leaders and staff.

Sharing Materials

After the initial outreach, consider sharing helpful information and ideas with the court. For example, after an introductory call with court staff, you may want to share more reference points and substantive reading about how other courts have engaged in new pilots, procedural reforms, or data collaborations to promote emergency rental assistance or eviction prevention. Relevant resources to share might include:

- 10 Guidelines for Residential Eviction Law (American Bar Association)
  The ABA adopted 10 key points for how due process should be protected during an eviction lawsuit as a formal resolution in February 2022. The ABA urges all federal, state, local, territorial, and tribal legislative, and other governmental bodies to implement the ABA 10 Guidelines for Residential Eviction Laws.

- Letter from Associate Attorney General Gupta (Department of Justice, June 2021)
  This advisory letter urges courts across the country to engage in eviction prevention work, especially as a result of COVID-19 hardships. It gives specific examples of what courts can do, with citations to specific examples.

- Readout of Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta's Meeting with State Chief Justices (Department of Justice, August 2021)
  This is a description of a meeting held between Attorney General Merrick Garland, Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta, and over 35 Chief Justices of state supreme courts for discussion of the eviction crisis. It demonstrates the Attorney General's support of the Associate Attorney General's letter outlining steps that state courts could take to raise awareness of emergency rental assistance and to implement eviction diversion strategies in their jurisdictions.

- Eviction Innovations (Stanford Legal Design Lab)
  This online repository of case studies has examples of policies, technology, services, and communication changes that courts have made to advance eviction prevention.

- [Opinion Piece: "It Should Take More than 10 Minutes to Evict Someone"](#)
  (New York Times, January 2022)
  This piece by two leading justices with different political backgrounds, Anne Blackburne-Rigsby (chief judge of the District of Columbia Court of Appeals) and Nathan Hecht (chief justice of the Supreme Court of Texas) lays out the benefits of diversion and prevention programs in court.

Understanding the Court Landscape

Once a relationship with the court has been established, ERA providers should seek to find out more about the eviction status quo. How do evictions currently operate in the courts, what is the eviction rate, and what are the outcomes? The goal is to understand opportunities for new court-based interventions to reduce evictions and how court data can inform the work of the local eviction prevention network.

During conversations with court contacts, try to get a better sense of the legal process, what happens inside the courtroom and the impact in the community. Ask for data on case volumes and outcomes and any other information that will help assess how the local court operates relative to other courts and national standards for due process. These conversations can also cover informal standards and what really happens behind the scenes when it comes to settlements, courtroom practices, services offered and frequently involved litigators.

Accessing Court Data on Eviction Rates and Outcomes

ERA program staff can request that the court share data reports from its case management system (CMS). Depending on how the CMS is structured, the court may not easily be able to delineate eviction cases from other kinds of cases. Try to work with the court to get as much specific information on evictions as possible, including:

- How many cases were filed each month for the past several years? What trends are notable?
- Who are the most frequent defendants (based on zip code or other data)?
- Who are the most frequent plaintiffs?
- What types of evictions are being filed? (E.g., for non-payment of rent, other lease violations, or other reasons)
- What is the average amount of rent that is being sued over in non-payment cases?

- How often are parties represented by an attorney?
- What is the default rate for defendants who do not respond to the lawsuit by filing an answer or appearing at the hearing?
- What are the rates of the ultimate case outcomes, including judgment for plaintiff, judgment for defendant, default judgement for plaintiff, or settlement?

After exported reports have been received, it may be necessary to ask for a meeting to go through the data. There will likely be missing fields, shorthand entries, or other issues that require clarification. The bottom line: make sure you have enough information to understand what is happening in court-based eviction cases.

If the court is willing, cities and their partners should pursue ongoing data connections or a formal data-sharing agreement. This could include periodic sharing of case data, which would allow for analysis and tracking of trends over time. Or, if automated data exchange is possible, it could be possible to see if people on the court docket are also in an ERA queue, and ERA providers can proactively connect with tenants as cases are filed. The initial data exchanges are a good blueprint for a more regular, ongoing exchange of data and information.

Assessing Courtroom and Judicial Process in Practice

ERA program staff should also request to observe eviction cases at in-person or virtual hearings. These are public hearings, so anyone can be present in the courtroom, but it may build goodwill to inform court contacts that someone will be observing. Talk to lawyers and advocates in the courtroom about the trends they see and during hearings, be sure to note:

- What are the dynamics inside the court room?
- How long does a court case last?
- How are tenants and landlords being informed of assistance that is available?
- Where do mediations and settlements happen?
- What is typically done to review settlement agreements?
- What kinds of settlements are being reached?

Comparing Local Processes to National Eviction Law Standards

Consider inviting court contacts with whom you have established relationships to review how local eviction laws and policies compare to national standards, such as those defined in 2022 by the American Bar Association or in 2021 by Associate Attorney General Gupta.

Frame this meeting as a collaborative strategy session rather than an audit. Working alongside court staff, go through the national standards one-by-one and ask: *How does this compare to what is happening in our region? If there's a difference, why does it exist? And what can happen to bring local processes more in line with the standards?*

This standards-oriented meeting can help set a local agenda and forge agreement on promising practices that can be brought into the local courts. Look for specific case studies of initiatives that other courts have piloted to improve their compliance with standards; this can help direct court partners to concrete next steps.

Collaborating with the Court

Another conversation to have with court personnel is about initiating new partnerships or pilot programs. This conversation can build on the prior ones, focusing on agenda points that have already been identified for improving coordination and access to services. The question at the heart of this conversation is: *What are some feasible ways the courts could participate in and facilitate ERA and eviction prevention efforts?*

Explore Procedural Reforms and Court-Based Prevention Initiatives

Ideas for new pilots, changes to court procedure, courthouse improvements, or new prevention programs may already have come up in earlier conversations. These conversations are a chance to go the next step in exploring exciting ideas for changes or interventions, while bringing a wider group into the discussion about what courts might be doing.

Draw on the case studies, national best practices and prior identification of problem areas to develop a list of possible procedural shifts or court-based innovations to pursue. Initial ideas to consider are included here.

Examples of Court Reforms and Partnerships

- Establishing a formal court-based eviction diversion program
- Texting reminders to litigants (e.g., to improve attendance rates to hearings)
- Redesigning court summons to be more user-friendly
- Including information about emergency rental assistance and available legal assistance in court packets served to tenant litigants
- Placing benefit counselors or housing navigators inside the housing court
- Requiring settlement conferences before a hearing takes place
- Establishing data sharing agreement and procedure between the court and ERA providers
- Establishing a judicial protocol to issue a motion staying cases for which there is an active emergency rental assistance application awaiting decision
- Developing hearing protocols to help litigants avoid default judgments (e.g., by calling tenants who have not arrived at the courthouse, or maintaining an online appearance option)

TIP: If the court seems open to establishing an eviction diversion program, use the National Center for State Courts diagnostic tool to structure a conversation about how such a program might be implemented locally. This tool walks through strategic questions that can help identify if a light, medium, or full version of a diversion program would be a good fit for the court.

Court staff can filter through ideas from around the country to identify the most feasible innovations or programs. It might be useful to engage more access to justice leaders in these conversations as well — including members of a statewide Access to Justice Commission — to identify if there are other resources that could support a local court pilot around eviction prevention.

Organize a Design Workshop or Brainstorm

One way to identify possible partnership projects with the court is to convene a design workshop. ERA service providers, court leaders (including staff and officers who have not been a part of your conversations to date), advocates, service providers, community members, and even past litigants can be convened to explore what kinds of court-based initiatives would be impactful and feasible.

Provide participants in the workshop with data and information about the current state of eviction cases, how the region's laws compare with national standards, and key frustrations and opportunities that have already been identified. With that shared understanding established, stakeholders could spend the first half of the workshop in small, mixed groups to reflect further on the *status quo* and pathways to more effective eviction prevention. Questions to consider include:

- What is going wrong?
- What is going well?
- What are the key opportunities for strengthening the process?
- What are the risks to be aware of?

Based on the themes that arise, facilitators can next align the group around specific prompts aimed at identifying possible solutions. For example:

- How do we increase the likelihood that tenants are equal participants in court?
- How might we divert potential lawsuits away from the court and to mutual resolution?
- How do we build ongoing relationships between courts and other agencies that can improve social outcomes and institutional efficiency?
- How might we increase due process for both sides in an eviction case, so that landlords and tenants feel they have a respectful, transparent, and fair experience in the court system?

The second half of the workshop should be used for brainstorming, idea selection and aligning on next steps. Consider the many ways the court and the broader set of housing actors in the region could improve the process and bring added services to tenants and landlords.

The facilitator should set up a brainstorming environment to encourage creativity. The facilitator should encourage teams to think about new services, policies, products and organizational changes that are not bound by resource constraints or present-day limitations.

This can mean using sticky notes; dividing into smaller groups that bring people from different teams together; and encouraging participants to focus on generating lots of ideas using prompts such as, *“What if you had a billion dollars?”* or *“What if politics and bureaucracy didn’t matter?”*

The resulting list of ideas can then be filtered down and adapted. Some of the “pie in the sky” ideas might spark thinking around more realistic alternatives. Consider whether any of the “wish list” items can be adapted or scaled back. Encourage the group to end by aligning around a handful of ideas that are impactful yet feasible, establish clear next steps, and identify point people to carry each idea forward. Notes from the session and the final recommendations should be compiled and shared with court leadership and throughout the local eviction prevention network.

Continued Partnership and Coordination

With possible innovations and procedural changes identified, ERA providers and other members of the local eviction prevention network should explore how they can best collaborate with and support the court to move new initiatives forward.

This might mean establishing more formal partnerships, service referrals, or data exchanges between local government agencies and the court. Or it could mean supporting the court in its own internal procedural, courthouse, or technology reforms.

Regardless of the specific path forward, cities and ERA program staff should seek to sustain and strengthen established relationships within the court through consistent communication and coordination. These ongoing conversations and check-ins will help the court become an active member in local eviction prevention work, while broadening the reach and impact of promising new initiatives.

Suggested Resources

Eviction Laws Database
(Legal Services Corporation)
This online repository has a state-by-state guide of formal eviction laws. Please note that local laws in a city or county may differ, and laws that are formally on the books may be applied differently in practice. Regardless, this resource can help a team see how its eviction laws compare to those in other jurisdictions.

10 Guidelines for Residential Eviction Law
(American Bar Association)
The ABA adopted 10 key points for how due process should be protected during an eviction lawsuit, as a formal resolution in February 2022. The ABA urges all federal, state, local, territorial, and tribal legislative, and other governmental bodies to implement the ABA 10 Guidelines for Residential Eviction Laws.

White House and Department of Justice Actions on Eviction Prevention
(White House)
This page collects the statements, initiatives, and meetings that the Department of Justice and the White House have issued around eviction prevention and housing stability. It includes many recommendations from national legal leaders for courts and lawyers to engage in eviction protection work.

Tiny Chat Series with Guidance to Courts on Evictions
(National Center for State Courts)
This is a series of short videos with court leaders across the country discussing specific ways courts can engage in eviction prevention work.

Listen > Learn > Lead: A Guide to Improving Court Services through User-Centered Design
(Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System)
This practical guide walks court leadership or their partners through the process of using a design workshop to get many stakeholders' input into an agenda for reform.

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Coordinating Emergency Rental Assistance Across Internal and External Systems

The successful implementation of an emergency rental assistance (ERA) program depends on several factors, including program design, outreach and engagement, and alignment with other eviction prevention services offered locally.

Yet another crucial factor is maintaining strong coordination across the many entities that have a stake in ensuring that eligible tenants and landlords successfully apply for and receive emergency rental assistance. Beyond the ERA program team, this list of stakeholders can include multiple city departments, other service providers and community-based organizations that are responsible for program administration and payment distribution.

This worksheet guides city staff through practical steps for coordinating internal, municipal systems and external systems in ways that will contribute to the successful implementation of a local ERA program.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Emergency Rental Assistance Coordination Action Steps

Identify Internal and External Systems that Require Coordination

Prior to the launch of the ERA program, think about the internal and external systems that need to be coordinated and aligned to allow for the effective provision of assistance. Brainstorm with the ERA program team to identify those systems, as well as barriers that may hinder stakeholder coordination and program effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify city departments that will be involved in setting up and launching the ERA program, and determine the responsibilities of each department before and after the program launch. Departments or teams may include:
  - Finance and Budget
  - Procurement
  - Information and Technology
  - Communications and Marketing
  - Community Development
  - Legal or the city's head legal counsel
  - Human Resources
  - 311
- Identify external organizations that will assist with ERA program implementation, including community-based organizations that may deliver assistance or support outreach efforts. Clarify the responsibilities of each external organization in ensuring the success of the program.

- Brainstorm barriers that might hinder coordination among internal and external systems and limit the ERA program's success. Create a priority list of barriers for the program team and internal and external stakeholders to address prior to program launch. Common barriers or challenges include:
    - Long phone wait times due to high call volume
    - Website crashes or slow load times due to a high volume of web traffic
    - Slow application processing due to limited staff capacity or insufficient technology solutions
    - Delays in processing direct deposits of assistance or cutting checks

Establish a Coordination Strategy for Internal Systems

Beyond the city department responsible for implementing the ERA program, it is important to coordinate with other city departments that will also impact program success. Establish a strategy for coordination across city departments and teams to keep everyone aligned and prevent backlogs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop onboarding materials for city departments that explain the launch and implementation of the ERA program, program objectives, target populations for assistance, and the timeline for distributing funding.

- Create a working group of the program team and city departments responsible for ERA program implementation. Working group meetings can be the venue to address internal barriers that may impact users' awareness and uptake of available assistance.

- Establish subcommittees within the working group based on operational capacity. This might include subcommittees dedicated to outreach, technology or delivery of assistance. As issues arise, the appropriate subcommittee will be primed to address them.

- Select the best methods for communicating challenges and successes across city departments outside of established working group meetings. This might include an internal email distribution list, a dedicated message board channel, or internal memos distributed on a set schedule.

Establish a Strategy for Coordination with Subgrantees

If the city is partnering with community-based organizations or other entities in the distribution of ERA funds, establish a coordination strategy for external systems. The goal is to ensure consistent and effective messaging and program implementation across all subgrantees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish clear policies, procedures and trainings that will guide subgrantees as they step into their responsibilities for executing the ERA program. To ensure a seamless user experience for tenants and landlords, provide subgrantees with guidance on:
    - Funding and reporting requirements
    - Program objectives
    - Eligibility requirements
    - Program benefits
    - Application review procedures and prioritization
    - Onboarding or training materials for subgrantee staff
- Create standardized materials for use by subgrantees, including:
    - Program application
    - Program FAQs
    - List of required documentation and/or checklist for applicants
- Provide subgrantees with a centralized technology solution for administering emergency rental assistance. Consider a technology solution that allows for application processing, case management and reporting, as well as payment distribution. A centralized technology solution allows for improved transparency and data sharing among subgrantees, preventing duplication of benefits.
- Establish a subgrantee working group to triage challenges and elevate best practices. Schedule regular working group meetings to align messaging and program implementation while addressing challenges as they arise. This subgrantee working group also can be a forum for highlighting successful strategies for outreach and engagement.

Monitor and Evaluate the Effectiveness of Coordination Strategies

The success of a local ERA program will hinge on regular monitoring and effective check-ins to assure alignment among internal and external systems. Establish a feedback loop and review process for making regular improvements to the coordination strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a quarterly feedback session or deploy a quarterly, anonymous survey among department staff and subgrantees. From these sessions and surveys, program staff can discern what improvements will strengthen coordination and alignment of internal and external systems.

- Create an "after-action report" following each funding distribution cycle to explicitly detail the wins and opportunities for improvement with respect to coordinating across external and internal systems. Use these reports to strengthen future ERA disbursements and similar programs.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

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LEGAL DESIGN LAB
Stanford Law School

Developing an Intentional Landlord Engagement Strategy

Landlord engagement is vital to the work of preventing housing instability and evictions. A landlord engagement strategy can help ensure that local landlords are aware of and make use of available programs, while also communicating important information to tenants.

This brief provides guidance to cities on how to develop an intentional landlord engagement strategy to support the success of programs such as emergency rental assistance, eviction diversion and mediation. The brief explores how cities and their partners can address five critical questions when developing their engagement strategy:

- Who are your local landlords?
- How can your city develop a relationship with local landlords?
- What resources can your city provide to landlords?
- How can your city inform landlords about programs and services available to them?
- How can your city navigate unprecedented moments with your local landlords to address housing instability effectively?

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Who Are Your Local Landlords?

Landlord engagement starts with knowing who a city's landlords are and what the local rental housing landscape looks like. Using this knowledge, local governments can design programs that fit the needs of the local landlord community, along with outreach and communications strategies that effectively connect with landlords to encourage their participation.

Collect and analyze available data on local landlords

Program staff should analyze data from eviction prevention programs such as emergency rental assistance, mediation, right to counsel and eviction diversion with the goal of capturing landlord contact information. This can be supplemented with information from municipal neighborhood services teams, small business initiatives, and other programs that may possess data on local landlords.

Staff also should also review residential property information or geographic data to identify properties where the mailing addresses and property addresses are different. If the two addresses are not the same, it is likely that the property is not owner-occupied.

Develop a contact list of local landlords

From the collected data, program staff should create a contact list that contains relevant information about each landlord. This should include their name, mailing address, property address or addresses, and contact information such as e-mail address or phone number.

Create a map visualizing local rental housing units

With the contact list, program staff can map where local landlords own residential rental properties in the community. This visualization can assist the city and its partners in better understanding the local residential rental housing landscape. It will offer insights into the number and types of residential rentals in the community, who owns properties, and where the city might want to target eviction prevention outreach and services such as emergency rental assistance.

TIP: If additional housing market data are available, it can be helpful to overlay the information about local landlords and their residential rental properties with data on housing costs, vacancy rates and the demographic makeup of a neighborhood. This will provide a more robust picture of the residential rental community.

Update the landlord contact list and map regularly

After the initial data collection, analysis and mapping of local landlords, program staff should monitor and update the contact list and map on a semi-annual basis to ensure up-to-date information.

How Can Your City Develop a Relationship with Local Landlords?

Developing authentic, fruitful relationships and establishing trust with local landlords will take time, sustained investment, and intentionally on the part of the city. But the payoff is worth the effort. When cities forge strong communication and trust with the landlord community, they ensure better success and broader engagement for programs designed to support landlords and foster housing stability for tenants.

Attend landlord association meetings

Program staff of eviction prevention services should be assigned to regularly attend local landlord association meetings. At these meetings, staff will have an opportunity to learn about and respond to landlord concerns while establishing ongoing relationships and regular channels of communication. These meetings can also be a platform for raising awareness among landlords about existing programs and available supports.

Host landlord-specific roundtables or convenings

Once relationships with local landlords have been established, eviction prevention services staff should host landlord-specific roundtables or convenings. At these events, staff will have an opportunity to introduce local landlords to relevant city and community services, as well as staff contacts for those services. The convenings also are an opportunity for program staff to educate landlords about local and state housing laws, including the latest updates, along with available funding for emergency rental assistance or residential rental rehabilitation.

Create a landlord advisory board or commission

To create even deeper and more meaningful relationships with local landlords, consider establishing a landlord advisory board or commission. Whether this is a formal or informal body, it can be a dedicated space where landlords contribute feedback on ordinances, program design and funding related to eviction prevention and efforts to promote housing stability.

Hire a landlord liaison or landlord-tenant officer

Consider hiring one or more landlord liaisons to recruit, engage and sustain relationships with local landlords. This dedicated staff member can ensure that the landlord contact list remains up-to-date, and act as a resource for landlords when they are seeking non-legal advice or assistance. When the city provides a clear and consistent point of contact and a familiar face for landlords to reach out to, they may be more likely to access available emergency rental assistance, mediation programs, and supportive services instead of filing for an eviction.

What Resources Can Your City Provide to Local Landlords?

Resources and services specifically focused on supporting local landlords can be a critical part of local efforts to address housing instability and prevent evictions.

Understand the unique needs and priorities of local landlords

Prior to designing resources and services to support local landlords, program staff should engage local landlords through the strategies outlined above. Other avenues for getting a better sense of landlord priorities and concerns include: one-on-one conversations; focus groups or surveys to collect qualitative data about their needs; and outreach to regional landlord associations. Based on these activities, staff will gain an understanding of the key challenges landlords face and how various services and supports can help. Landlord perspectives also will help staff tailor incentive structures in ways that boost landlord participation in eviction prevention programs.

TIP: Prompt landlords to share their thoughts on what is and is not working with current support services and systems. Ask about the greatest challenges or concerns they face with tenants, as well as with financial institutions such as mortgage holders. Collect information on how landlords learn about city programs to inform future outreach strategies.

Develop resources for local landlords with their input

Once staff has an idea of the needs and priorities of local landlords, they can solidify these insights into helpful and effective programs, resources and services. Keep landlords involved in providing feedback as the city and partners launch new or redesigned initiatives, including adjustments to the ERA process or application, mortgage assistance programs, trainings, and more. Use focus groups and other activities to vet programs and program adjustments, troubleshoot barriers and potentially recruit early adopters for available programs and services. Staff can also engage landlords to get feedback on outreach strategies and communications materials tailored to the landlord audience.

Create a feedback loop to evaluate programs and services provided to landlords.

To ensure programs and services for local landlords are effective, it is important to establish a feedback loop by which local landlords feel comfortable offering regular input about what is working and what is not with the programs or services available to them.

TIP: Local landlords are not a homogeneous group. Ensure that input from all local landlords is considered in the design and implementation of programs and resources for landlords. In particular, ensure that non-dominant landlord voices are heard. This group may be different for each city but can include landlords who are women; Black, Indigenous and People of Color; and those who own a smaller number of rental units.

How Can Your City Inform Local Landlords About Programs and Services Available to Them?

Providing information to local landlords effectively requires a multifaceted approach.

Design outreach and program materials to be easily understood

Outreach materials targeted to local landlords, both paper-based and digital, should convey what programs or supports are available, how to apply, and where to go for more information. Avoid providing too much information that could overwhelm the intended audience. Messaging and materials seeking to engage tenants often will not be appropriate or effective for a landlord audience.

Program materials such as applications should be easy to understand and complete. Materials should also center a range of user experiences and reflect a racial and gender equity lens. Develop accompanying resources, such as a clear list of required documents or a breakdown of legal requirements for participating landlords, to ease the application process.

Create a one-stop shop for governmental and community-based assistance to landlords

Information about available programs and services for local landlords should be easily accessible both online and in-person at a physical location. Consider creating an in-person, one-stop shop where landlords can find information about programs and services that can support their tenants and their business. Align with other government service providers and community-based organizations to create a robust referral process that connects landlords to services and information and to build awareness about the range of support available.

Access to information from the in-person, one-stop shop should also be made available on the city's website in a user-friendly format that guides local landlords through a step-by-step process for resolving tenant-related issues, securing emergency rental assistance for tenants, or accessing resources to assist landlords with their business.

Develop a comprehensive landlord training

Local and state laws related to landlord-tenant relationships and residential rental properties are constantly evolving. As a result, some landlords may not be familiar with the most recent landlord-tenant laws, housing regulations, or programs and services available.

Consider creating a comprehensive landlord training that familiarizes local landlords with local and state laws, the nuts and bolts of how to be a landlord, code enforcement, city services, the eviction process, and eviction prevention services such as emergency rental assistance or eviction diversion. The training and related materials can be offered both in-person and virtually. The goal is to help landlords develop a baseline understanding of key issues and available services. Training also can help the city capture contact and property information about local landlords, and facilitate landlord connections with a city liaison focused on their needs.

Distribute information to landlords on a consistent basis

Because the landscape for rental housing is constantly changing, it is important to distribute up-to-date information to landlords consistently. Using the city's landlord contact list, consider developing and distributing a bimonthly newsletter, in digital and paper-based format, or a postcard to inform landlords of upcoming events, programs, services, news, and changes to local and state laws.

TIP: Evaluate which local landlords are accessing programs and services and which local landlords are not. Based on these ongoing evaluations, program staff will be able to refine communication and outreach strategies to ensure all local landlords — including small landlords and those who are women or Black, Indigenous and People of Color — are informed and have access to all available resources.

How Can Your City Navigate Unprecedented Moments with Your Local Landlords to Address Housing Instability Effectively?

Lessons learned from COVID-19 can offer a blueprint for cities faced with other crises in the future.

Develop an engagement strategy to foster housing stability during both emergency and non-emergency times

Compile best practices and key considerations that have worked in your community for landlord engagement before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The compiled list of best practices and key considerations can help guide how program staff engage with local landlords when a public health emergency or a natural disaster occurs in your community in the future.

Be nimble and work with local landlords to address the moment through policy solutions

Prior to piloting programs and services during extraordinary moments, deploy a short survey using the landlord contact list to gauge the needs and priorities of the city's local landlords. Based on the survey, program staff and policymakers will have an idea of how best to support local landlords with targeted programs and services. Do not assume that a one-size-fits-all approach will work, or will be an effective intervention during all potential crises.

Suggested Resources

Cities should reference the following resources while developing and implementing a landlord engagement strategy.

Strategies to Increase Participation in Eviction Prevention & Eviction Diversion Programs
(National League of Cities)
This blog provides recommendations to city policymakers and staff for growing engagement with landlords and tenants with the aim of increasing participation in eviction prevention and eviction diversion programs.

Incentives for Landlords to Rent to Lower Income Households
(Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania)
This guide provides recommendations for increasing partnerships and providing incentives for landlords to rent to lower-income households.

Understanding Who Owns Rental Stock Can Ensure Tenants and Small Landlords Get the Support They Need
(Urban Institute)
This blog describes steps city staff and policymakers can take to better target rental assistance and eviction prevention programs by improving residential rental data collection and transparency.

Eviction Prevention: A Guide for Local Governments
(National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab)
This publication guides local governments through a step-by-step process and menu of program offerings to develop effective interventions that are responsive to community needs.

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Emergency Rental Assistance Program Design Checklist

From program design to implementation and evaluation, the process of launching a local emergency rental assistance (ERA) program is complex and unique to every jurisdiction. Some cities may be well-positioned to deploy a centralized ERA program, while others may be better served by a program that relies on partnerships with community-based organizations. Funding and political priorities will also affect the design and results of a local program.

With these regional and local variations in mind, this resource offers an overview of key considerations in kick-starting an ERA program. It can serve as a checklist of important steps and factors that cities and local leaders should keep in mind throughout program design and implementation. For city leaders or administrators looking to explore program design elements at a deeper level, this brief also highlights relevant tools and resources for further reading.

Contents

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

I. Program Design and Development

i. Initial Program Design

☐ ACHIEVE INTERNAL ALIGNMENT ON PROGRAM SCOPE AND SPECIFICATIONS

Use the questions below to align internal stakeholders (e.g., administrative staff, city council, city manager, city mayor) around key issues and considerations that will inform program design.

Key considerations

- What is the goal or mission of this program?
- What needs should this program prioritize given the local eviction landscape?
- What other services or supports are already in place to meet some of those needs, and where are there gaps?
- What should this program strive to be?
- What is this program not?
- What municipal resources (e.g., funding, departments, personnel) are available to administer this program, and how could those be augmented by community partners or the addition of staff capacity?
- What political or feasibility limitations should we consider?

Related resources

Understanding Your Local Eviction Landscape: A Worksheet for City Officials
(National League of Cities)

Advancing Racial Equity in Emergency Rental Assistance Programs
(National Low Income Housing Coalition, et al.)

Learning from Emergency Rental Assistance Programs: Lessons from Fifteen Case Studies
(Housing Initiative at Penn, et al.)

DETERMINE PROGRAM BENEFITS AND ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Stakeholders will also need to achieve alignment and clarity on eligibility for the ERA program, including the level, type and duration of benefits offered. When determining who is eligible to apply, cities and their partners should include eligibility factors such as: income level (% of area median income), geographic limitations and demonstrated impact of COVID-19 on beneficiaries. Partners will also need to develop consensus on any requirements to be made of landlords benefiting from the program.

Key considerations

- How much funding is available for assistance?
  - How will the community balance the competing priorities of serving a large number of households vs. serving fewer households at a greater level of assistance?
- What are the eligible uses of the funding source(s)?
- What are the eligibility criteria defined by the funding source(s)?
- How can the program better target households and individuals with the greatest level of need?
  - What disparities exist in poverty and eviction risk across race, income level and geographic area?
- What are the local needs the program should address (e.g., back rent, future rent, utility payments, moving costs)?
- What are the current economic and housing market conditions in the community (e.g., median rent for low-income renters, average back rent owed)?

Related resources

Best Practices for State and Local Emergency Rental Assistance Programs
(National Low Income Housing Coalition)

Using CDBG Emergency Payments for Rental Assistance in Coronavirus Responses
(U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)

Administration of the Federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program: Considerations for State Agencies
(National Council of State Housing Agencies)

DEVELOP A BRIEF, PUBLIC-FACING PROGRAM SUMMARY

Once program details have been finalized across internal stakeholders, develop a one-to-two-paragraph description that can serve as the backbone for outreach materials, such as a program webpage or promotional materials.

Key considerations

- Explain what the program is, why it was created, whom it seeks to serve and how it works.
- This description can be general because it will later be supplemented with more specific information related to eligibility criteria, benefits and the application process.
- Use plain language to describe the program and benefits available, not jargon.

ii. Program Administration and Coordination

DEVELOP A SIMPLE PROGRAM APPLICATION

When developing an application for assistance, make every effort to keep it simple and accessible to residents while meeting the basic requirements of the funding source(s).

Key considerations

- Streamline the application and minimize the burdens for applicants as much as possible.
  - Limit the required documentation.
  - Employ self-attestation or fact-based proxies for requirements such as household income and the impact of COVID-19 on applicants.
- Develop an easy, accessible process for applicants to submit the application.
  - As application processing capacity allows, offer the application as a downloadable, fillable form and in hard copy.
  - Allow submission through a file-upload system or via email, in addition to accepting a hard copy of an application through mail or drop-off.
  - If possible, offer over-the-phone application submission.
- Ensure that application materials are available in the community's top-spoken languages.
- Use plain, user-friendly language throughout the application to limit confusion and applicant questions.

Related resources

Guidelines for ERA Program Online Applications
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

ERA Resource Hub: Application Examples & Prioritization Examples
(National Low Income Housing Coalition)

Example Flow for ERA Program Online Applications
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

ESTABLISH AN EFFICIENT PROCEDURE FOR APPLICATION PROCESSING AND REVIEW

Ensure a swift and efficient end-to-end process encompassing the following steps: intake of applications; review of applications for compliance with key criteria; applicant follow-up and notification; and hand-off to payment of emergency rental assistance to eligible applicants.

Key considerations

- How will applications be processed? (E.g., via a points-based system, standard first-come/first-served, shortlisted first-come/first-served, weighted lottery)
- In what cases will direct payments to the tenant be allowable, instead of payments going to landlords?
- What will be the process for following up with applicants to gather missing documents?
- What information on application status will be available to tenants and landlords?
- How will the process avoid or address duplication or "doubling up" of benefits to individual households?
- What additional forms of assistance or referrals can be provided to residents who submit applications that are deemed ineligible or who may still have unmet needs even after receiving assistance?

Related resources

Prioritization in Emergency Rental Assistance Programs:
A Framework of Strategies, Policies, and Procedures to Better Serve Priority Populations
(National Low Income Housing Coalition)

Implementing Fact-Specific Proxy in ERA Programs:
Key Considerations and Lessons Learned
(National Low Income Housing Coalition)

Guidelines for Fact-Specific Proxies
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

ESTABLISH AND DOCUMENT PROCEDURES FOR SWIFT PAYMENT PROCESSING

The payment process for emergency rental assistance must adhere to federal guidance, while prioritizing flexibility and prompt disbursal of payments to households experiencing housing instability.

Key considerations

- Establish a payment process that reflects the urgency of imminent eviction fillings and judgments, as well as informal evictions that can result in tenants becoming homeless overnight.
  - If the city is disbursing ERA, coordinate a meeting with the city's finance department early to establish responsive policies for getting assistance to tenants and landlords quickly.
  - If community-based organizations are supporting application processing and payment, consider establishing a process by which the city's finance department provides reimbursements to the organizations shortly after payments to tenants and landlords have been satisfied.
  - Consider a payment process that allows for direct-to-tenant payments if a landlord is unwilling to participate.
  - To effectively support unbanked or underbanked tenants, diversify payment options via alternative methods such as pre-paid cash cards or debit cards, and reach out to local financial institutions to arrange no-fee (or low-fee) check cashing services for the program.
- Provide transparency around the payment process to both tenants and landlords.
  - Develop outreach materials (paper-based and digital) that offer clarity about when and how applicants will receive payment.
  - Provide periodic updates to applicants on the status of their disbursement by phone, text message or e-mail.
  - When applicable, choose an electronic application system that provides applicants with updates on the disbursement of their assistance in real time.

Related resources

Direct-to-Tenant Payment Implementation:
Increasing Flexibility and Equity in Emergency Rental Assistance Programs
(National Low Income Housing Coalition)

5 Strategies to Better Serve Unbanked Tenants
(National League of Cities)

DEVELOP HELPFUL RESOURCES FOR APPLICANTS

In addition to developing a webpage housing the application and program information, aim to provide additional information and assistance to potential applicants in a range of formats. This will help ensure that more applications are completed properly with minimal follow-up by staff.

Key considerations

- Consider developing a range of resources for applicants including:
  - Checklist of documentation required for application
  - Frequently asked questions document
  - Overview or visualization of the application process and anticipated timeline
  - "How-to" video demonstrating the application process, step-by-step
  - Self-attestation forms
  - Instructions for how to receive additional assistance with the application process or how to reach out with questions
  - Referral list for other organizations that may provide additional assistance if an applicant is ineligible for ERA
- Ensure that all materials are culturally relevant and informed by racial equity.
  - Provide materials and application assistance in all top-spoken languages.
  - Partner with community-based organizations to vet and provide feedback on program-related resources.
- Improve accessibility of assistance by providing resources in a range of formats, both digital and hard copy.

Related resources

Example Forms
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

Culturally and Linguistically Competent Outreach
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

iii. Promotion and Outreach Planning

DETERMINE OUTREACH STRATEGY AND TACTICS

A comprehensive outreach strategy will help ensure that emergency rental assistance goes to tenants and landlords who are most in need. Outreach approaches can include: community events, digital promotion, paper-based resources, direct outreach or advertising, and community partnerships.

Key considerations

- Reach residents where they are by conducting outreach through a range of platforms, both online and in-person.
- Plan to develop both digital and paper-based promotional materials in top-spoken languages.
- Prioritize outreach to the most vulnerable populations, regions or neighborhoods based on level of need and historic inequities.
- Use trusted messengers (including neighborhood-based leaders) to communicate about the program.
    - Build on existing partnerships with culturally relevant community organizations who can help with outreach, or forge new relationships with local organizations.
- Make the most of existing outreach systems for reaching priority communities or expand staff capacity by hiring housing navigators.

Related resources

Eviction Prevention: A Guide for Local Governments
(National League of Cities)

Emergency Rental Assistance Outreach
(Local Housing Solutions)

Reaching Priority Populations through Emergency Rental Assistance Programs in Response to COVID-19: Lessons from Chicago, Illinois
(Government Performance Lab)

DEVELOP AN ONLINE PROGRAM WEBPAGE

Create an easily navigable online landing page for the program within the city government or departmental website by building upon your program summary.

Key considerations

- The program page should include:
  - A high-level, easily understandable summary of the program
  - Details on who is eligible to apply
  - Description of available assistance
  - List of documents required for the application
  - Clear direction on where and how to apply
  - Details on when and where applications are being accepted
  - Resources available to assist residents with the application process
  - Additional resources available for ineligible residents

Related resources

Guidelines for Program Web Sites (U.S. Department of the Treasury)

Eviction Help Webpage Guide (Stanford Legal Design Lab)

ERA Resource Hub: Outreach Materials (National Low Income Housing Coalition)

DEVELOP PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

Promotional materials for the program may include: digital and paper-based resources; direct outreach or advertising; or materials for partners to support their outreach and promotion efforts.

Key considerations

- Design and develop materials to have a similar "look and feel" to bolster recognition across the community by using consistent color schemes, fonts, design styles and messaging.
  - Use free tools such as Canva to create easily editable materials that adhere to the size and layout specifications of various platforms.
  - Include clear, brief and consistent phrasing and messaging.
  - Minimize text or excessive details and use jargon-free, compelling messages while directing readers to the program website and other resources for information.

- Develop promotional materials that can be used across a range of platforms — both digital and in-person — to reach the broadest possible audience, including:
  - Digital promotional materials such as: webpages; graphics and content for social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Nextdoor, TikTok, YouTube)
  - Paper-based resources such as: brochures; fact sheets; mailers; postcards; flyers; cards with QR codes
  - Direct outreach or advertising such as: scripts for public service announcements (PSAs); phone outreach and robo calls; SMS alerts; newspaper; TV; and radio advertising
  - Materials for partner organizations such as: blurbs and other information for partner newsletters or webpages; flyers; sample social media content
- Ensure that materials are culturally relevant, informed by racial equity and available in multiple languages.
  - Consider which households might be the "hardest to reach" in your community and evaluate whether planned materials will be relevant and accessible to them.
  - Analyze available data about the tenant community to identify trends, and target outreach based on factors such as location, demographics, internet access and language.
  - Develop materials tailored for both tenant and landlord audiences.
- Equip community partners and other community-based organizations (e.g., libraries, faith-based organizations and hospitals) with relevant materials and messaging.
  - This might include: posters and flyers for on-site promotion; brochures; mailers; QR codes; and additional paper-based materials to be distributed in-person.
  - Provide a 1-2 paragraph description of available assistance for partners to include in email and print newsletters, on organization websites, and to inform staff communications.

Related resources

Housing Insecurity Media Toolkit: Emergency Rental Assistance Resources
(Consumer Financial Protection Bureau)

Social Media Outreach Toolkit for Eviction Prevention
(Stanford Legal Design Lab)

ERA Resource Hub: Outreach Materials
(National Low Income Housing Coalition)

II. Pre-Launch and Launch

WORK WITH THE COURT SYSTEM TO PROMOTE REFERRALS AND DUE PROCESS FOR RESIDENTS

The relevant local, state, or county court system can be a critical source of referrals for landlords and tenants facing the prospect of eviction, as well as an essential partner in preventing housing instability. Engage with judges and court staff early and often to stay aligned and to ensure that the court and individuals actively facing or filing for evictions have accurate information about available assistance.

Key considerations

- Ensure that judges, clerks and court staff have a clear understanding of the resources available to tenants and landlords, are aware of the process for obtaining ERA and know where to direct people for help.
  - Provide court personnel with promotional and informational materials for relevant resources, including flyers and cards with QR codes that direct to the program webpage.
  - Encourage court clerks and court staff to share program information before, during and after eviction filings with landlords and tenants.
  - Provide regular updates to court personnel about changes related to the process or program requirements, average processing times, availability of funding, and additional eviction prevention measures.
- Encourage judges to follow due process requirements, ensuring adequate opportunity for both tenants and landlords to prepare for hearings and present their case.
- Encourage court officials to follow national eviction diversion standards, including screening for litigants who are in ERA queues, and courts' issuance of motions that stay cases until a decision on an open ERA application has been made.
- Pursue a data-sharing agreement between the court and the ERA program to enable program administrators to quickly reach households at risk of eviction and to support ongoing program evaluation efforts.
- Work with court staff to ensure that court summons and other eviction-related court documents are user-friendly and proactively direct recipients to available resources.
- Invite relevant judicial stakeholders to participate actively in the city's broader eviction prevention efforts through attendance at regular taskforce meetings, planning sessions or community events.
  - Remember that court staff are often on the front lines of eviction cases and can be crucial partners in preventing housing instability across the community.

Related resources

[Resources for Courts]
(National Center for State Courts)

[Court Initiatives on Eviction Prevention]
(Stanford Legal Design Lab)

[10 Guidelines to Aid Tenants and Landlords in Eviction Crisis are Adopted by the ABA House]
(ABA Journal)

PARTNER WITH AND BRIEF LOCAL NONPROFITS, SERVICE PROVIDERS, COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND THE LANDLORD COMMUNITY

Front-line service providers, community-based organizations and landlords themselves should be equipped with specifics about available assistance prior to program launch so they can effectively refer households at risk of eviction.

Key considerations

- Provide ERA program information to social service providers, legal aid providers, tenant help lines, community-based organizations (e.g., culturally diverse community groups and faith-based organizations) and other nonprofits.
  - Share key information such as eligibility standards and application requirements, available benefits, the dates of open application windows, and an overview of the application process.
- Be prepared to direct households to resources from non-municipal organizations that can provide additional assistance or in the case of a denied ERA application.
  - Establish a method for regular check-ins with other service providers regarding program updates and opportunities for improved alignment of services.
- Connect with the landlord community though local landlord associations, meetings with large property owners and community events to share information about available assistance.
  - Coordinate with existing city initiatives or information repositories that serve landlords, such as Neighborhood Services teams and small businesses initiatives.
  - Ask landlords who have had a positive experience with ERA to share written testimonies that can be used in promotional materials shared with other landlords.
  - Provide a clear point of contact or channel for communication and feedback related to ERA for landlords.

ROLL OUT AND ANNOUNCE THE PROGRAM

Deploy clear, consistent messaging to announce the program and share information about the assistance available to residents in need of financial support.

Key considerations

- Coordinate with website developers and communications staff to ensure a smooth roll-out and to rapidly address any glitches or bugs with the webpage or application.
- Notify local news outlets (e.g., newspapers, TV and radio stations) with a press release or launch event, share relevant resources, and offer interviews with city leaders.
- Partner with community-based organizations, elected officials and landlord associations to host pop-up booths and information-sharing events.
- Complement in-person events and news coverage with direct mailers to households in high-need areas, posted flyers, paid ads and social media promotion of the program.

III. Reporting and Data Collection

ADHERE TO REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

COVID-19-related ERA programs funded by U.S. Department of the Treasury (e.g., ERA1 or ERA2) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development grants (e.g., CDBG-CV) generally require the submission of quarterly compliance reports.

Key considerations

- Review the most up-to-date reporting requirements and guidance for the relevant funding source(s) prior to finalizing program design to ensure that eligibility and data tracking specifications will be met.

Related resources

Reporting Guidance
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

ERA Reporting Guidance v 3.2 (Updated March 29, 2022)
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)

Program Rules, Waivers, and Alternative Requirements Under the CARES Act for CDBG-CV Grants, FY 2019 and 2020 CDBG Grants, and for Other Formula Programs
(U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)

COLLECT AND ANALYZE TIMELY DATA FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION AND REFINEMENT

Negotiate data-sharing agreements across partners, institute sound data collection practices, and leverage open data sources to track progress on eviction prevention efforts over time.

Key considerations

- Coordinate closely with courts and service providers to improve access to digital, up-to-date data and forge alignment on data standards.
- Categories and types of data cities should seek to collect and analyze over time include:
  - Court data on eviction lawsuits:
    - Annual eviction filing rate and total numbers
    - Share of filings for non-payment of rent, lease violations and for other reasons
    - Share of landlord wins in court cases
    - Share of cases resolved without the tenant appearing in court or other defaults
    - Average amount of unpaid rent or months in arrears
    - Estimated number of informal evictions taking place outside the court system
  - Use of legal services in evictions:
    - Share of tenants who appear in court without a lawyer
    - Share of tenants who connect with legal aid groups or legal self-help centers
    - Variance in court and housing outcomes between tenants who have and have not received legal assistance
  - Demographics and location of evictions:
    - Demographics of groups most likely to face eviction (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, gender, income bracket, household size)
    - Geographic areas or housing units with the highest eviction rates
  - Landlord details:
    - Share of landlords who have filed evictions
    - Landlord types and locations (e.g., “mom and pop”, out-of-state, large property management companies)
  - Eviction outcomes:
    - Share of eviction judgments that result in setouts or forceful removals
    - Housing stability status or rate of homelessness for people who have been through an eviction lawsuit
    - Rate of refiling for eviction by particular landlords against the same tenant
  - Open data sources may be available to supplement local or regional data systems.

Related resources

[Data on Evictions and Housing]
(Stanford Legal Design Lab)

[Foreclosure and Eviction Analysis Tool]
(New America)

[The Eviction Tracking System]
(The Eviction Lab at Princeton University)

ALIGN WITH STAKEHOLDERS TO DEVELOP A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR LOCAL EVICTION DATA

Coordinate with relevant local and regional partners to explore how to forge a coordinated strategy for capturing and tracking data on an ongoing basis.

Key considerations

- What is the current state of local eviction data?
  - How accessible is eviction data?
  - What type of data is available, and how granular is it?
  - What laws, regulations or policies are in place to maintain privacy and guard against misuse?
  - Is there political will for building or improving on local data systems?
- What systems and resources are already in place or could be built on for the collection, stewardship and analysis of eviction data?
- What additional data and analysis would be beneficial for data-driven, equity-focused decision-making and policy development?
- What data-sharing agreements or alignment of data standards are possible across governmental and community-based partners?

Related resources

[Recommendations for Creating National and Local Eviction Data Systems]
(New America et al.)

[Foreclosure and Eviction Analysis Tool: A Step-by-Step User Guide]
(New America)

[Open Eviction Data and Tool Resources]
(Stanford Legal Design Lab)

IV. Additional Steps and Considerations

☐ **IMPLEMENT A FEEDBACK LOOP FOR PROGRAM AND PROCESS IMPROVEMENTS**

Should collect and act on feedback and program data to continually improve outreach, targeting, application processing, payment systems and user experience.

Key considerations

- Establish clear and direct channels for program staff, other government staff, court staff, community partners and applicants to provide feedback and recommendations for improving the ERA program.
  - Host community roundtables and regularly dedicate time at eviction prevention taskforce meetings to collecting feedback.
  - Share brief surveys that take no more than 5 minutes to complete with ERA recipients directly via text, email or phone.
- Regularly revisit available program data to determine whether assistance is effectively reaching high-need households. Prioritize data on:
  - The race, ethnicity, age, primary language spoken, and geographic location of households served, relative to averages for high-need households in your region
  - The share of extremely low-income, very low-income and low-income households served
  - The share of available funds that have been dispersed
  - The degree to which applicants are consistently "getting stuck" at a particular stage in the application
  - Areas and categories where evictions are being filed at a high rate (e.g., in specific neighborhoods, or by specific property owners)
  - The degree to which the needs of eligible households are being fully met and whether they remain stably housed
- Adjust or implement additional outreach and processing strategies to better reach households the ERA program is not reaching. Possible activities include:
  - Provide information about the ERA program in local libraries, recreation and community centers, and schools
  - Engage community-based organizations to serve as trusted messengers
  - Expand the languages used to provide program information, materials and assistance
  - Deploy door-to-door outreach in priority neighborhoods
  - Focus paper-based materials on areas with limited internet access
  - Minimize required documentation and take other steps to streamline the application process
  - Offer additional hands-on assistance for completing an application (e.g., over-the-phone assistance or in-person help at locations convenient to applicants)

CAPTURE SUCCESS STORIES FOR PROGRAM PROMOTION

Foster relationships with individuals who have positive experiences with the emergency rental assistance process and good outcomes and invite them to be program ambassadors for the local landlord and tenant communities.

Key considerations

- Build in processes that enable follow-up with clients and ERA recipients to identify success stories (e.g., tenants who remain stably housed as a result of ERA program, landlords who have a positive experience with payment processing, and joint tenant/landlord relationships that are improved).
- Ask both tenants and landlords to author brief testimonials about their experience with ERA program.
  - Use stories and quotes in promotional materials (e.g., fliers, social media content) and particularly in presentations to tenant or landlord groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

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LEGAL DESIGN LAB
Stanford Law School

Paper Outreach for Emergency Rental Assistance and Eviction Prevention Services

Public outreach is essential in achieving the goals of emergency rental assistance (ERA) programs and eviction prevention services. Despite the ubiquity of digital communications, paper-based promotional and informational materials still play a key role in raising awareness and usage of available assistance. Well-executed paper flyers, posters, handouts, explainers and other communications collateral can spread the word about what assistance is available, how various services can help residents, and how to apply.

This worksheet guides cities and their partners through best practices and examples of paper-based communication materials for outreach related to era and eviction prevention programs. It explains the key collateral types your city should have, including flyers, posters, cards, court packets, and more. It also offers guidance on messaging and explains basic visual design principles for effective communications. Program administrators can use these principles to refine existing outreach or design and issue new materials.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Create a Portfolio of Basic Communication Materials

Non-digital, paper-based materials can help bridge the knowledge gap about emergency rental assistance and eviction prevention services — especially for people with limited Internet access.

Paper-based materials also offer multiple, easily adaptable avenues and formats for outreach. Four paper-based materials every city should have include: community handout flyers; simple posters or cards; service referral sheets; and court summons flyers.

Community Handout Flyers

Community handout flyers can be widely distributed to raise awareness of available services among renters, landlords and community leaders. The goal is to make tenants generally aware of available services in case an eviction filing or other housing stability challenges arise.

Share flyers broadly during crises such as economic shocks related to the pandemic, or after natural disasters — times when many in the community struggle with housing security and making ends meet. Flyers should also be distributed regularly to low-income households and in high-need communities where renters are more likely to experience housing instability. Distribution can rely on on-the- ground city program staff, as well as community partners and neighborhood-based service providers. For example, flyers can be stapled to distribution bags from food banks, handed out at schools, posted on grocery store bulletin boards, and shared at libraries or community centers.

Example of a Flyer for Rental and Utility Assistance

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Greenbelt, MD

Simple Posters and Cards

Develop simple designs for communications materials that work in both large and small formats. For example, large-format materials can include billboards, bus wraps and ads, and yard signs; and small-format materials can include business cards, magnets or postcards.

A poster or card design should make the public aware that a service exists through a short and simple headline. Sample messages might be:

- Behind On Rent? Call (555) 555-5555 to get free assistance.
- Trouble with your Landlord? Free lawyers can help. Text "help" to (555) 555-5555
- Worried About Eviction? Scan this QR code to find free help.

The poster or card design should echo the messaging of the community handout flyer and direct people to the same services and support, but with condensed language. The goal of this collateral format is to build basic awareness of services as broadly as possible. The message should be catchy, highly visible, easy to read quickly, and provide clear direction for the reader's next steps. In many cases, the most straightforward message may follow the basic format of: *"Have This Problem? Here's a Solution and Next Step."*

Example Design for Cards, Signs and Large-Scale Collateral Formats

Small and large-scale communication materials should present an ultra-simple message.
This design could be repurposed for posters, yard signs, business cards or postcard mailers.

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Greenbelt, MD

Service Referral Sheets

Service referral sheets can be distributed to tenants after they have engaged in an initial conversation or a formal intake process with a service provider or a housing or community navigator. For example, tenants might receive a service referral sheet after talking with an expert about their challenges and how rental assistance or eviction prevention services such as mediation might help.

The service referral sheet shares details about how to apply for services or assistance, and about who is eligible. The sheet might also provide step-by-step guidance on how each service will work, helping tenants know what to expect, what documents are required for the application, how long application processing will take, and how complicated the process will be.

Examples of Service Referral Sheets

Service referral sheets can outline the basic process involved in using a local service, such as emergency rental assistance. Sheets can offer a highly simplified step-by-step guide, or they can provide additional detail about specific activities and considerations/cautions at each stage of the process.

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Milwaukee, WI

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for California Rent Relief

Court Summons Outreach Flyers

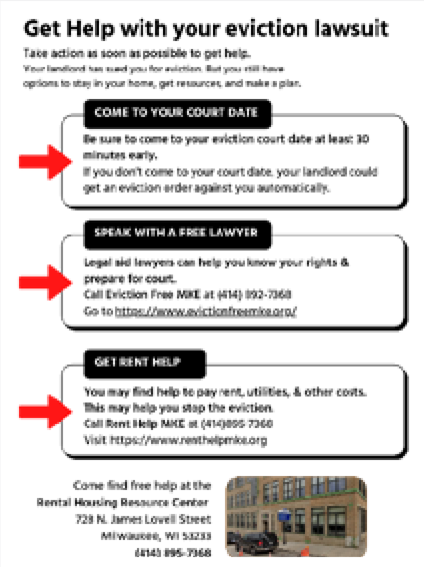
When an individual is notified that they are being sued by their landlord for an eviction, they receive a packet with two official documents from the court: the complaint and the summons. The complaint details what the landlord is claiming to the court, or what they are suing the tenant for. The summons informs the tenant of the next steps in the court process.

Receiving these materials can be an intimidating experience for a tenant; people can easily feel isolated, targeted and confused with nowhere to turn for help. That is why it is important to add another document to the packet whenever possible: an outreach flyer sharing information about resources available to help a household facing eviction. The flyer should offer simple, easy-to-understand summaries and contact information for local legal defense, emergency rental assistance, housing navigation, and mediation or diversion services. The goal is to offer the tenant a sense of control and an understanding that help is available when they receive notice of the lawsuit.

TIP: Once the outreach flyer for the summons packet has been developed, it can be used in other situations as well. For example, jurisdictions may seek to make the presentation of an outreach flyer mandatory at an earlier stage in the legal process, such as when a landlord gives a warning notice to a tenant. This can help ensure a tenant has early access to available services, potentially stopping a lawsuit from happening. Note, however, that it is difficult to monitor compliance about whether landlords do in fact provide a flyer along with a warning notice.

Example of a Court Summons Outreach Flyer

Court summons outreach flyers should accompany the court's summons and complaint packet. They should be designed to fit on a letter-sized piece of paper and highlight key services available for a tenant, along with contact information.


Get Help with your eviction lawsuit

Take action as soon as possible to get help.

COME TO YOUR COURT DATE

Be sure to come to your eviction court date at least 30 minutes early.

If you don't come to your court date, your landlord could get an eviction order against you automatically.

SPEAK WITH A FREE LAWYER

Legal aid lawyers can help you know your rights & prepare for court.

Call Eviction Free MKE

GET RENT HELP

You may find help to pay rent, utilities, & other costs.

This may help you stop the eviction.

Call Rent Help MKE

Come find free help at the Rental Housing Resource Center

Milwaukee, WI

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Milwaukee, WI

Courts in many jurisdictions can mandate that an outreach flyer be included in the summons and complaint packet. Ideally, the court itself may mail the flyer directly to the tenant, or require that the plaintiff or their process server include the flyer in the packet served to the tenant. An alternative is that a service provider mails the flyer to tenants who have been sued for eviction, based on the service provider's access to the court's docket information.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Keep It Simple with One User-Centered Message

What is the key action you want your audience to take? Answering this question is central to a successful communication that will achieve your goal of connecting more people to available services and support.

The desired action should be the focus of your visual design and content. Clarifying your desired action also provides a way to measure impact by tracking the number of people taking the recommended step(s).

Identify the Goal

Flyers, posters, signs, and cards promoting an eviction prevention service or program should present a single key message. It might be tempting to serve multiple audiences with a single flyer or poster but providing too much information or competing messages can easily backfire by making the message confusing and dampening engagement.

Goals or actions associated with eviction prevention materials will include the following:

- **Increase emergency rental assistance awareness**
  The city (or community-based organization) wants the target audience, who is unfamiliar with emergency rental assistance, to know what it is and how to learn more. Based on the content provided, a member of the target audience should be able to tell a peer what emergency rental assistance is, and generally what kind of situations it can help with. This is a common goal for a simple poster or community handout flyer. Success could be measured by a higher number of inquiries such as phone calls, website visits, or hotline texts about the program; and applications to the emergency rental assistance program.

- **Increase applications for emergency rental assistance**
  The city (or community-based organization) wants the target audience to initiate an application — by calling the phone number on the materials, texting the hotline, signing up on a website, or visiting a local office in person. This might be a central goal for a service referral sheet or community handout flyer. The goal of the communication is to provide the tenant or landlord with a sense of agency and confidence that they can make use of the featured service. Success could be tracked in the number of people initiating contact to start the application process.

- **Get people to show up at a court date or file a response**
  The court (or community-based organization) wants the tenant to attend their court date. If the tenant is in a jurisdiction that requires a written answer to be filed before obtaining a court date, then the message might aim to get the tenant to call legal aid to file an answer. The goal of the message is to help a tenant overcome stress, inaction, and intimidation related to the judicial process. Success could be measured by tracking tenant participation in the court process so they avoid a default judgment.

- **Increase follow-through to access services**
  The city (or community-based organization) wants the tenant to stay engaged throughout the process of accessing assistance, despite delays and potentially challenging requirements. The message for these materials should reinforce confidence about the service and provide clarity on next steps in the process. The goal is to show that if the tenant sticks with it, they will reach the end goal and get a benefit. Success could be measured in low drop-off rates and high completion rates for a service.

TIP: Communication and marketing team members should collaborate with the program team to identify the single key message for a communication. If a single main action the target audience should take can not be identified, consider creating a series of communications products aligning with various goals and actions, instead of a single product.

Alternatively, once the team has created communications for emergency rental assistance, consider how those messages and materials might be repurposed for other housing-related services. The same key messages might be useful for eviction diversion services, housing navigators, or other programs.

Put it in the Words of the People You Want to Reach

Test your key message with your target audience. Choose a message that portrays an action or worry from the audience's point of view.

For example, the target audience might not respond to terms like "eviction." While lawyers or city officials may think of a household being "at risk of eviction," the target audience might be focused on the more basic financial problem of being behind on rent. So instead of *"Are You Facing Eviction?"* the message might be *"Are You Behind on Rent?"*

Effective messages might vary by location or demographic group. Some groups might be familiar with services like legal aid, and so a message to them might be, *"Legal Aid Is Available to Help."* Meanwhile, others might not know that free civil legal aid lawyers even exist, so a better message might be, *"Free Lawyers Are Here to Help."*

Talk to current and past clients to hear their feedback about which messages are the most understandable and engaging.

RECOMMENDATION 3: Harness Visual Design Principles

Visual design should amplify the key message. Design the flyer, poster or card to direct the audience to pay attention to the message and the information provided. Work with designers or visual design tools to employ proven techniques that highlight the key messages.

Follow these visual design principles to amplify the message, ensure it is engaging and useable, and "brand" communications in a way that builds awareness and trust in the community.

Ensure Brand Consistency

Before creating a new visual design scheme, check with colleagues to determine if there is already an established style for communications related to a particular service. If an established or informal style guide exists, employ it consistently when creating outreach materials, and work collaboratively to improve and strengthen the default styles and designs.

If no visual brand guidelines have been established for communications related to a particular service or program, the team developing outreach materials should, at a minimum, define and document the following:

- Standard color palette
- Logo (e.g., city, organization or program-specific)
- Set of fonts
- Font sizing rules
- Image guidelines (e.g., types of imagery, icons and photography to use)
- Key messaging phrases
- Template materials (e.g., program letterhead, document templates, promotional material templates)

Be Intentional with Hierarchy

Not all information on a flyer, poster or card is equally important. A "visual hierarchy" directs the audience's attention to the key message and content while helping them through important follow-up details in a logical fashion.

To identify the proper hierarchy for visual materials, complete a first draft of the content and information that should be included in a communication. Then mark it up based on hierarchy: *What is the highest-priority information to get across to the reader? Second-highest? And third-highest?*

Once the hierarchy of importance has been established, use visual design techniques to segment the information in the materials.

The hierarchy of information will be designated using:

- **Font Sizes**
  The larger the font, the more likely a reader will see and remember that message or content. Present high-priority information in the largest fonts and use smaller fonts for information that is important but not as high of a priority.

- **Distinctive Fonts**
  Eye-catching fonts using more distinctive fonts will draw a reader's attention to high-priority information. For example, a script font might be used for the high-priority message, with an aesthetically compatible but more standard font (such as Arial or Helvetica) used for second- or third-tier information. Alternatively, consider using a bolded version of the font throughout for high-priority information.

- **Color Pops**
  Use a bright, distinctive color to call out the message the reader should pay most attention to. Other text can be presented in black or dark gray.

Tip: If you squint at the communication, what pops out at you? The central message and key action should be the most eye-catching. To test this, briefly show a piece of communications collateral to a colleague who was not involved in the development process and ask them what information they remember.

Use White Space

As content layout and hierarchy decisions move forward, consider whether a communication appears too crowded or busy. One key principle to enforce is the use of white space. White space does not necessarily have to be white — the background of a design might be a color other than white — but there should be ample blank areas on a page or piece of collateral.

Ensure there is white space around the borders of the communication, instead of designing up to the edge of a page. Allow for more white space around the highest-priority information in the hierarchy — the more blank space around a heading or sentence, the more attention people will give to it.

White space is important because it gives the audience a break. Rather than cramming many pieces of information onto a flyer, poster or card, adhering to the white space principle ensures the communication is not hectic, overwhelming or overstuffed. It makes the outreach material feel professional, fresh and approachable.

TIP: A fashion adage states, “Before you leave the house, take off at least one accessory.” Visual design operates in the same way. People may want to include many pieces of information in a communication, but more white space and less content will help get the message across more effectively.

Practice Restraint with Fonts and Colors

It is easy to get excited about exploring different fonts and colors to make communications materials feel lively and special, but restraint with fonts and colors is key to useability and impact.

Use a maximum of two font types for any given printed communication: one distinctive, eye catching font for headings or high-priority information; and a second font that is highly legible, if not a little boring. This font will be used for the secondary and tertiary hierarchy items. Think of it as the “body” font.

Using distinctive fonts for long sentences or passages can undermine legibility. The two font types should be almost opposite: one serif and one sans serif, for example. Using two fonts can help the audience distinguish between different messages and levels of information while improving readability.

Follow a similar principle for font colors: use one distinctive, bright color for high-priority hierarchy content such as titles, headings or short slogans. A more stable font color should be used for sentences and body text, such as black or dark gray. The colors should contrast, so it is easy to differentiate between them.

Align Text and Design in a Grid

The placement of text, images and other content in a communication can make the difference in whether people read it. Content should be aligned to a grid, meaning text and images are lined up along the same left or right grid guideline. Alignment to a grid is an easy way to ensure that the communication appears crisp and professional.

Design and text editing software often have in-built alignment tools. These alignment tools may "snap" pieces of content to each other so that they are lined up. However, keep in mind that automatic tools can easily align things in a way that make sense visually, but not contextually, and that less advanced tools may lay out text without ensuring alignment at all.

Review all content before it is published to ensure it is aligned. Correcting alignment can be an easy way to avoid big mistakes that make a piece of communication collateral look sloppy or untrustworthy.

Example of Alignment to a Grid

Source: Margaret Hagan, Stanford Legal Design Lab

Review and Refinement

FINAL REVIEW BEFORE PUBLICATION

Share communication materials across internal and external teams, and with colleagues who can offer fresh eyes before printing and distribution. Marketing and communications colleagues can provide insight into design and messaging, while the program team should ensure that the information is correct, up to date and directs the reader to the goal or action they need to take. A colleague who has not seen the materials before can serve as a barometer for whether a communication gets the message across to a first-time reader.

Final review of communications material should include:

- Spell check and grammar
- Content correctness (e.g., application due dates, program or service description)
- Directional information and action steps (e.g., correct phone numbers and website URLs, functioning QR codes or links)
- Adherence to design principles
  - Hierarchy of information and layout
  - White space
  - Use of color
  - Consistent use of limited font styles
  - Alignment to a grid

Essential Communications and Design Principles to Follow

Review communications collateral to ensure they follow these essential visual design principles to make materials more effective and impactful.

Source: Margaret Hagan, Stanford Legal Design Lab

Evaluation and feedback strategy

Following dissemination of materials, track the success of a message and a given communication. Note when a flyer, poster or card is distributed or posted, and monitor key metrics such as the number of website visits, calls, applications and court attendance rates in order to identify changes in the trends. Is the strategic goal of the communication material being met?

Establish a feedback strategy as well. This could be through periodic check-ins with service providers and clients before another batch of materials are produced. Explore if there is anything people seem to be misunderstanding or getting wrong that could be tied to the message and materials. Ask if front-line service workers have heard of other ways tenants are phrasing their problems, which could point to a stronger message to use in new materials. Make sure tenants and landlords know they can provide feedback, so that every new round of materials is more effective in delivering reliable, actionable and engaging information.

Suggested Resources

Cities should reference the following resources when developing paper-based resources to communicate about the availability of emergency rental assistance or other eviction prevention services.

Canva

Canva is an online design platform that enables users to borrow from existing, well-designed templates. It has alignment, color palette, and other features that can encourage good designs.

The Visual Law Library

The Visual Law Library is an online repository of how laws and policies have been visualized in different situations that can serve as inspiration for legal visuals.

The Noun Project

The Noun Project has consistent, black-and-white icons that can help avoid outdated or clumsy clip-art. Icons from the Noun Project are all scalable vectors, and are screened for quality depictions. Subscribe to use an unlimited number of royalty-free icons.

Legal Design Toolbox

The Legal Design Toolbox is an open-source resource with links to tools, instructions, and examples to help develop effective legal communications.

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Stanford Law School

Process Mapping for Emergency Rental Assistance

What actually happens when a tenant or a landlord in your community applies to receive emergency rental assistance (ERA)? What are the problems they face, how do they connect with the ERA program, and what happens as they navigate through the ERA process? What are service providers doing behind the scenes to get available funds to households efficiently and equitably? Process mapping is a way for cities and their partners to clearly document how the local ERA process works and how to improve it to deliver better results for everyone.

This worksheet describes how to develop a step-by-step process map for emergency rental assistance in your community. Key topics include: how to get the right stakeholders to contribute effectively to the mapping process; how to transform your map into helpful materials for tenants, landlords, service providers and others; and how to use the mapping process to identify opportunities for strengthening the ERA process and other eviction prevention services and supports.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Developing an Emergency Rental Assistance Process Map

Use this step-by-step guide to create a master ERA process map, and then to synthesize the map into specific materials and content that can drive improvements in service delivery and policy.

1 Identify and Invite the Mapping Stakeholders

Who knows how evictions and the provision of ERA play out in your region? These are the stakeholders to invite to a mapping event. These sessions may be in-person or on a virtual call. Think about having fewer than 20 people at an event. If you have more than 20 stakeholders, consider holding a series of mapping events.

Some stakeholders to invite to the mapping event from your local eviction prevention network include:

- ERA administrators, managers, program officers and others in charge of the program's operations
- Front-line ERA staff who interact with clients and the general public
- Other housing and eviction prevention service providers who interact with the same clients and the ERA program, including non-municipal and community-based organizations
- Past clients, tenants, landlords and property managers
- Court staff or judicial officers, particularly those who have experience in referring people to ERA or who interact with the ERA's data systems
- Tenant advocates or community navigators who have experience representing people through the eviction or ERA application processes

Reach out to the individuals from these groups to invite them to participate in the mapping event. The invitation can be framed in the following way:

> "We are making a comprehensive map of how ERA currently works for tenants, landlords and housing service providers in our area. We want to make sure your voice is heard so we can see the ERA process from your perspective and flag opportunities for improvements. We'll be using our ERA process map to create user-friendly guides and an agenda for service and policy changes. Could you plan to attend and contribute to this collaborative and interactive mapping session?"

ESTABLISH A CORE FACILITATION TEAM

Cities and their partners should ensure there is a core team assigned to lead the facilitation of the event and synthesis of the maps. It will likely take at least three people to facilitate the mapping event so there is thorough documentation, broad participation, detailed conversation and effective synthesis. Think about inviting people to the core team who are detail-oriented, have excellent note-taking skills, and can empathetically see the process from different points of view.

2 Set up the Mapping Workspace

Before you can get started filling out the ERA process map, it is important to reach an agreement on what the map will look like, how it will be organized, and what the main sections will be for people to fill out. This includes deciding on the map's phases, format, and stakeholder zones or "lanes."

DEFINE THE PROCESS PHASES TO MAP

The first thing to establish for mapping will be the phases that a person goes through in a journey through the ERA process. This includes the presenting problem, solutions, detours, and, hopefully, a resolution. Think of it like a long, horizontal timeline that tells the story of how an individual becomes in need of rental assistance, how they come to seek out resources, what service providers do in response, and what happens along that person's journey.

Lay the phases out chronologically and horizontally on your mapping surface. These phases might include:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Before a problem arises	As the problem begins	Outreach or connection to services	Application & processing to obtain assistance	Possible resolution through services	Problem escalates to court	Moving forward

Details about what is happening during each of these stages of the ERA process will be added during the mapping event.

For each phase, participants should seek to capture how the ERA process works for multiple scenarios, including "the ideal path" — the scenario in which relevant parties are able to find the necessary services, get help, and potentially establish a stronger landlord-tenant relationship — as well as cases in which things go wrong. The latter might include situations in which people are not aware of or do not apply for rental assistance, face greater housing insecurity, and possibly go through the court system for an eviction proceeding. Alternatively, mapping also should consider what happens when a tenant or landlord seeks and applies for rental assistance, but faces additional challenges or "detours" along their journey, such as missed deadlines, unresponsive parties, or the denial of their application.

DEFINE THE STAKEHOLDER ZONES

The second thing to establish as part of the mapping surface are the different stakeholders' zones. To define these zones, identify the key users, providers, or other stakeholders performing actions within the ERA timeline. The main clusters of stakeholders should each get their own horizontal section or stripe on the map. Think of it as a series of "swim lanes" that will show what each of these clusters of people are doing at a certain phase of the timeline.

Key stakeholder zones will include:

- Tenants having issues making rent
- ERA service providers
- Landlords or property managers
- Other service providers (e.g., legal aid, housing counselors, court staff)

BUILD THE BLANK PROCESS MAP

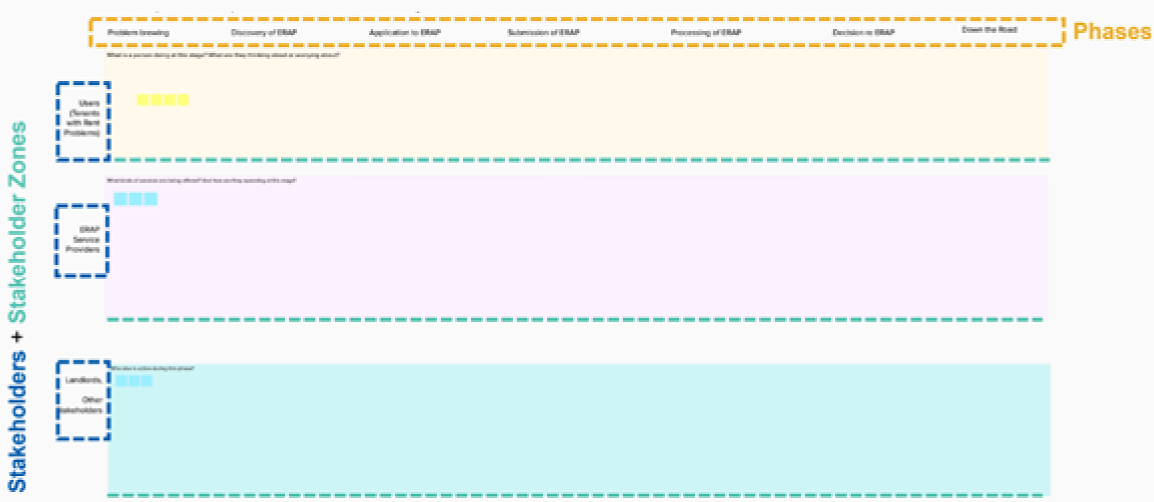
With the phases, format and stakeholders defined, facilitators should build the blank map (or "mapping workspace") that participants will contribute to. Your resulting map structure should look like a long horizontal timeline, divided by some basic phase titles and separating lines, and a series of different colored backgrounds for the stakeholders' swim lanes or zones.

If the mapping event will take place in-person, consider creating a physical workspace on a whiteboard or large poster, and plan to have participants contribute ideas and details by writing on sticky notes. This interactive element can lead to more creative and engaging sessions.

If the mapping event will take place virtually, you may want to leverage digital whiteboard platforms such as Miro or Mural for the most collaborative and immersive experience. Shared documents or slides can also be used, but likely will not yield the same level of participation and engagement.

TIP: Make sure the facilitation team is very familiar with the horizontal and vertical categories. At the mapping event, you will be responsible for leading participants through populating the map and making sure participants' insights and observations end up in the correct locations.

Example of a Blank ERA Process Map



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

3 Hold a Mapping Event

Once the structure of the process map has been established and key players have been identified, invite those stakeholders to a mapping event.

This session can take place either virtually or in-person. In-person events often yield the most interactive and collaborative results, but virtual events may enable facilitators to engage a broader range of stakeholders.

Individual mapping events should be scheduled for at least 45 minutes and no more than 90 minutes. It will be difficult to capture all the necessary details in less time, and energy may begin to fade after 90 minutes. If the group runs out of time, you can schedule supplemental mapping sessions or follow-ups for more detail-oriented mapping, including virtual convenings as needed.

TIP: Consider offering a virtual participation option for in-person mapping events if a critical stakeholder is unable to attend. Virtual participants should be encouraged to join by video call with their camera on, they should be able to see the physical workspace that in-person participants are contributing to, and an in-person facilitator should be specifically assigned to ensure that the voices of virtual participants are being heard.

MAKE A FACILITATION PLAN

Members of the core mapping team should each be assigned specific facilitation roles. This includes:

1. **Lead Interviewer:** This person will ask questions of the group, prompting discussion, guiding participants to provide greater detail, and signaling when it is time to move on to a different topic or a new phase of the ERA timeline.
2. **Notetaker:** Even though participants will be contributing to the map workspace directly in real-time, it is important to have someone focused on capturing notes in greater detail in order to identify knowledge gaps or areas that might require additional clarification. The notetaker also can document cross-cutting issues that are relevant for multiple stages or zones.
3. **Timekeeper and Facilitator:** This person should help the Lead Interviewer keep the group on track and moving through the process map based on the time allotted. They should ensure lively, equitable discussion by paying attention to who is participating and asking pointed questions or otherwise creating space for participation by quieter stakeholders. They can also assist people with contributing to a virtual mapping workspace.

SPARK COLLABORATION AT THE EVENT

The Lead Interviewer should be prepared to guide the stakeholder group through the entire process map, allocating time to prioritize fruitful discussion or to focus on problem areas. They should kick off discussion at the beginning of the ERA process timeline, and then slowly work across the map phase-by-phase, prompting participants to explain how the ERA program operates in each stage, for each stakeholder.

Facilitators should rely on a set of probing questions to uncover specifics about how the ERA process plays out in real-world cases and to spur discussion around possible hurdles or detours in the process. These questions might include:

- What is your department or organization doing at this point in the process?
- What happens next?
- Tell me more. What exactly happens?
- What if that goes wrong? Then what would you do?
- What is the experience like for the tenant at this point in the process? What about the landlord?
- Are any other stakeholders or organizations taking action at this point? If so, what does their involvement look like?
- Where are there frustrations or problems now? What can go wrong at this stage?
- Do you have any ideas for improvements?

While the Lead Interviewer generally guides the conversation, other members of the core mapping team can co-facilitate by prompting with additional questions or picking up on important threads for more focused discussion.

Participants should contribute to a shared map, either in-person or virtually, and take turns adding details based on their expertise or involvement in the process at different stages. Those details, actions and red flags can be captured on sticky notes or virtual sticky notes and added to the map under the relevant stages and in the appropriate stakeholder zones.

TIP: If no one can answer a question the facilitator asks, make note that the core mapping team should reach out to additional stakeholders at a later date to contribute those details or to clarify.

At the end of the mapping event, the core team will have a decision to make: Do you need to host additional sessions to get more stakeholder input? Or do you have enough information from the event to complete the map, even if you might have to fill in some gaps through email follow-up or phone calls?

If the team feels that it doesn't have a clear understanding of all steps in the process or the experiences of key stakeholders, you should plan an additional mapping event, perhaps only with the relevant stakeholders included or to drill down on a particular stage.

4 Clean up the Master Map

At the end of the mapping session, the facilitation team will likely have a robust but unwieldy map. It will be full of details, clumps of overlapping sticky notes, and some fuzzy spots where you need more details. Your team tried to capture and organize during the live event, but inevitably the map will be too busy to be useable for most stakeholders and will need to be organized.

PRESERVE THE ORIGINAL MAP

Take clear, legible photographs or screenshots of the map that results from your event. These photos should be shared with all participants so they have a copy of the original, and to offer them a more immediate "payoff" for attending the event. Facilitators can also encourage participants to submit any edits, additions or clarifications as the team works to finalize the map into more useable formats.

ORGANIZE AND DISTRIBUTE THE MASTER MAP

After preserving the original map, the core mapping team should consolidate, streamline and reformat the notes to create a cleaner and more useable version of the master map.

This can be done by creating a duplicate of the physical map and reorganizing the notes, though at this stage it may be more functional to transition physical maps to a virtual whiteboard format by leveraging tools such as Miro or Mural.

Items to consider when cleaning up the map include:

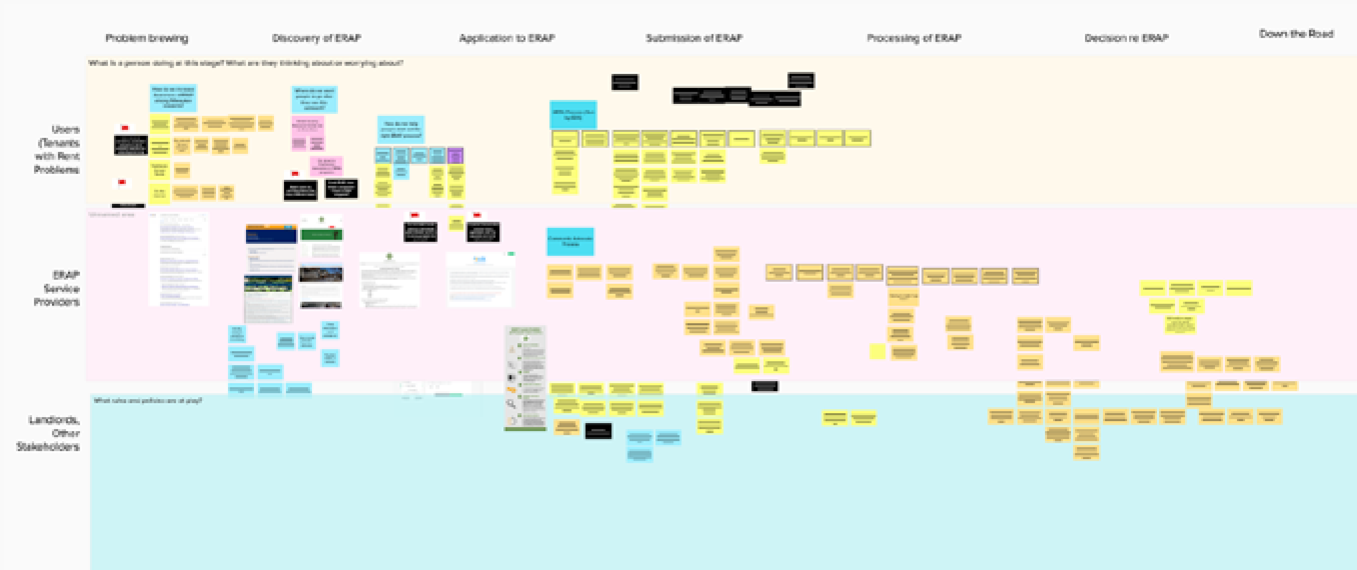
- Retain the timeline structure and zones for different stakeholders
- Focus on synthesizing the notes and individual details to make the map more readable
- Create clusters of notes to capture common themes or action areas

- Ensure that all actions are sequenced chronologically from left to right
- Designate detours, hurdles or areas for improvement in the ERA process by organizing them in a slightly different area on the map or in a different color
- Identify knowledge gaps about steps in the process and conduct the necessary follow-up to answer any open questions
- Be conscious of whether any new phases or stakeholder lanes were identified during the mapping event and adjust the underlying map structure accordingly
- Ensure that all notes are clear and readable

Once the map has been organized and streamlined, the core mapping team should reach out to participants and other stakeholders in the local eviction prevention network to share the cleaned-up master map in multiple formats. Encourage participants to provide feedback on any ways in which this information could be visualized, presented, or otherwise transformed into materials that would be useful for their work.

TIP: Share the entire map as a single image or file (e.g., PDF or PNG) that is large enough for people to zoom in and read the detailed notes. Additionally, consider providing screenshots or photos of sections of the map in which you have zoomed in on specific areas, either in a similar file format or collected on a series of slides in a PowerPoint deck.

Example of a Completed ERA Process Map



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Milwaukee, WI

5 Create Simplified Materials and Content

Though useful for visualizing an ERA process in the big picture, the master map may provide too much information for many users and service providers. Instead, the core mapping team should use the master map to make more specific visuals, slide decks, and lists that will be more functional and user-friendly for stakeholders' specific objectives.

Possible content resulting from the map might include: public-facing guides or process overviews to be used in outreach and communication materials; service maps; training materials for service providers; or a consolidated list of action items and necessary improvements.

Ultra-simple guide for tenants or landlords

An ultra-simple version of the process map could be presented on the ERA program webpage, included on flyers handed out by courts or social service providers, or posted anywhere residents might be seeking assistance.

This visualization could be as simple as four or five blocks corresponding to different phases in the process, laid out as a timeline of what program applicants should expect. Think of this as a high-level, bird's-eye view of the main phases of the process. The goal is to present the titles of the main phases, and define the primary task or most significant action item within each phase.

Example of an Ultra-Simple Guide for Tenants or Landlords

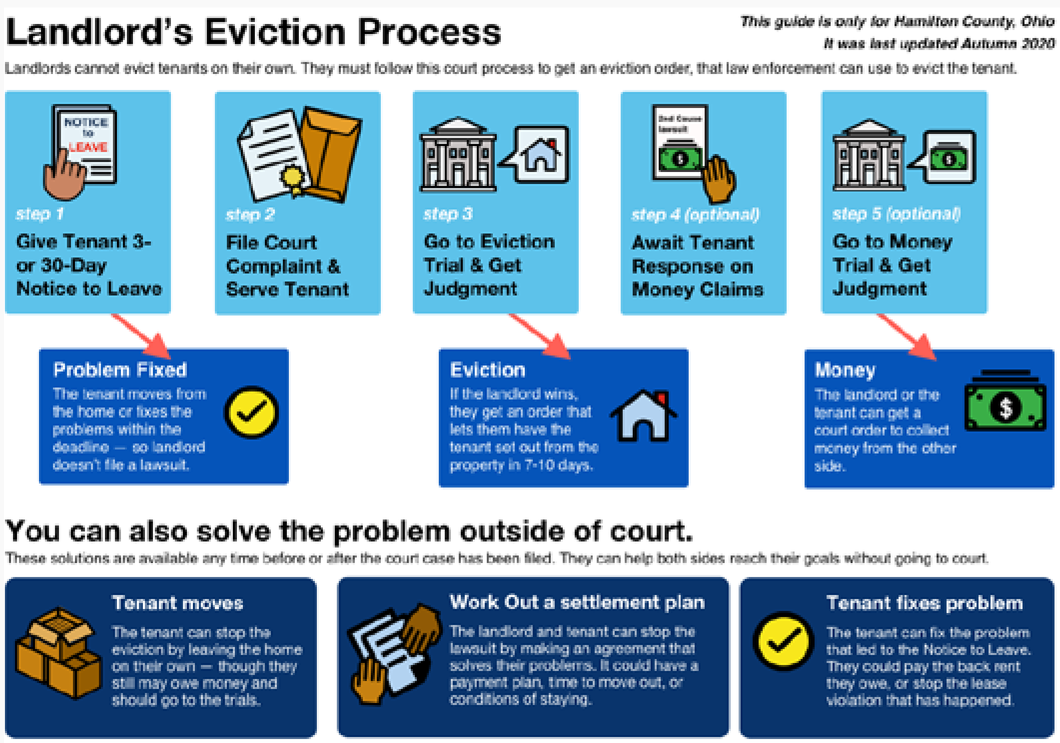
Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Milwaukee, WI

DIY service map for tenants or landlords

This user-facing map is more detailed than the ultra-simple guide. It should include information in a greater level of detail, specifically tailored to the perspective of the landlord or tenant. This representation can also flag possible detours or mistakes, instead of just the "ideal path" of how everything could go right.

This map can also be distributed at service points or on websites to the public. But it should largely be used in an interaction between a service provider and a landlord or tenant to explain the different paths the person might take and what outcomes they might reach. Think of it like a board game that a user can follow along and use to navigate the process.

Example of a DIY Service Map



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for Hamilton County, OH

Step-by-step text for websites and fliers

The step-by-step content of a complete map also can be laid out in a numbered list form. This can be shown on websites, fliers, or other places where a person might be seeking information on how to receive rental assistance. This format is particularly useful for presenting concise information on platforms accessed on a mobile device.

Service provider training materials

In addition to user-facing content, the process map can also serve as a foundation for resources for onboarding new members to the ERA team or other service providers (e.g., court or city agency staff, legal aid lawyers, housing counselors and community navigators).

The mapping structure is well-suited for slide decks or training materials depicting how the local ERA program works. Screenshots of the phases depicted in the map can be complemented by additional details on each stage and what the users or the service providers are doing in each phase. This can help other providers better understand how each phase currently works.

Agenda list

The core team should capture the problems, frustrations, and recommendations that emerged during the mapping events and subsequent synthesis by the team. Write these out as a numbered list to share with the network of service providers and staff working to prevent evictions in your region or city. Consider what the process map has revealed about possible service, technology and policy changes that could improve efficiency, experience and quality. Group the agenda points into near-term and long-term actions based on how feasible or resource-intensive the tasks seem to be.

DISTRIBUTE AND CONTINUE TO REFINE MAP-BASED RESOURCES

The team should distribute materials resulting from the mapping process to mapping event participants, any additional service providers and the general public. Consider how best to deliver helpful content in user-friendly formats to tenants, landlords and advocates who can use the various representations of the process map as they try to understand and navigate the ERA process.

Cities and their partners also should provide stakeholders and users of these resources with a clear process for updating the map or for offering feedback on the resulting materials. Participants should feel comfortable reaching out with new information or requests so the process map and materials continue to be accurate and useable. Consider using an online form or email to obtain feedback and updates.

Suggested Resources

Government agencies and service designers have created a rich set of resources on how to create and deploy process maps. Additional ideas and guidance are available from the resources listed below:

Service Mapping: A Step-by-Step Guide
(UK Government)
Designers in the United Kingdom have captured how they create maps of how government services operate. This step-by-step guide provides a walkthrough from determining what the map will do and look like, to completing the map and determining next steps.

What is a Customer Journey Map?
(U.S. General Services Administration)
Innovation teams in the federal government, within the General Services Administration, developed this three-part series describing how to create user-centered maps of how people journey through government services.

Journey Map and Service Blueprint
(Service Design Tools)
This design resource provides instructions, templates, and examples of how to use process maps to document users' journeys through the service process, or to map out how service providers deliver value.

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NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

LEGAL DESIGN LAB
Stanford Law School

Service Mapping for Eviction Prevention Networks

Most communities rely on at least a few different service providers to help prevent evictions and reduce housing instability while supporting tenants and landlords to find resources and assistance. This often presents as a network of government and nongovernment providers — from formalized eviction diversion programs and legal aid providers, to Continuums of Care (COCs) and faith-based organizations — offering partially overlapping services based on wide-ranging eligibility criteria. But few city governments have a sense of the complete scope of available services and target populations, just as few nonprofit and community partners have clear insight into the exact offerings of others in the service network. Additionally, communities often lack up-to-date records that account for changes in funding, policies and capacity that might affect the availability of services across the local network.

This worksheet guides city and regional leaders through the process of developing a map of the services available across the local eviction prevention network. It also offers a guide for creating materials and content about available services that can be helpful for service providers, households and landlords. Cities and their partners can use this worksheet to create a comprehensive Eviction Prevention Service Map, alongside referral directories for the public and services providers, website content, and other resources.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Developing a Map of Eviction Prevention Services

1 Identify and Invite Mapping Stakeholders

What services are available in your community for a tenant who is falling behind on rent or who may be on the brink of housing instability? To get a comprehensive view of these services, an essential first step is to gather a diverse group of stakeholders for a service mapping session.

The goal of the session is to compile participants' detailed knowledge about what services are available, and to whom. This should include "behind-the-scenes" details that may not be publicly listed on fliers or websites, such as when an organization might be able to exercise discretion on a case-by-case basis. Ideally, those in attendance should include directors, managers, and front-line staff of a broad range of service providers. Additional participants can include housing navigators and others who interact with service providers regularly and who can comment on residents' real-world experiences.

The following are some of the stakeholders from your local eviction prevention network to invite to the mapping event:

- **Community advocates:** This category includes individuals who work with both tenants and landlords as they try to access available services. Community advocates can likely offer a candid view of the accessibility, capacity and overall value of various services, along with an important window into client experiences. They should be encouraged to share both positive and negative experiences that clients have had interacting with the eviction prevention service network.

- **Emergency rental assistance providers:** Staff members and administrators of programs that offer financial assistance to tenants and landlords. These providers can offer a ground-level view of how they have helped clients, as well as issues and challenges they have experienced. They also can shine a light on possible financial and policy changes that may impact the availability and quality of services going forward.

- **Legal service providers and court staff:** This includes legal aid attorneys, pro bono lawyers, legal navigators, and legal clinic directors. These legal providers can describe what kinds of advice or full-service help are available to tenants and landlords, eligibility requirements for clients, capacity limits, and services for specific demographic groups or populations.

- **Housing counselors and navigators:** Individuals who specialize in assisting renters and landlords as they navigate through the different phases of housing instability.

- **Additional social service providers:** This might include participants from the local Continuum of Care, as well as community groups or faith-based organizations providing homelessness prevention services or assistance.

Reach out to these individuals and groups to invite them to a mapping event. The invitation can be framed in the following way:

> “We are mapping out the services available in our community to tenants who might be facing an eviction and their landlords. We hope to get your expertise on the full range of services the public should know about, as well as on opportunities for improvement. Could you plan to attend and contribute to this collaborative and interactive mapping session?”

ESTABLISH A CORE MAPPING FACILITATION TEAM

Prior to the mapping session, identify a facilitation team that includes at least three people: one to lead the session; a second to take detailed notes; and a third to help ensure active engagement and equitable participation. All three individuals should have deep knowledge of the goals of the session, the topics areas that will be covered, and the role of each invited stakeholder in the broader eviction prevention network.

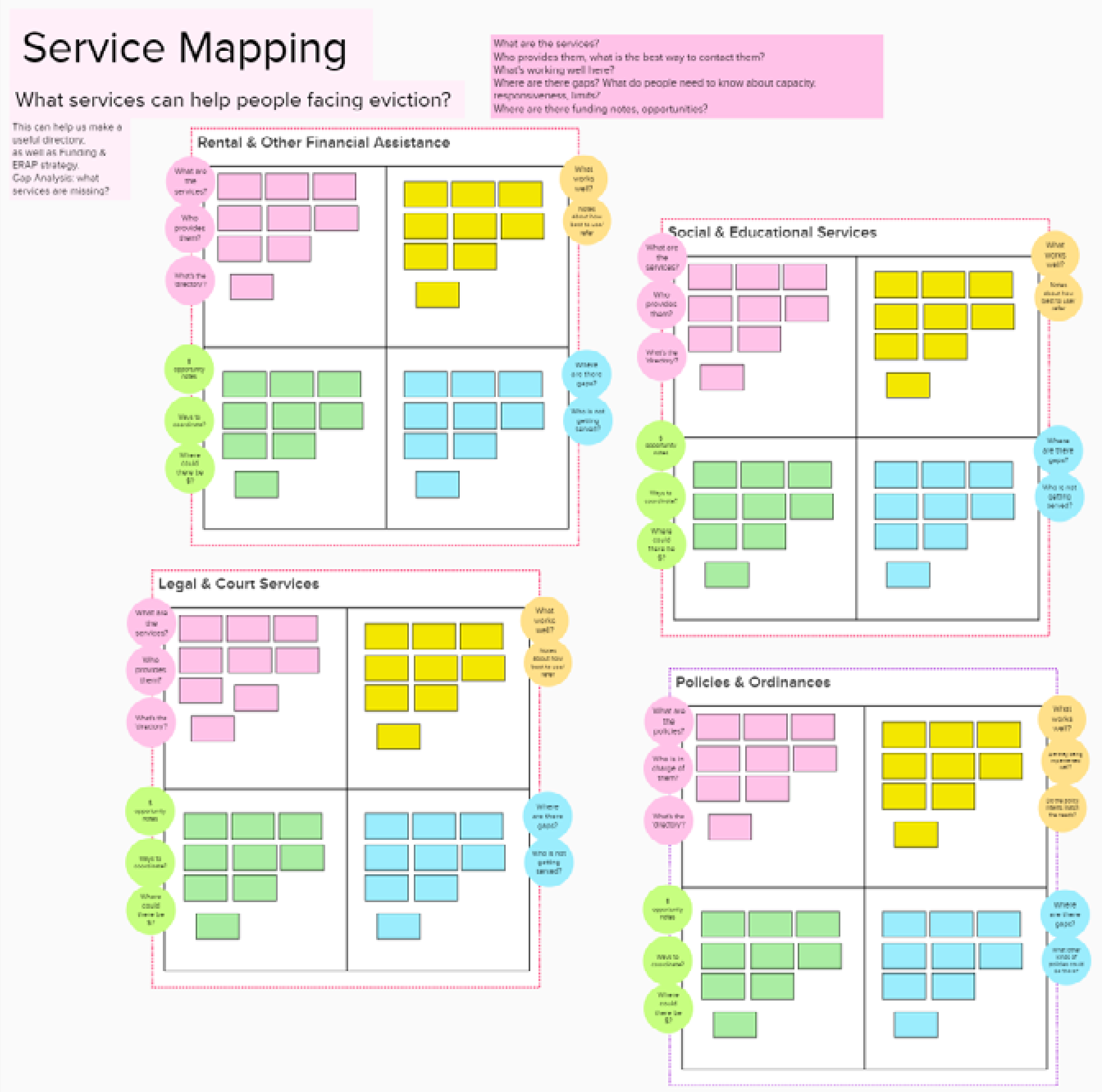
2 Host the Mapping Session

The mapping session can be in person or virtual and should last between 60 and 90 minutes. If the mapping event will take place in-person, consider creating a physical workspace on a whiteboard or large poster, and plan to have participants contribute to the map by writing on sticky notes — this interactive element can lead to more dynamic sessions. If the mapping event will take place virtually, consider leveraging digital whiteboard platforms such as Miro or Mural.

Whether in-person or virtual, the map should include defined zones or types of services to help guide the group discussion. Zones for the mapping workspace should include:

- Rental and Financial Assistance
- Social and Educational Services
- Legal and Court Services
- Policies and Ordinances (if time allows)

Example of a Blank Service Map



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

The facilitation team should be prepared to use the session to move through the first three zones and collect stakeholders' input on available services in each area. If there is time remaining, the team can turn to Policies and Ordinances, the laws, regulations and other policies that affect the provision of services.

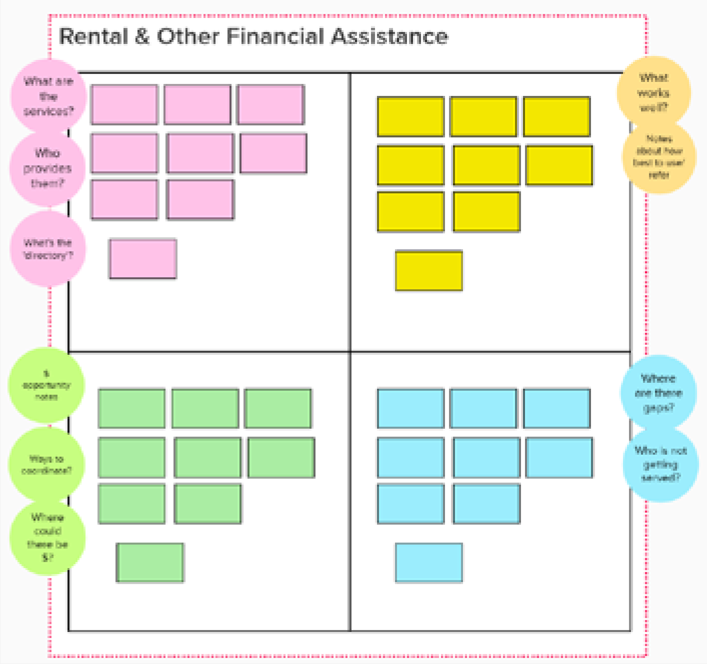
The lead facilitator can kick off the session by restating the purpose:

> "We are here today to learn about all of the services available to tenants and landlords in our community in situations when tenants are at risk of eviction or housing instability. We'll go through different buckets of services one-by-one to list out what assistance is available, to whom, and from which provider. For each type of service, we'll also document opportunities for improvement that can form an agenda of future work and priorities for our network."

GUIDE AND DOCUMENT THE GROUP DISCUSSION

Once the group has convened and is aligned on session goals, the lead facilitator should begin by focusing the discussion on the first zone, Rental and Financial Assistance. Facilitators should prompt participants to identify available services, highlighting specifics about each provider and the assistance offered.

Example of a Service Map Zone



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

Discussion questions might include:

What services are available in our community — and who provides them?

This is where the group will start to develop a directory of service providers and their offerings. This conversation should be relatively straightforward with the facilitator offering additional questions such as:

- Are there other services we haven't covered that a tenant or landlord could benefit from?
- Are there services that aren't typically in use right now that we should still include on the list?
- What services are available for members in specific demographic groups, like veterans, domestic violence survivors, or families with young children?

What is currently working well?

This should capture how current services are providing important supports to tenants and landlords, and perhaps offering models that others can replicate. The facilitator should make sure to probe the group for positive reflections, even if participants are slow at first to call out success stories. Follow-ups can include:

- What stories can you share about how clients have been benefited from these services?
- Can you share examples and stories that show where service provider(s) are coordinating service delivery to good effect?
- In what ways are available services better than they were one year ago? Five years ago?

Where are there service gaps — and who is not being served?

This set of questions should capture problems with service design, limitations of current policies or funding, and other frustrations expressed by users, front-line service providers, program directors, and policymakers. Often this set of questions will generate the most responses. Facilitator questions can include:

- Where are tenants and landlords coming up short in their search for help in these situations?
- What frustrates tenants or landlords about the services that are currently available to them?
- What is frustrating for service providers? In what ways are they not able to reach the outcomes they want?
- Have things gotten worse in the past year? Five years?
- Where are we falling short in relation to other communities you've heard about?

How can we do better?

The final section of questions will build from the discussion of successes and gaps by lifting up opportunities for improvements in funding, policy, coordination and other areas. Here the facilitator can press participants on how the network can resolve current problems and move to a higher level of service delivery and results. Questions can include:

- Are there untapped funding streams to fund services from both public sources and philanthropy?
- What could help service providers work together more effectively and align services for maximum impact?
- How can we get to the next level in helping tenants and landlords navigate a smooth journey to resolving the issues they are facing?

Once the facilitator has completed their questions or exhausted discussion related to Rental and Financial Assistance, these same questions can guide the conversation for the next two service zones, Social and Educational Services and Legal and Court Services. Each of these topic areas will likely take up less time than the first. If time allows, the facilitator can go on to explore the topic of Policies and Ordinances.

At the end of the session, the facilitators should thank participants for their time and provide insight into the next steps:

> “Our team will clean up this map and share materials based on the results of today’s session. This may include a referral list, outreach materials, and an agenda or priorities list based on the areas for improvement identified today. Is there another resource or material based on the information we’ve compiled that you would find useful?”

COMPLETE AND PRESERVE THE ORIGINAL MAP

Once the facilitation team has completed the mapping session with the stakeholder group, the facilitation team should check the map for completeness. Are there stakeholder groups mentioned during the event whose perspectives were missing? Write them a note or try to arrange a meeting. Add additional notes from this follow-up process to the existing map or whiteboard.

The facilitation team should also review the map and make small formatting improvements. This could include spellchecking, clustering of similar comments, removing duplicate listings of information, or adding titles that provide better guidance. Preserve this original service map with detailed photos or screenshots.

Example of a Completed Service Map

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

3 Unpack the Referral List from the Mapping Event

Once the map has been completed and organized, the team can begin parsing out and compiling key details and information. The goal of this work is to develop content that can be repurposed for materials that will be more useable for members of the eviction prevention service network.

DEVELOP A SERVICE DIRECTORY

The first deliverable to extract from the map is a comprehensive list of service providers and assistance available in the community.

Create this "Eviction Prevention Services Directory" using a web-based spreadsheet tool such as Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel in SharePoint. The directory's column categories should follow this structure, so that it can be interoperable across service areas:

- State
- Service Category (Financial, Housing, Legal, Social, Educational, Other)
- Service Name (e.g., program, clinic, fund)
- Jurisdictions Served (e.g., neighborhoods, ZIP codes, cities, counties or statewide)
- Service URL for the Specific Service
- Service Phone Number
- Service Email
- Service Description
- Service Eligibility Notes (e.g., demographic groups served, income limitations, situations addressed)
- Name of Organization Providing the Service
- Organization URL
- Organization Phone Number
- Organization Texting Number
- Main Office Street Address
- Main Office City
- Main Office State
- Main Office Zip
- Main Office Email

The facilitation team should list all organizations and services mentioned during the mapping session. Each service should be listed on a new row of the spreadsheet. If an organization offers more than one service, each service should be listed in a separate row.

The facilitation team should fill in information for each service across all columns. If specific details were not gathered during the mapping session, the team should conduct the necessary follow-up or external research to complete the sheet.

Example of a Completed Service Directory

State	Issue They Can Assist People With	IssueType	Organization & Web Page Name	Website	Main Phone Number	Texting Number	Local Jurisdictions It Serves (inside State)	Special Audience or Demographic	Special Issue a
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	Bay Area Legal Aid	https://baylegal.org	(800) 551-5554		Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, Sa		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	California Indian Legal Serv	http://www.calindian.org	(800) 743-8941		Alpine, Inyo, Mono; Native Americans living in all coun		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	Legal Services of Northern	https://www.lsnc.net	(888)-354-4474		Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn		
CA	General Assistance	financialAssistance	211 Bay Area	https://www.211bayarea.c	Call 2-1-1		Bay Area counties		
CA	Legal Information	legalAid	Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board	https://www.cityofberkeley.info/rent/	(510) 981-7368		Berkeley		
CA	Legal Information	legalAid	Berkeley Tenants Union	https://berkeleytenants.org/	(520) 982-6696		Berkeley		
CA	Legal Information	legalAid	Los Angeles Housing + Community Development Department (HCIDLA)	https://hcidla2.lacity.org/	866-557-7368		City of Los Angeles		
CA	General Assistance	financialAssistance	Santa Clara Salvation Army	https://siliconvalley.salvationarmy.org/	(408)247-4588		City of Santa Clara		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	California Rural Legal Assist	http://www.crla.org	(510)-267-0762		Colusa, Imperial, Kern (northwest portion), Madera, M		
CA	General Assistance	financialAssistance	West Valley Community Services	https://www.wvcommunityservices.org/	(408) 2558033		Cupertino, Los Gatos, Saratoga, San Jose		
CA	Legal Information	legalAid	East Palo Alto Fair Rent Coalition	https://www.ci.east-palo-alto.ca.us/rentprogram	(415) 845-7447		East Palo Alto		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	Central California Legal Ser	https://www.centralcalleg:	(800) 675-8001		Fresno, Kings, Mariposa, Merced, Tulare, Tuolumne		
CA	General Assistance	financialAssistance	St. Joseph's Family Center	https://stjosephsgilroy.org/	(408) 8426662		Gilroy, San Martin		
CA	General Assistance	financialAssistance	211 Los Angeles	https://www.211la.org/	Call 2-1-1		Greater Los Angeles Area		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	Greater Bakersfield Legal A	https://www.gbla.org	(888)-292-4252		Kern (except northwest portion)		
CA	General Assistance	financialAssistance	Community Services Agency of Mountain View and Los Altos	https://www.csacares.org/	(650) 9680836		Los Altos, Mountain View		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA-CAN)	http://www.cangress.org/	(213) 228-0024		Los Angeles		
CA	Legal Information	legalAid	Coalition for Economic Survival (CES)	http://www.cesinaction.org/	(213) 252-4411		Los Angeles		
CA	Legal Aid Group	legalAid	Eviction Defense Network	http://www.evictiondefensenetwork.com/	(213) 385-8112		Los Angeles		
CA	Legal Information	legalAid	United Tenants - Inquilinos Unidos	http://www.inquilinosunidos.org/	(213) 483-7497		Los Angeles		

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the State of California

Make sure the services are categorized by the type of service (e.g., financial, legal, social service, or other). This will enable you to create sections or tabs in the spreadsheet to make the different types of services clearly discoverable.

TIP: Cities or regions with a significant number of available services should also consider columns or tabs within the service directory that indicate the stage of an eviction process at which a service is available (e.g., "Before Lawsuit," "During Lawsuit," or "After Eviction/Homeless Status").

The draft service directory should first be shared with stakeholders who participated in the mapping event for feedback. Once additional gaps have been filled and the information has been verified, it can be shared more widely with other city departments and service providers.

The directory can then become a shared, private resource list for groups in the community to help support effective referrals. It also can be integrated into existing case management referral portals or used as a web-based directory that service providers can access when researching options for a client or making a referral.

TIP: Establish a clear process for keeping the information in the directory up-to-date. Sharing the directory as a web-based document allows members of the eviction prevention network to leave comments in the sheet flagging recent changes or necessary updates. Another option is to create an online update form with a link included at the top to the directory. An "owner" of the directory should be identified and responsible for making updates regularly.

4 Create Public-Facing Services Information

In addition to the Eviction Prevention Services Directory, use information captured through the mapping process to inform public-facing materials. For example, details about available services, resources and eligibility requirements can be captured in the form of a simplified referral list online, or repurposed for paper flyers, postcards, mailers and social media outreach.

WEBSITE-BASED SERVICES INFORMATION

In addition to publishing an abridged form of the service directory on the city website and relevant department pages, the facilitation team can promote the compiled information on a range of webpages. This can include the websites of stakeholders across the eviction prevention network who may have participated in the original mapping session, and other websites or web-based resources that residents may turn to for help in these situations.

One way to identify possible websites for promoting the services information is to test multiple keyword searches that households facing eviction might use: *"missed rent in [city]," "need help with paying rent in [city]," "homelessness prevention in [city]," "eviction notice in [city]."* Experiment with multiple searches, in multiple languages, and identify reputable websites from the first few pages of search results. Connect with each website's hosting organization or administrators to provide a simplified version of the service directory.

The user-friendly version should be much more streamlined than the larger directory and can include the following information:

- When a service can help (e.g., before an eviction, during an eviction or after an eviction)
- Name of service
- Service description (e.g., what assistance is available)
- Organization that provides the service
- Abbreviated description of eligibility and jurisdiction limitations
- Best contact channels for learning more (e.g., phone, text, email, request form, URL)

Tip: Imagine that a person might be scrolling for this information on their phone. Make it easy to understand when they should contact a certain service rather than another. Make it clear if there are eligibility restrictions the reader should know about, so they can avoid a frustrating rejection.

The more websites this information can be listed on, the better chance tenants and landlords will discover it.

SCHEMA.ORG MARKUP VERSION FOR SEARCH DISCOVERABILITY

The facilitation team can improve how the services will appear on Google and other search engines by transforming the services directory into a Schema.org markup. This markup is how websites communicate to Google and other search engines. The markup tells search engines what is on a website, and why the search service should send visitors to the website. This is a search engine optimization (SEO) technique that can improve how government and public interest websites rank on key search results pages.

The team should work with local website administrators to create the schema markup on the "back end" of their websites about the available services. This is a technical step that requires web developers, but having the web-based spreadsheet of the services directory should make it relatively straightforward.

TIP: The team and website administrators can use the free tool at schema.legalhelpdashboard.org to generate the markup by uploading the service directory spreadsheet or by completing the web-based form. This produces JavaScript Object Notation (JSON) code that website administrators can easily put in the website's headers. This will tell Google and other search engines about the services and organizations included in the directory, and will make it easier for people to discover those services when they search online.

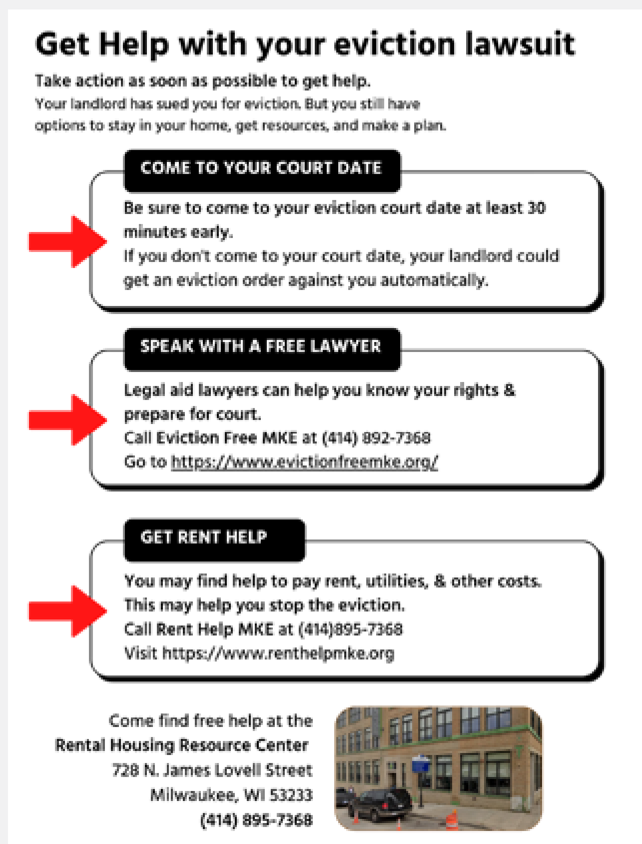
PAPER-BASED OUTREACH ABOUT SERVICES

In addition to website outreach, the team can create flyers, handouts, postcards, mailers and other paper-based promotional materials using highly simplified versions of the directory information. These materials should feature the most impactful and broadly accessible services available in each category, such as those with the most capacity to deliver assistance to the largest number of households in the community.

Lay out the top three or four services in a handout that can be distributed at court facilities, by service providers, or at community events. The headings can be phrased around real-world scenarios, such as: *"Are you Behind on Rent?," "Are You Worried About Eviction?," or "Are You Having Trouble with Your Landlord? These services can help!"*

List the names of the top services, the best contact information, and a very short description of the services provided and how they can help.

Examples of Paper-Based Service Directory Materials



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Milwaukee, WI

5 Create a Shared Agenda Document

The final step in the service mapping process is to compile all of the hurdles, problem areas, opportunities, and recommendations that surfaced during the process into a single document. This document will define the necessary next steps or priorities to improve the local eviction prevention network.

Divide the agenda document into two sections: Near-Term Improvements and Long-Term Changes. The first section is for items that the network or stakeholders have the power and the capacity to address in the next six months to one year. The second section is for improvements that require action by a broader group of external actors (including government or the court system) to complete. Items found in this section are more substantial, may require more political buy-in, advocacy or funding, and will likely take longer to achieve.

To develop the agenda document, the facilitation team should go through all of the notes from the mapping session and organize the content into action items that include near-term improvements and long-term changes. The facilitation team can decide if they want to organize the document around agenda items for specific stakeholders or organizations — for example, by assigning Near-Term Improvements and Long-Term Changes to specific groups that will lead the work on those topics.

Once the notes are transcribed and organized into the agenda document, share it as a web-based document with mapping session participants and ask for feedback:

> “We have captured all of the opportunities and action items from our mapping session into this document. Have we gotten all of the ideas and proposals you talked to us about? Have you thought of any more agenda items in the meantime? Please review the Agenda Document so we can share a finalized draft more widely and begin to discuss next steps as a group.”

After responding to edits and feedback, the facilitation team can move to finalize the agenda document for distribution among the network of providers and, if appropriate, more publicly.

6 Regularly Update the Service Directory and Agenda Document

The mapping process is not a one-time event. The map should be revisited and updated as needed regularly. The city or facilitation team can host ongoing check-in calls with network members for collecting updates, discussing changes, and identifying new trends in what is working or where households are falling through the gaps in the local support services net. These meetings should be expanded to engage new stakeholders as additional service providers or eviction prevention stakeholders emerge. In a follow-up from each update meeting, the facilitation team can recirculate the updated service directory and agenda document.

Tip: Consider scheduling a recurring quarterly or six-month check-in call to collect updates to the service directory and align the network around the agenda document and any new priorities. The team should consider supplementing these check-ins with an annual mapping session as an opportunity to revisit the map and the directory in its entirety, while reviewing any new challenges and opportunities for improvement.

Developing a process for ongoing discussion and assessment can ensure that all materials remain up-to-date and useful to providers, and that tenants and landlords have the information they need to navigate their way through the local housing and eviction system.

Suggested Resources

Consider using the following resources to facilitate your community's efforts to map services and deliver helpful information to providers, tenants, landlords and the general public:

Co-Creating System Maps

(This is Service Design Doing)

Co-Creating Systems Maps is a chapter from *A Practitioner's Handbook: This Is Service Design Doing that guides teams on how to facilitate a mapping exercise.*

Service Mapping: A Step-by-Step Guide

(UK Government)

Designers in the United Kingdom have captured the process they use to create maps showing how government services operate. This step-by-step guide provides a walkthrough of the process, from determining what the map will do and look like, to completing the map and determining next steps.

Schema Markup to Improve Search Rank

(Stanford Legal Design Lab)

A project of the Stanford Legal Design Lab, Schema Markup is a tool to assist service providers with improving their website or webpage to improve the machine readability of their content. Schema markup tells search engine crawler bots what your organization is, who you aim to serve, and what kind of information and services you offer. By implementing this markup on the backend of a website, providers can ensure that the information on a webpage will be more readily identified and promoted through search engines.

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Stanford Law School

Tailoring ERA Outreach to Eligible Tenants Who Are Not Accessing Assistance

Traditional outreach and engagement strategies — like creating a website, handing out fliers or issuing a press release — can increase general awareness about a local emergency rental assistance (ERA) program. But these outreach and engagement strategies often fall short. In fact, conventional outreach, while critically important, can easily miss some people who are the most at risk of eviction and housing instability. That is why cities and their partners should also pursue more targeted outreach and engagement strategies focused on populations facing various barriers to learning about and accessing emergency rental assistance.

These populations may include: individuals with limited English proficiency; individuals with limited access to the internet; individuals with a disability; individuals with immigration concerns; individuals with justice system involvement; individuals with work, childcare responsibilities or transportation challenges that impact their ability to apply; individuals who have experienced systemic racism; and individuals who have a fundamental distrust in government.

This worksheet offers guidance on identifying the populations who are not accessing a local ERA program. It also provides recommendations for improving the effectiveness of existing outreach efforts and developing more deliberate, customized engagement strategies specific to these tenant groups.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Create a Targeted Outreach and Engagement Strategy

Cities should create a targeted outreach strategy that seeks to reduce the barriers that limit or impede certain groups from applying for and receiving emergency rental assistance.

Determine Who is Not Accessing the Program

Program staff and the broader eviction prevention network should explore what groups of tenants may have difficulty accessing or finding information about the local ERA program.

Examples of People Facing Barriers to Accessing ERA

People facing specific barriers to accessing an ERA program may include, but is not limited to:

- Individuals with limited English proficiency, including those who may not understand ERA outreach in English or who may be intimidated by the idea of engaging with a government or nonprofit agency due to a language barrier
- Individuals in a racial or ethnic group who may have experienced structural racism, and who may therefore distrust government programs
- Individuals wary of the immigration implications of using a government service or a public benefit, and who have concerns for their family's security
- Individuals with limited access to the internet and digital outreach platforms
- Individuals with physical or mental disabilities that may impair their ability to learn about or access a service effectively
- Individuals in rural areas or areas with limited transportation options who may experience added difficulties submitting an application
- Individuals working outside 9-to-5 business hours or those with children, who may struggle to appear in person to receive assistance
- Individuals with justice system involvement
- Individuals 65 years and older who may experience multiple barriers to information and access

The likelihood of any of these groups not having adequate access to the ERA program will vary from community to community based on geography, population size, demographics, history, and more. Consider which factors might pose the greatest challenge for which populations, as well as what barriers might deter the largest number of people in your community from accessing the assistance they need.

REVIEW CURRENT PROGRAM DATA

Program staff should collect and review program data to better understand who is currently applying for services, and who is not.

Disaggregate and evaluate program data to determine who has accessed the program based on race and ethnicity, age group, gender, household size, income (or area median income bracket), and, if known, language spoken and citizenship status.

TIP: Map disaggregated data by census tract or zip code to visualize where applications are coming from geographically — and where they are not. This data can also be compared to census data and relevant statistics on the local population, such as neighborhoods with a high percentage of rent-burdened households.

From this review, program staff can begin to get a picture of the types of tenants who are not accessing the program. This data may confirm that the program staff's initial thoughts on who is not accessing the program were correct, and that those populations should be the focus of more intentional outreach and engagement. Alternatively, this review may reveal additional individuals or households that were not initially considered as requiring a more targeted approach for building awareness and engagement.

Develop a Targeted Outreach Plan

ESTABLISH AN OUTREACH WORKING GROUP

Program staff should assemble a working group of internal and external partners to help identify community organizations, messages, communications media and platforms, events or engagement opportunities, and other strategies to improve outreach to target groups. Beyond general awareness-building campaigns, the working group's efforts should be specifically tailored to reach individuals who face additional barriers to accessing the ERA program. This workgroup could be an informal network with meetings, calls, and check-ins as needed, or it could be a formal group that meets every month to share insights, data, updates, and feedback.

TIP: The outreach working group should include members of city commissions (e.g., Housing Commission or Human Rights Commission), along with community leaders and partners with experience working with diverse populations. Go beyond established relationships to identify community leaders who have unique insights into these populations, such as principals, school counselors or clinicians, faith leaders, librarians, or leaders of neighborhood associations or civic leagues.

CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCES IN STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Work with advocates, navigators, service providers and community organizations to connect directly with individuals who experience the type of barriers the program is looking to overcome. In tenant interviews, focus groups and other conversations, ask these individuals what would help and encourage them to access the ERA program, and use their insights to inform future outreach.

Another way to center the lived experience of target audiences is to speak with individuals who have successfully accessed the ERA program. Learn more about how they became aware of the program, what prior knowledge or misconceptions they had, what led them to apply, and what challenges they faced during the application process. Ask if they know of friends or neighbors who are also in need of assistance but have not accessed the program, and what they think would help more people apply. Finally, ask for direct feedback on existing outreach materials and the application process as a whole, and make improvements based on their input.

DRAFT AN OUTREACH PLAN

Program staff, with assistance from the working group, should draft an outreach plan to boost awareness of the local ERA program among target groups, improve trust in the system, and increase willingness to participate in the program.

The plan should include a description of each type of tenant that is not accessing the program, information about their current barriers, and promising opportunities or examples of ways to improve outreach to the targeted group. The plan should set measurable goals the team can use to hold itself accountable over time for increasing awareness and engagement.

The outreach plan might also cover some of the following topics:

Geographic Zones

Where do tenants in the target populations live? What service providers or community-based organizations do they interact with? Where are the best locations for targeted fliers, canvassing, events, or out-of-home advertising to reach them?

Trusted Messengers

Who in the community does the target population trust? These trusted messengers may include principals, doctors, faith leaders, small business owners, community organizers, social media influencers, or neighborhood leaders. How can these individuals be included in outreach strategies?

Messaging

Create a style guide with phrases, messages, images, symbols and colors that may engage the target populations. This guide can resemble other branding packages city teams use, but with more specifics about visual, language, and messaging choices that may improve outreach to the target groups.

- **Develop targeted messaging:** Ensure that the messaging addresses concerns people in the target group might have — like "worried about rent," "having problems with landlord," or "got an eviction notice" — in plain language that a tenant might use.
- **Use appropriate images:** Use imagery, phrases, and symbols that are welcoming and representative of the age, race, gender, gender expression or disability of your target audience. Make sure that the images are reflective of the target population's experience. Consider looking beyond typical stock imagery or clip-art and use the following:
  - Images of individual people showing racial and socio-economic diversity
  - Images of people with facial expressions that show a sense of calm and dignity
  - A diversity of relevant environments, including rural, urban, agricultural and suburban settings
- **Address misinformation:** Are there misconceptions about the ERA program that could be inhibiting people's participation? Address these explicitly in the outreach. For example, the style guide can state prominently and redundantly a message such as, "Anyone, regardless of immigration status, is eligible," or, "This program will not affect your immigration status."
- **Check for blind spots:** Before publishing outreach materials, request an external stakeholder or stakeholders to review the messaging, images, and other content. Is the outreach in the right language? Are the materials translated professionally and with cultural sensitivity? Ask stakeholders in the working group and translators for assistance in this review.

Refine Tactics for Targeted Outreach

The outreach plan targeting individuals who are not accessing the program should include specific tactics for both in-person and virtual engagement.

On-the-Ground and Paper-Based Outreach

IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCESSIBILITY OF EXISTING OUTREACH MATERIALS

Begin by ensuring that existing informational and outreach materials are effective and accessible. Make any necessary improvements, including by using clear, straightforward, jargon-free language to explain the program.

The visual design of materials should also be considered. Ensure that all materials conform to design best practices, such as including sufficient amounts of white space. Text should be broken up into short sentences and paragraphs, making use of distinct header hierarchies to provide clear structure. Fonts should be simple and large enough to be legible, with a limited number of contrasting colors to improve readability. Images or illustrations of people used in design should be inclusive and representative of communities that the program aims to serve.

To further improve accessibility, professionally translated materials in widely spoken non-English languages should be developed based on community needs.

TIP: Engage community organizations and residents throughout the material development and design process and ask for feedback on existing materials. Community members may offer new perspectives on how to better tailor materials based on cultural relevance, language or other accessibility considerations.

DISTRIBUTE OUTREACH MATERIALS IN HIGH-TRAFFIC AREAS

Print letter-size fliers and tabloid-size posters to distribute in locations where target groups are likely to encounter them. Identify key locations for dissemination such as schools, churches, food banks, coffee shops, grocery stores, libraries, bus stations, banks, large employers, and community groups. Distribute fliers and posters at these locations and ask to have them posted in entryways and on bulletin boards.

TIP: Get creative with distribution methods. For example, include fliers in school packets that go out to students' parents, or in food bank distribution bags. Be sure to provide community groups with extra printouts and a digital file to enable digital distribution.

PARTNER AUTHENTICALLY WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Cities and ERA providers should look for guidance from organizations that have deep connections with the communities they are trying to reach. Actively engage these community-based groups in the design of programs and materials, the development and implementation of outreach strategies, and more.

Staff and members of these community organizations may have more established connections with individuals who are not accessing programs; they can therefore act as trusted messengers for the ERA program. This is particularly true when the city and its partners are trying to reach individuals who have experienced systemic racism or who distrust government, as may be the case for Black, Indigenous, Latino and Hispanic, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities; individuals with justice system involvement; individuals who have experienced homelessness or foster care; households with mixed immigration status or refugees; and more.

ENGAGE COMMUNITY LEADERS AND PAST CLIENTS AS INFLUENCERS OR NAVIGATORS

Ask community leaders and individuals who have successfully benefited from the program if they would be open to becoming community navigators or informal program advocates. This may mean reaching out to small business owners, neighborhood association leaders, community advocates, faith leaders, or residents with long-term family ties to the community to explore their interest in supporting the outreach effort.

Willing community leaders or former ERA clients can be trained about the inner workings of the ERA program, details on how to apply, and common obstacles that applicants might face. Equipped with this information, they can help refer people the program and integrate program information into their community conversations, while building awareness among their staff, clients and neighbors. Encourage them to post about the program online and provide them with outreach materials to distribute.

Informal advocates or influencers can also be integrated with more formal navigator programs and the broader service provider community. These individuals can be given access to shared referral directories used by service providers in the region, and be trained on how to facilitate the intake process.

EXPAND COURT-BASED OUTREACH AND PARTNERSHIPS

To better reach individuals who are actively facing eviction, foster closer partnerships with local, county or state courts involved in the eviction process. Coordinate to ensure that the appropriate resources are being shared directly with landlords and tenants, such as by including ERA informational fliers in court summons packets. Fliers and other promotional material should be posted throughout the court building, if allowed by the court staff. Program staff or benefits counselors should also aim to be present at court to personally engage with tenants attending hearings.

Social Media Outreach and Analytics

Program staff can also use social media to improve outreach to target groups that are not accessing the ERA program. Outreach on social media can include targeted advertisements and posts for the program in multiple languages. Use social media platform targeting tools to aim outreach at specific geographic regions or demographic groups.

MEET RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ARE ONLINE

While the ERA program may have an ongoing social media strategy for broader outreach efforts, consider whether that strategy is inherently missing particular target groups because it overlooks a specific social media platform or online community (e.g., Reddit, Nextdoor, or particular Facebook groups). For each tenant group not being reached, consider if it includes people who might be accessing an alternative platform or who might engage with social media in ways that are not reflected in the broader strategy. For example, the targeted populations may use more culturally specific platforms, information channels or discussion groups.

TRACK ENGAGEMENT TO IDENTIFY EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

The team should track engagement levels with different social media posts and use this feedback to identify messages, images, or types of content that increase engagement with the program. This can include tracking users' likes, clicks on links, or comments and questions regarding a post. These user actions can provide important feedback about which types of content are best at engaging target groups. If the platform allows, track which demographic groups are engaging with outreach posts or advertisements. This can help clarify what strategies are most effective in increasing engagement with groups not otherwise accessing the program.

ENGAGE TRUSTED PARTNERS AS SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Recruit community leaders, government agencies, community-based organizations and other community influencers who have relationships with the target communities to post and reshare information about the ERA program.

Program staff could develop shareable content (e.g., posts, social media copy or videos) to share with influencers. Additionally, program staff can suggest that influencers create original content (e.g., TikTok videos, Instagram Stories or Live) about the ERA program that would resonate with their followers. The staff can support the creation of original content through stipends that cover the cost of this important work.

TIP: Prior to content being shared on influencers' social media channels, program staff should educate influencers about what the ERA program is and is not. This will help ensure that influencer content is accurate and up-front about the program's value, along with its limitations.

USE GEOGRAPHIC TARGETING

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Nextdoor, allow for certain posts and advertisements to be targeted at specific geographic regions, such as a set of zip codes or a neighborhood. Use this geographic targeting to focus digital advertising and boosted content to priority populations.

Make The Program More Accessible

Of course, improving engagement of populations that are not currently accessing the program is not solely about messaging and outreach strategies. It is also about improving the accessibility of the application process and the ERA program as a whole.

PAPER AND DIGITAL ACCESS

ERA program materials, including the application, should be available in both paper and digital formats. This will better accommodate tenants with different abilities, preferences, and access challenges for applying.

Digital materials should be compatible with mobile devices (e.g., a mobile phone or tablet) and include an easy-to-use, fillable application. Clear instructions on required documentation and how to upload those materials should also be provided.

Similarly, residents should be able to fill out and submit a paper-based application, either by mailing it in, using drop boxes, or applying in-person.

TIP: Documentation requirements can be a significant hurdle to completing an ERA application successfully. For many applicants, it can be confusing to identify and submit the acceptable forms of documentation to meet various requirements. This is particularly true for individuals without a formal lease agreement to show proof of address, those with informal work arrangements, or those who lack formal bank and tax histories for demonstrating income.

To improve accessibility, minimize and simplify documentation requirements; allow for and facilitate self-attestation by providing templates; and employ proxies for income verification if possible.

HANDS-ON ASSISTANCE IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES

Program staff and trained community navigators should be available to support tenants who need help and guidance completing their applications. Ensure staff and community navigators have received cultural competency training, and have relevant language skills, cultural connections and lived experience that will enable them to connect with and support a diversity of program applicants. Community navigators can provide hands-on support beyond what program staff can, through assistance with filling in form fields, gathering documents, and following up on other required steps. Assistance should be made available online, over the phone and in-person.

LEVERAGE TEXTING AND SMS OUTREACH

Developing text message (or SMS) channels with the public can also improve the accessibility of the ERA program. Program staff should consider establishing an outreach hotline for the program over SMS. This can be done by establishing a phone number and using a keyword included on outreach fliers and posters. A prospective applicant can text the keyword to the provided phone number to sign up for the program, get answers to FAQs, or link to the main website of the program.

In addition to the hotline, program staff can utilize text messages to send ongoing reminders and updates to a prospective applicant who has applied for emergency rental assistance. The text messages can prompt applicants about the program's due dates, missing fields, application progress, or reminders to make applying to the ERA program more transparent and engaging.

TIP: Text messages and SMS can also be used to send surveys or feedback forms that collect information about improving the application process or program. Program staff may also be able to collect additional information about the applicant's outcome or provide the applicant with additional referrals to eviction prevention services, even after their engagement with the ERA program has concluded.

Ongoing Check-Ins, Analysis and Accountability

It is not an easy task to engage people who are not accessing an ERA program. Entrenched, structural barriers may affect people's willingness and ability to apply for assistance. That said, cities and their partners should commit to a process of continuous improvement as they seek out strategies that may work. This means building ongoing feedback and tracking of outreach strategies into the outreach plan.

CONDUCT AN ONGOING EVALUATION OF PROGRAM DATA

Program staff should regularly review application and program data to see who is engaging and who is not engaging with the program. Ongoing tracking will help determine if the intentional outreach is succeeding in reaching individuals who may not otherwise be aware of or accessing the program.

COLLECT QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK

ERA providers should conduct regular check-ins with eviction prevention stakeholders, partner organizations, community leaders and applicants to identify trends and collect feedback. Use these conversations to learn more about the on-the-ground response to outreach, changes to the program design, and general community response:

- Is there misinformation about the program?
- What reasons are people giving about why they are not using the program?
- What challenges are people running into if they try to access the program?
- Where are people going or what information sources do they turn to when they need help?
- Are any of the messages succeeding in building trust and engagement?

Continue to track and document program data against these types of questions to gradually improve the program. The goal is to make emergency rental assistance accessible to all who need it, so that the benefits of this important assistance are enjoyed equitably among the city's residents.

Suggested Resources

The resources below provide additional guidance on effective communication strategies, improving the accessibility of ERA programs and applications, and targeting strategies.

Lessons from COVID-19 on Executing Communications and Engagement at the Community Level During a Health Crisis
(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)
This paper captures lessons learned and insights by public health and communications practitioners on issues to further explore or consider in strengthening the public health sector's communications and community engagement capacity when anticipating and responding to future crises.

Guidelines for ERA Program Online Applications
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)
These guidelines detail how to create easy-to-use online ERA applications. A sample application flow, example application screens, sample self-attestation documents and guidance on fact-specific application proxies are all provided, along with general best practices for application design.

Eviction Prevention: A Guide for Local Governments
(National League of Cities and Stanford Legal Design Lab)
This publication details how local governments can work with partners to implement laws, policies and services that stabilize housing and prevent evictions — in the near term and for years to come. It includes a step-by-step process and menu of program offerings to develop effective interventions that are responsive to community needs.

Targeted Universalism: Policy & Practice
(The Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley)
This resource is a primer on the targeted universalism framework and describes how to take an outcome-oriented approach to public policy. It challenges the "one-size-fits-all" policy formula and offers an approach to developing targeting strategies for reaching a universal policy goal.

Community Navigators: The Role of Community Navigators to Reduce Poverty and Expand Access to Justice
(Legal Link)
This working paper proposes community navigators as an integral component of addressing barriers to access to justice and discusses how community navigators can modernize the civil legal system.

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Using Data Visualizations to Understand the Scope of Evictions and the Impact of ERA Programs

Good programs run on good data. For cities and their partners working to design and implement effective and equitable eviction prevention programs and services, it is critical to develop data systems that integrate data collection and analysis. Another key component of a data system is data visualization.

With the right visualizations, program administrators and policymakers will have a deeper understanding of the current eviction landscape, the effectiveness of programs and services, and who is accessing and not accessing emergency rental assistance (ERA) and other supports.

This brief provides guidance on the use of data visualizations to assess and improve the effectiveness of local eviction prevention programs such as emergency rental assistance. While not a comprehensive guide to creating visualizations, it offers recommendations for the early stages of compiling and cleaning data with a clear policy question or goal in mind. It is largely written with an aim of helping program administrators and city governments develop internally-facing visualizations, though the methods described can be adapted for public-facing deliverables if added consideration is given to data privacy.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

The Need for Data Visualization

Visualizing data can assist cities and program administrators in identifying structural problems and trends regarding evictions at the local level, as well as in assessing the impact of interventions such as emergency rental assistance. When datasets are visualized effectively, cities gain clarity about the local eviction crisis, as well as fresh insights on the best approach for eviction prevention programs.

At the most basic level, collecting eviction filing numbers and rates provides an indication of how many evictions are being pursued formally through the relevant court system. By tracking this data over time, stakeholders will be able to implement timely policies and programs focused on stemming rising eviction rates, while also evaluating whether current interventions are having an impact on housing stability.

Building the necessary capacity and data-driven culture to pursue robust data visualization within a local government, or any entity, takes time. It requires resources in terms of data system infrastructure, analysis tools and expertise, along with experience knowing what kinds of questions to pursue through data. But even basic data visualization presents an opportunity to both tell a story based on the underlying information, and to provide actionable policy insights.

This is achieved by first identifying the policy question that you seek to answer, based on the type, quality and quantity of data available.

Examples of Questions that Data Visualizations Can Address

- **Who is most at risk of eviction?**
  By visualizing eviction rates or filings against potential risk factors (e.g., demographics, neighborhood, economic or housing market trends), policymakers can more clearly determine who in the community faces the greatest risk of being evicted, and therefore how to better target programs or outreach efforts.

- **How have local eviction trends shifted over time?**
  Depending on the availability of data, local eviction rates can be visualized to help identify changes and trends historically, or in the more recent past (e.g., pre-and-post eviction moratorium, or the launch of an ERA program). These trends can also be explored in the context of a number of different individual factors, including race/ethnicity, neighborhood, family size, household income, or the average amount of rental arrears owed.

- **Who is currently accessing available assistance (e.g., ERA), and who is likely to be eligible but not participating in the program?**
  As localized trends and risk factors are specified and target populations are identified, this information can be overlayed with ERA program data such as participation and disbursal rates. By visualizing this information, such as by graphing a target group's share of the population relative to their program participation rate, or by mapping it geographically, policymakers can more easily identify gaps in who is being served by a program.

- **What impact have policies, programs or outreach strategies had on local eviction rates?**
  By visualizing data collected before and after a significant policy or program shift, program administrators and policymakers can identify correlations between those changes and shifts in data. Though often not demonstrating causal relationships or direct results, visualizations can provide insights that would be difficult to identify through raw data alone.

Data visualizations allow stakeholders to develop a more refined understanding of the problem and possible solutions in a way that goes beyond what can easily be garnered through data collection and spreadsheets alone.

By mapping eviction filing or judgement data and overlaying additional information such as race or ethnicity, or household income, cities and program administrators can gain insights into which populations or neighborhoods are disproportionately impacted by evictions and what characteristics may be associated. Armed with this information, city leaders can refine policies, programs and outreach strategies to more effectively reach those households likely to be affected.

Additionally, with a clearer understanding of the nature and scope of the local eviction problem through data visualization, program staff can better make the case for additional budget allocations or more staff to ensure that programs such as emergency rental assistance are able to target the problem more effectively.

TIP: Be mindful of blind spots that may result from incomplete or imperfect data. For example, following eviction trends based on eviction filing rates alone does not account for informal and illegal evictions that may be taking place in the community (e.g., through intimidation or "lock-outs," without an eviction being filed with the court).

Determining Your City's Level of Data Granularity

The usefulness of data visualization depends on the "granularity" of the data collected — the more granular, or specific, the available data is, the more opportunities there are for garnering actionable insights. That being said, useful insights can often even be drawn from data at the lowest levels of granularity.

To determine what kinds of data visualizations are possible, it is important for program administrators to have a good understanding of what data is available and how detailed it is. For example, if eviction filing rates are collected at the state, county, city and zip code level, then the most granular level of data would be the zip code-level data. Granularity can be measured by other characteristics such as time interval (e.g., years, months, weeks, days) or the amount of information associated with a particular entry (e.g., whether there is demographic data associated).

Prior to pursuing any type of visualization, consider the level of data granularity for the city. These levels include low, moderate and high granularity.

Level 1: Low Granularity

At Level 1, only the most basic information is being collected, such as eviction fillings per month or per year.

The limitation of data with low granularity is that it does not provide detailed insight into the scope of a community's eviction landscape. While it may provide an overview of how many evictions are being filed in the city, it does not indicate which neighborhoods or residents are being affected the most.

Level 2: Moderate Granularity

At Level 2, more detailed information is being collected to help understand the city's eviction landscape. In the case of eviction filings, this might include basic demographic information such as race, age and gender, along with geographic data such as a census tract or zip code.

Data that is more granular in terms of geography and demographics allows local leaders to gain a better understanding of where evictions are happening and who is being disproportionally affected.

Level 3: High Granularity

At Level 3, the dataset includes eviction filings, detailed demographic and geographic data, and program data such as participation and disbursal rates. More advanced demographic data includes household income, education level, employment status and household size, in addition to age, race and gender. Geographic data includes residential addresses or zip codes.

As cities or program administrators begin to establish a strategy for data collection, compilation and visualization, there is often an inherent tradeoff between the availability of data and its granularity.

Level 3 data with high granularity is often preferred because it gives analysts the opportunity to be creative and experiment with different types of visualizations. However, in practice, high granularity data is usually the exception rather than the rule. Data with this level of specificity is time-consuming and expensive to collect, and it may raise concerns about privacy.

TIP: Program administrators and data analysts should work to build a clear understanding of what data is already being collected by different agencies, departments or partner organizations, along with collection methods
The way data is collected impacts how it can be analyzed and visualized. Additionally, there may be opportunities to streamline or standardize data collection processes, which opens up the possibility of visualizing data from a range of sources.

Compiling Data Prior to Visualization

After determining the level of data granularity, program administrators should compile the available data. This includes identifying the relevant datasets, coordinating with "data owners," and later preparing (or "cleaning") and analyzing the data prior to visualizing it.

Identify the Relevant Datasets

Begin by identifying available datasets related to eviction. This is likely to include:

- Eviction filing numbers or rates with residential addresses or zip codes
- Eviction filing numbers or rates with demographics
- Emergency rental assistance program distribution rates with addresses or zip codes

- Emergency rental assistance program distribution rates with demographics
- Demographic data such as age, gender, race, household income, education level, employment status, and household size for people who have faced eviction

If staff and stakeholders are looking to explore and visualize data related to other eviction prevention efforts beyond ERA, such as the impact of mediation or diversion programs, consider expanding your search for data to include datasets relating to eviction judgment decisions, default rates, and program-specific data.

Coordinate with Data Owners to Retrieve the Data

Every city or organization has different protocols and guidelines when it comes to data-sharing and privacy. This makes it difficult for cities to create a centralized data system, as there are different protocols that need to be followed before a data scientist or analyst can gain access to the data.

The first step to securing data is to identify the "data owner" for each dataset. The data owner is a person within an organization who is either collecting the data or monitoring the database. Data owners often know what the sharing protocols are. Once the data owner for each dataset has been identified, it will be easier to coordinate the respective protocols and formats of the different datasets into one holistic data landscape.

Common data owners include courts and program staff of eviction prevention programs and services (including both city and community-based programs), such as Court Clerks, Housing Strategy Directors, Housing Coordinators, and Court Administrators.

TIP: In many cases, the primary data owner of eviction datasets is someone within the court system. Pursuing a formal data-sharing agreement with the court should often be among the top priorities for collaboration and partnership with court staff. This could mean arranging to receive regular reports (e.g., quarterly, monthly, daily or real-time) on eviction filings or judgment decisions taking place at the local level. Access to this data would enable program staff to target assistance to households actively facing eviction, while expanding the potential for impactful data visualizations.

Once a relationship with a data owner has been established, coordinate with them to gain access to the relevant data. While protocols will vary, this may include anonymizing the data, sharing encrypted files, and determining where data files will be stored (e.g., on a secured server or an encrypted file sharing platform).

Selecting a Type of Data Visualization

Selecting a type of data visualization will depend on several factors. These include:

- The availability and granularity of datasets
- The objective of the data visualization
- The resources available to produce the data visualization

The objective can often be framed as the policy question you are attempting to answer. For example, an ERA provider may want to gain an understanding of who is most at risk of eviction and where to target outreach efforts. Or a city may be interested in assessing whether a particular program or strategy has been effective in preventing evictions or improving access to a service. Alternatively, cities with access to long-term data may seek to understand how eviction trends have changed over time. Each of these objectives will be best served by a different type of data visualization.

Additionally, consider resource availability from the perspective of both capacity within the team, and the availability of data visualization tools. Common tools for data visualization include:

- ArcGIS
- Power BI
- Tableau
- Canva
- Excel

Once the team has assessed data availability/granularity, objectives and resources, program administrators can then determine what type of data visualization to produce.

Types of Data Visualizations

Data can be presented in a range of different chart and graph styles. The list below is not comprehensive, but includes the styles that are most likely to be relevant for visualizing data related to ERA programs. Additional guidance is available through the Suggested Resources section at the end of this guide.

BAR GRAPH

This data visualization can demonstrate a relationship between the two variables, typically with a categorical variable (e.g., race and ethnicity) on the x-axis and numerical data on the y-axis (e.g., number of eviction filings or filing rates).

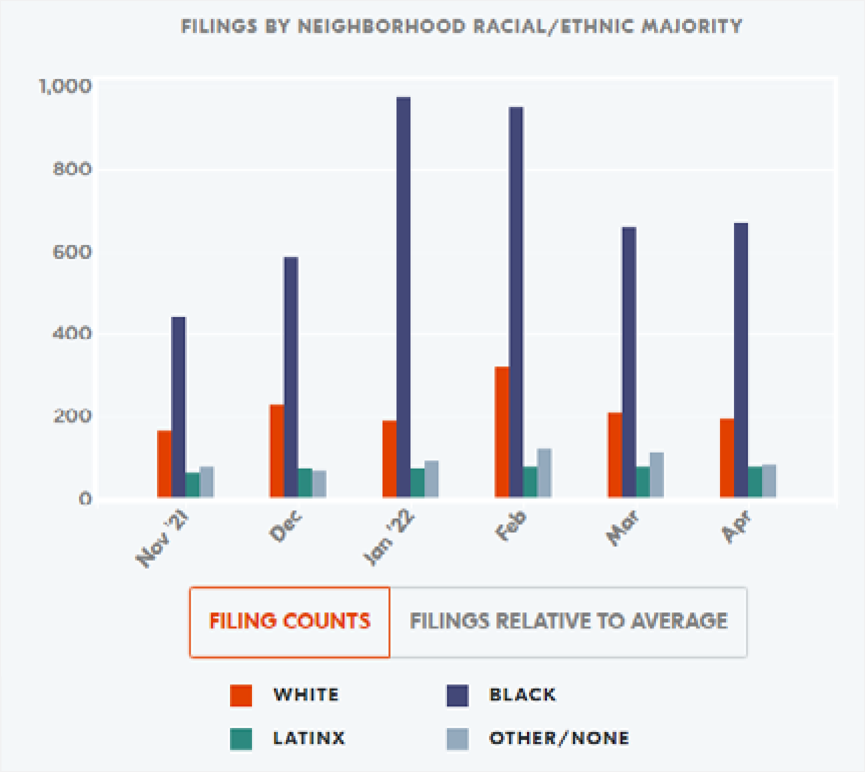
Relevant data to visualize in this way include eviction filing rates by demographic variables such as race, gender or household income.

The limitation of bar graphs is the lack of detail. For example, bar graphs struggle to visualize large, multi-variate datasets and can quickly become difficult to visually interpret.

TIP: If capacity and resources are limited internally, work with a local university or community-based organization that has the necessary data capacity to collect and analyze data, both quantitative and qualitive, and produce data visualization such as geographic maps, bar graphs, scatterplots or timelines.

Example Bar Graph: Eviction Filings by Neighborhood Racial/Ethnic Majority

This representation of monthly eviction filings in Milwaukee, WI was developed by the Eviction Lab as part of the Eviction Tracking System, an open-source system for tracking eviction filings to help monitor and respond to eviction hotspots.



Source: The Eviction Lab at Princeton University

SCATTER PLOTS

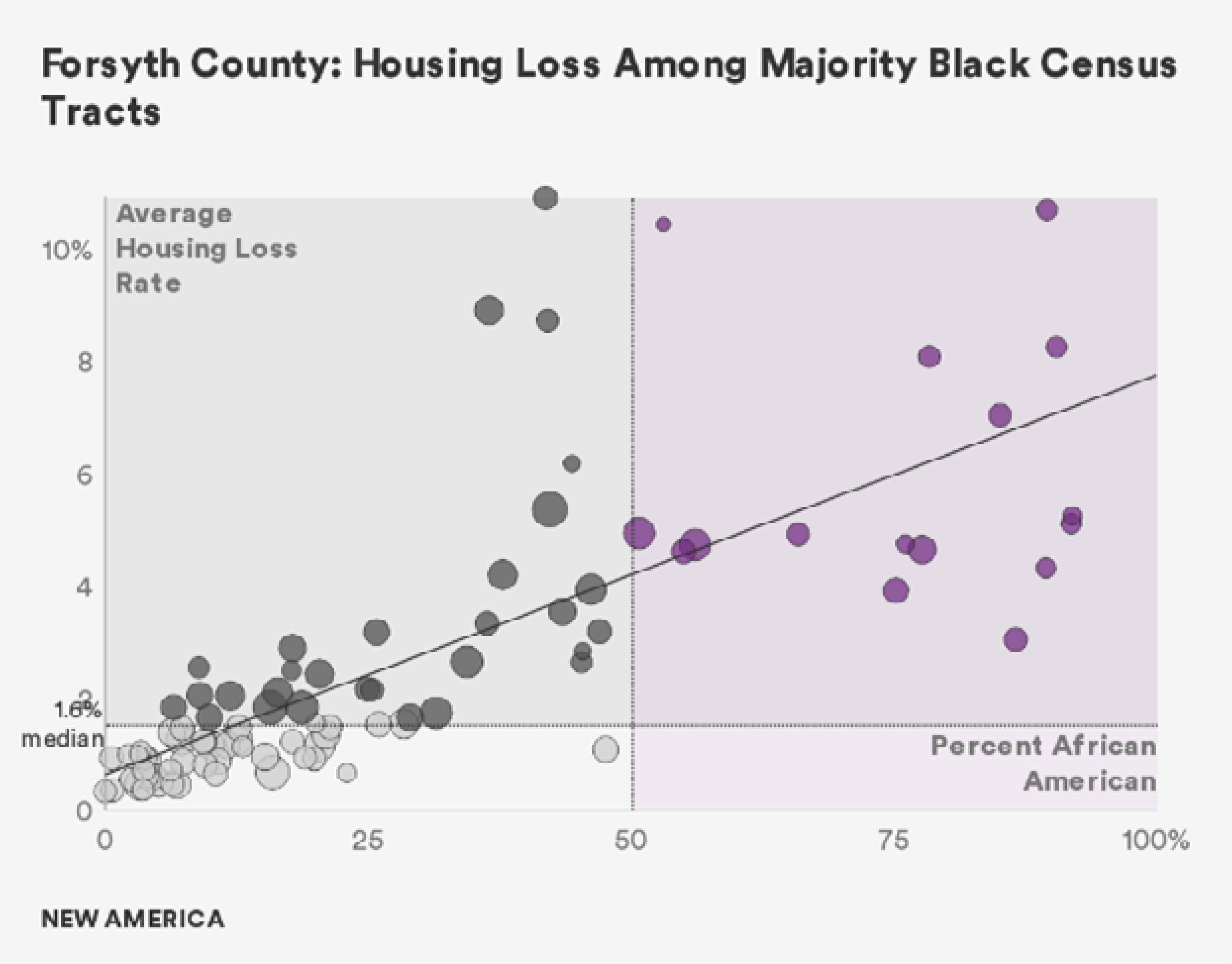
This data visualization shows a correlation between two different data indicators along an x-and y-axis. A scatter plot can visualize a certain degree of correlation (or relationship) between the two variables.

Relevant data to visualize in this way include eviction filing rates by demographic variables such as race, gender or household income.

A limitation of scatter plots is that they are predominantly used to examine and display the relationship between just two numeric data points.

Example Scatter Plot: Housing Loss Among Majority Black Census Tracts

This representation of housing loss due to eviction and foreclosure in Forsyth County, NC was developed as part of [Displaced in America](). This project from New America visualizes historic housing loss at the county level nationwide, and looks to predict where future housing loss will occur as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.



Source: New America-Future of Property Rights (via DataKind)

TIMELINE

This data visualization shows variation in a dataset over time. Time is noted as the x-axis and the y-axis is the data variable that is typically shown as a line or bar.

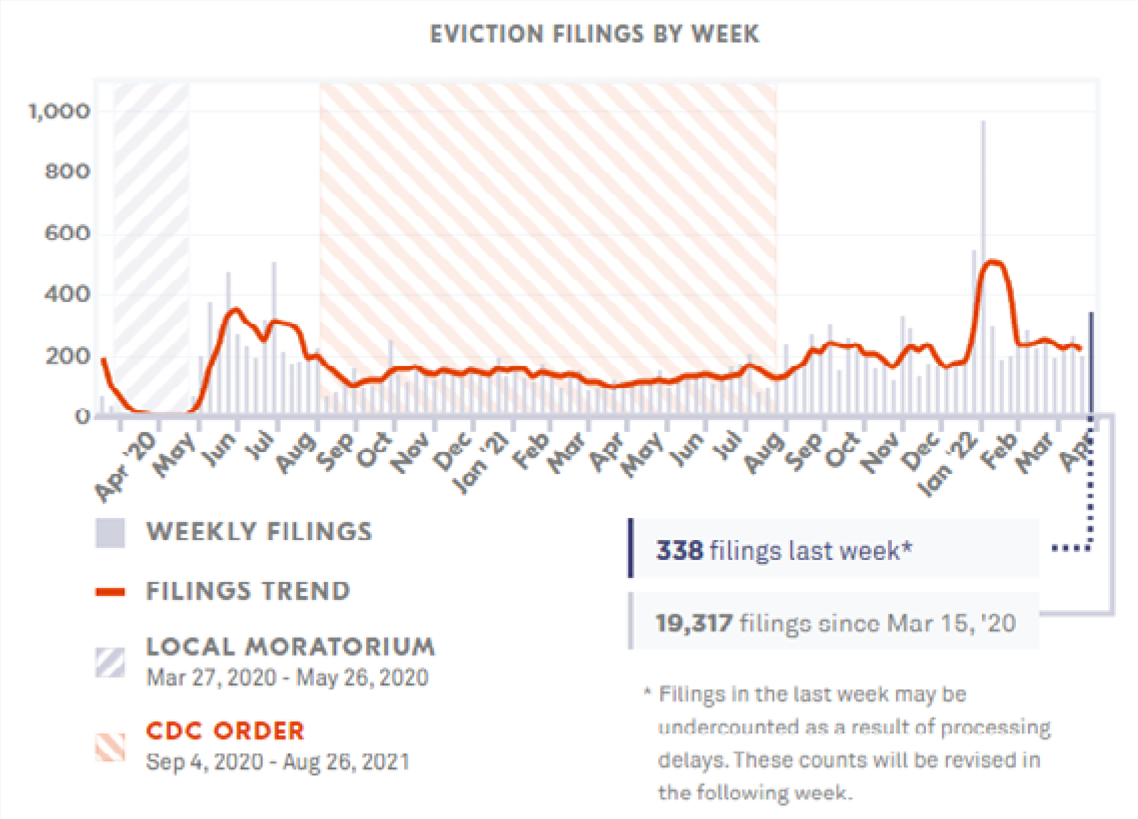
Relevant data to visualize in this way include eviction filing rates over a period of time, such as by months or years. This can be supplemented with indicators of the timing of significant events, such as the implementation or removal of an eviction moratorium, or the launch of an eviction prevention program.

A limitation to using timeline data visualization is that they tend to denote a point in time (e.g., when an eviction filing has occurred, or when a tenant or landlord has received ERA funds).

Timelines often do not showcase detailed geographic data, which can have significant historic trends.

Example Timeline: Eviction Filings by Week

This representation of weekly eviction filings in Milwaukee, WI was developed by the Eviction Lab as part of the Eviction Tracking System, an open-source system for tracking eviction filings to help monitor and respond to eviction hotspots.



Source: The Eviction Lab at Princeton University

GEOGRAPHIC MAP

This type of visualization allows program staff, policymakers and others to gain a more detailed understanding of the impact of eviction prevention services at a neighborhood level. It is useful for assessing eviction trends and program impact at specific locations through the use of addresses or data at the zip code, census tract or census block level.

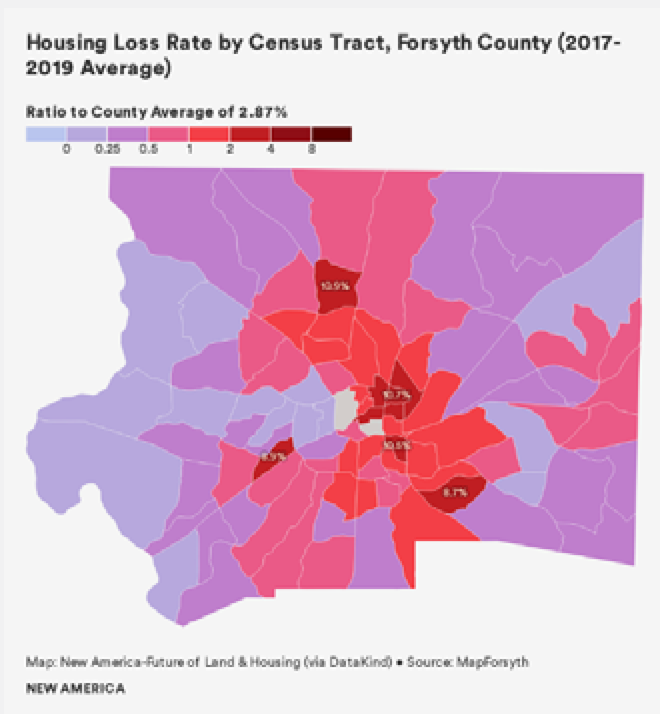
Geographic maps can visualize both quantitative (numeric) and qualitative (categorical) data, including eviction filings, demographics and program data.

Geographic maps can offer a more comprehensive understanding of:

- What neighborhoods, zip codes, or census tracts are/are not receiving assistance
- Where outreach and engagement should be targeted to ensure the equitable distribution of emergency rental assistance
- What neighborhoods have the highest eviction filling rates

Example Geographic Data Map: Housing Loss Rate by Census Tract

This representation of housing loss due to eviction and foreclosure in Forsyth County, NC was developed as part of [Displaced in America](). This project of New America visualizes historic housing loss at the county level nationwide, and looks to predict where future housing loss will occur as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.



Source: New America-Future of Property Rights (via DataKind)

Preparing Data and Conducting the Initial Analysis

Once the data visualization type has been selected, program teams can begin the process of preparing the data by "cleaning" it, followed by completing any initial analysis, ahead of visualizing the datasets. This will involve acquiring data dictionaries, checking for data entry errors, standardizing variables, validating the data and documenting changes.

Data cleaning is the necessary precursor to any data analysis or visualization. As the adage goes*: garbage in, garbage out*. Without cleaning the data so it is standardized and rid of incorrect, corrupted, poorly formatted, duplicate, or incomplete entries, you run the risk of processing faulty data that will produce faulty results.

When it comes to eviction-related data, it is likely the case that there will be some data entry inconsistencies, as is often the case in courts records. Another common hiccup comes when combining multiple data sets (e.g., data from two ERA providers). If no standard data reporting is agreed upon in advance (e.g., consistent naming for particular variables), these data sets may be difficult to combine.

The process of cleaning, analyzing and visualizing data can be complex, and may require additional resources such as the involvement of a city's data team or outside support. However, while this is not intended as a comprehensive guide, data cleaning will generally involve a few main steps:

- **Acquiring data dictionaries**
  A data dictionary should have a record of each variable of interest, its possible values and how to interpret those values. If no formal data dictionary is available, request that information for the variables of interest.

- **Checking for data entry errors**
  Particularly when data is entered manually, there is ample possibility for data entry errors. Scan the data for possible errors (e.g., values that seem too high or low, variables that have no clear meaning, and missing values). Flag any potential errors and if possible, consult the person or organization who supplied the data. If this is not possible, exclude any entries that are cause for concern.

- **Standardizing variables**
  Especially when combining datasets from multiple sources, variable names, categories and collection methods can often vary. For example, zip codes may be labeled as “ZIP” or “Zipcodes”; or one dataset might have demographic data from recipients who “opt-in” to report their race/ethnicity, while another might require recipients to report their demographic information. Know what and why certain decisions were made before determining how to move forward with standardizing data across multiple datasets.

- **Validating the data**
  Before moving on to “officially” analyzing the data, validate it by running simple, preliminary tests. For example, create a basic bar graph of evictions by month in a given year — if there are any anomalies (e.g., an abnormally high number of evictions in a month that historically has a lower number of evictions), that is good indication that there may be an error in the data.

- **Documenting your decisions**
  Write down any discrepancies, missing values, or other concerns as they appear in the data cleaning process, keeping in mind what analysis will eventually be conducted. Especially if other people and teams will be working with the data, knowing how the data transformed over time is key for quality assurance purposes.

Data is not purely a numbers game. Often, data roadblocks are due to unclear communication about a particular variable or why certain decisions were made in data entry. Data cleaning is also an iterative process — not only for the person who is manually in charge of manipulating the data itself, but also for stakeholders that have supplied the data. Anticipate back and forth communication across the entities supplying the data and the individuals who clean it, particularly about what, why and how certain decisions were made at each stage.

But ultimately, armed with clean data and a clear question or objective for analysis, program administrators and policymakers will be positioned to use data visualization to both answer and generate additional questions about local eviction prevention efforts and programs such as emergency rental assistance.

Suggested Resources

The resources below provide additional guidance on forms of data visualization, how to select the best type of visualization based on the data and objective, and how to use data visualizations to drive program design and policymaking.

Storytelling with Data: Chart Guide
Learn the basics about different styles of graphs, and how each style can be used to accurately and effectively present data to tell an action-oriented story. This guide offers strategies for styles such as line graphs, bar charts, area graphs, pie charts, scatterplots, slope graphs, bubble charts and more. It also identifies common pitfalls and offers tips for avoiding them.

Data Visualization Catalog
(PolicyViz)
This collection of more than 700 graphic visuals can offer inspiration for creative ways to present data. These real-world examples help to demonstrate a wide variety of graph styles, and ways to use typography, color, platform and design to communicate effectively through data visualizations.

Effective Data Visualizations Should Focus on Narrative, Not Numbers
(The Data Visualization Society)
This article offers four ways that people visualizing data can tell better stories using data, instead of prioritizing solely the visual impact of the design. This includes focusing on the narrative behind the data, and using data to persuade readers with facts instead of simply telling the reader what to believe.

Why is Eviction Data so Bad?: Recommendations for Improving the Local and National Landscape
(New America)
This report highlights current gaps in eviction data, details why these inadequacies matter, and lays out an 'ideal' eviction data landscape. It ends with concrete recommendations for fixing the county's eviction data gaps and offers a framework for creating local eviction databases that feed into a national database.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

LEGAL DESIGN LAB
Stanford Law School

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION:

Using Social Media to Increase Participation in Emergency Rental Assistance Programs

Social media is a vital tool for local governments seeking to raise awareness about programs and services designed to reduce housing stability and prevent eviction filings, including emergency rental assistance.

However, residents receive an overwhelming number of updates across their social media channels, and users typically spend only a few seconds on any specific post. With these challenges in mind, cities must be strategic to engage residents and get important messages across.

This worksheet is intended to guide emergency rental assistance (ERA) program staff through the process of evaluating and improving social media outreach. It includes a step-by-step guide, building on Stanford Legal Design Lab's Social Media Outreach Toolkit for Eviction Prevention, to assist cities with curating and designing a social media channel that increases awareness of programs and assistance. Special attention has been given to images and other types of visuals that are used across social media channels. By following the steps in the worksheet, cities will amplify awareness and magnify outreach about their ERA program to both tenants and landlords.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

The Basics: Establishing a Social Media Presence

The first step to reaching tenants and landlords through social media is to establish a strong, trusted social media presence. This can be achieved by using a few simple strategies and by disseminating consistent and engaging content.

City staff or others administering a local ERA program should defer to guidance from the city communications staff or broader organization regarding use of specific social media accounts. It is likely that the city and its partners will have established accounts across a range of platforms, and department- or program-specific accounts are often discouraged. Craft a social media approach that attains key outreach goals while adhering to city practices and standards.

Identify Priority Social Media Platforms

Given that cities and eviction prevention service providers often lack a robust communications department and dedicated social media team, consider focusing your efforts on one or two social media platforms. Decide which platforms to prioritize based on the type of content to be shared and the platforms that the target audiences use most.

Tip: When selecting a social media platform, follow the rule of thumb of "quality over quantity." It is better to have fewer channels that are well curated and frequently updated than several inactive accounts on various social media platforms. Even if the city has accounts on many of the major platforms, ERA program staff should focus their efforts on just one or two.

An important metric that you can use to determine which social media platform would be a good fit for your city is age. Age plays an important role in the world of social media platforms as it gives a good indication of the userbase. Content is another metric you can use to determine which platform would be a good fit for your organization.

The chart below provides a summary of these key factors by platform:

Social Media Platforms by Content Type and User Demographic

Platform	Type of Content	Largest User Demographic
Facebook	Written text, images, long and short videos, links to other websites	Even spread of users across most age groups
Instagram	Images, short videos	25-34 year olds
Twitter	Short messages, links to other websites	40 year olds
LinkedIn	Written text	30-49 year olds
YouTube	Videos	Even spread of users across most age groups
Reddit	Text, images, link sharing	18-29 year olds
TikTok	Short videos	16-24 year olds
Pinterest	Images, link sharing	Even spread of users across most age groups
Spotify	Podcasts (audio)	18-44 year olds

Analyze the demographic your city is targeting for eviction prevention information and assistance, and identify the social media platform(s) where those residents are most engaged. Use this metric to focus strategy and content development around one or two platforms. Most communities will be best served by prioritizing Instagram, Facebook and/or Twitter. Examples in this worksheet are focused on these three platforms.

BECOME A VERIFIED ACCOUNT

Seek to have city and program accounts verified by social media platforms as "official" or designated as a business. This will enable social media managers to gain insights into back-end performance data and engagement analytics, while also bringing credibility to the account. Users viewing the content will be more likely to trust and act on information provided by a verified and reliable source.

The process for verifying an account varies by platform. Refer to guidance from the social media company and go through the necessary steps:

For Instagram

Cities can request a business account as a nonprofit. This will give the account a "Verified" badge that is visible to users, provide the option of having a contact button for the account, and allow access to Instagram Insights for viewing engagement data and account analytics.
Follow the steps outlined by Instagram.

For Facebook

Facebook offers the option for account pages or profiles to receive a verification badge. [Request verification by filling completing this form.]

For Twitter

To receive the blue "Verified" badge on Twitter, an account must meet the criteria of being authentic, notable and active. Account administrators can apply for verification by navigating through the account settings.
[Learn more about the criteria and process of becoming verified on Twitter.]

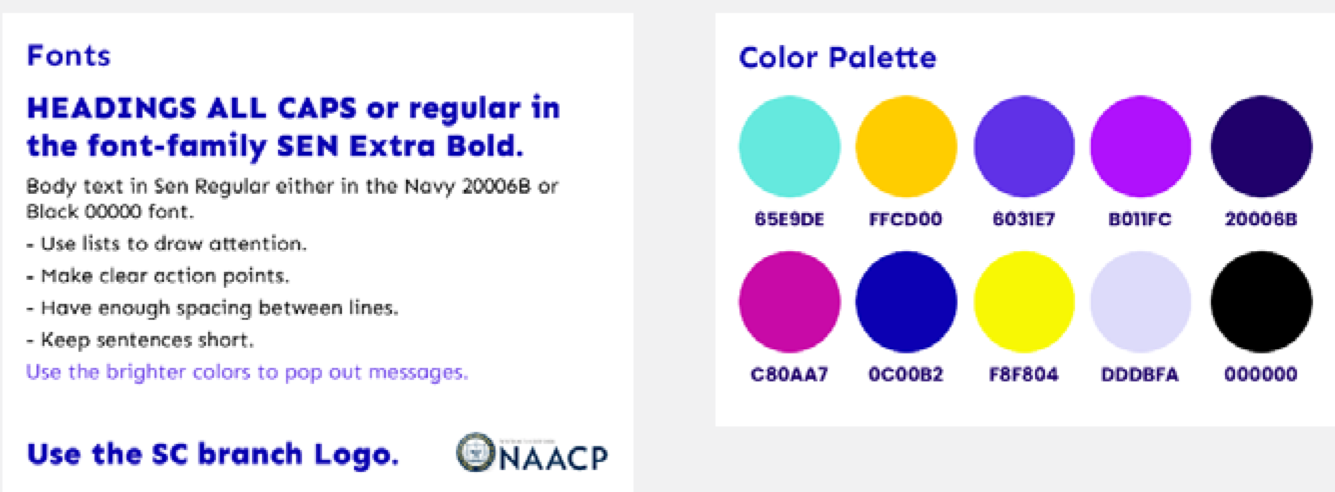
Develop a Language and Style Sheet

Content on a priority social media platform should have consistent, user-friendly language, colors, fonts, and styles. This consistent "look and feel" will give a more professional appearance to the account, leading to greater trust from the audience.

A style sheet should, at a minimum, include guidance on:

- Color palette (with Hex color codes)
- Font name(s)
- Font styles by message type (e.g., styling for headers and body text)
- Relevant logo

Example Style Sheet



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the NAACP Housing Navigator Program (Columbia, South Carolina)

Posts should also consistently employ key phrases and messages using shared language. Sample text phrases are listed below.

Sample Key Phrases for Outreach

Program Phrases

- Are you behind on rent?
- Have you been evicted?
- Do you need housing?
- Worried about eviction?
- Can't pay utility bills?
- Problems with your landlord?
- Facing an eviction?
- Has COVID affected your ability to make rent?

Call-to-Action Phrases

- Apply for rent assistance now.
- Apply to get your rent and utilities paid.
- Let a housing navigator help you for free.
- We can assist you for free – know your options.
- Text PAY RENT to (###) ###-#### to get started with your application.
- Learn more about rental assistance at [URL].

Follow Size Requirements for Content and Images

Size requirements for content and images will vary based on the selected social media platform. If the image size is not correct, it will not display properly on the platform. This can result in the loss of information or visual cues that might be important for tenants or landlords viewing the post. Image size requirements (in pixels) for Instagram, Twitter and Facebook are listed in the table below.

Image Size Requirements by Platform (in pixels)

Content Type	Instagram	Twitter	Facebook
Profile photo	320x320	400x400	400x400
Stories	1080x1920	1080x1920	1080x1920
Grid/Embedded in post or Tweet	1080x1080	1024x512	Portrait: 627x1200 Landscape: 1200x627
Header image/ Cover photo	n/a	1500x1500	851x315

Select Photos and Illustrations

Use authentic photos, videos and illustrations in your social media posts. Ask colleagues or local actors to participate in a photoshoot to create stock images for use (with their permission) on the city's social media channel. Photos of real-world users or residents should only be used with permission from the individual(s); be mindful of privacy issues when using resident and user photos.

In addition to or in place of photos, consider using illustrations to represent people involved in the eviction process. Work with local artists to develop a collection of useable graphics, or leverage free, open-use illustrations created by the Stanford Legal Design Lab that are included in the Social Media Outreach Toolkit.

TIP: Photographs on the city's social media channel should be inclusive and representative of the city's demographics. Be mindful of the age, race, ethnicity, gender and ability of individuals pictured or highlighted through social media.

Examples of Illustrations Available for Use

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

Employ a Range of Content Styles and Formats

STORIES AND GRID POSTS

Instagram, Facebook and some other social media platforms offer the option to create "stories" posts in addition to "grid" posts. Stories are posts that disappear within a certain time period, often 24 hours. This is in contrast to grid posts that are always visible through a user's main account page. Story posts can also be repurposed and saved as "highlights" outside of the account's main content grid.

It is important to make a distinction between "permanent" and "temporary" posts and understand when to use each type.

Social Media Post Formats and Recommendations

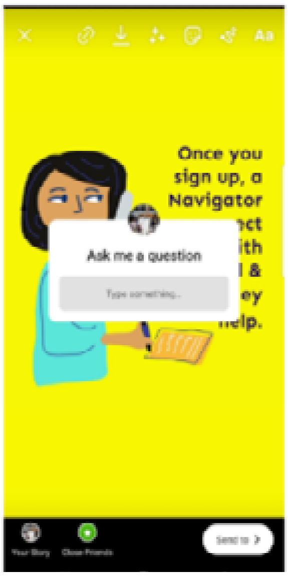
Stories or Other Temporary Post Formats	Grid Posts
CHARACTERISTICS OF THESE POSTS: ◆ Displayed for a limited period of time ◆ Presented in chronological order by when it was posted ◆ Offer interactive elements and features (e.g., polls, quizzes)	**CHARACTERISTICS OF THESE POSTS:** ◆ Displayed permanently ◆ Multiple posts are viewable at the same time through the account page ◆ No interactive elements
WHEN TO USE THESE POSTS: ◆ During emergencies or developing situations (e.g., new policy, ruling or important news event) ◆ To highlight events or direct links that can not be shared in captions ◆ To engage directly with users through interactive elements ◆ To promote and draw attention to a new grid post	**WHEN TO USE THESE POSTS:** ◆ To share information that can be referenced at a later date (e.g., help line phone number, application date) ◆ To share important but long-term updates (e.g., opening the application window for ERA) ◆ To build a consistent visual brand for a program or organization over time ◆ To share a collection of related content (e.g., multiple photos from the same event presented in a carousel)
ADDITIONAL TIPS: ◆ Limit to 1-5 stories per day ◆ Save stories as highlights with a descriptive name to help users find them later ◆ Repost positive stories from community members if the account is tagged	**ADDITIONAL TIPS:** ◆ Do not create multiple grid posts in rapid succession — limit to 1-2 posts per day, or leverage carousels to share multiple images or videos ◆ "Cross-post" as a story to alert users that a new post has been added to the account

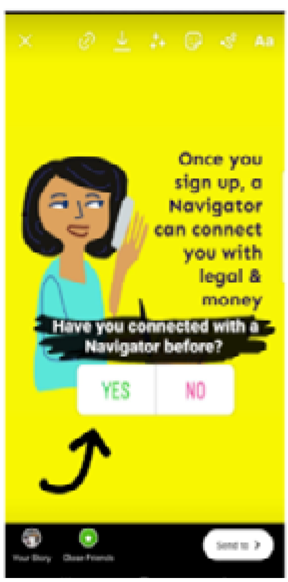
INTERACTIVE CONTENT

Interactive content can be a helpful tool to keep an audience engaged. By leveraging tools and content elements such as quizzes, polls, location and event tagging, and more, you create an opportunity for users to connect more directly and deeply with your account. This builds trust, credibility and awareness.

Several platforms offer interactive options, but Instagram offers the most well-known and versatile functionality. Follow the steps outlined below to create interactive content on Instagram:

Examples of Interactive Posts





Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the NAACP Housing Navigator Program (Columbia, South Carolina)

How to Create Interactive Content in Instagram Stories

1. Create a new "Story" post
2. Upload a photo to the post, or select "Camera" and navigate to the "Create" option to build a post on a colorful background instead of against a photo background
3. Select the "Sticker" icon at the top of the screen
4. Select from the several interactive content element options, including:

   - **Location:** Tag your location, such as your city, or a more specific location like an in-person resource center
   - **@Mention:** Tag another account, such as a partner organization or collaborator, to enable that account to repost your story
   - **#Hashtag:** Insert hashtags to help users find your content
   - **Questions:** Prompt users to submit questions (e.g., "What documentation do I need in order to submit an ERA application?" or "How long will it take to hear back about my application?"), and then create additional posts responding to those questions publicly
   - **Music:** Add songs to your post, or join in on viral "TikTok Sound" trends
   - **Like Slide:** Add a slide animation for users to swipe on to show positive responses to a question you ask
   - **Poll:** Create polls to collect feedback or input from users
   - **Quiz:** Create quizzes to test users' knowledge
   - **Countdown:** Create a countdown for key events or dates (e.g., for a community event, training, or open ERA application window), which allows users to set reminders for the selected time

Amplify the Reach of Your Content

With a social media presence established, seek to reach and engage as many local users as possible. This includes landlords and tenants who might make use of available services. Awareness throughout the community can also benefit the program in the long term.

No-Cost Strategies for Expanding Reach and Targeting

The following techniques can attract more tenants and landlords to view content, access resources and hopefully file an ERA program application:

- **Tags:** Use keywords, categories and relevant hashtags (e.g., #evictionhelp, #rentalassistance) to draw additional users who might be searching for those terms
- **Location tag:** Tag where the program is administered so tenants and landlords in the area can easily find and explore the account
- **Include direct links in posts or account pages:** Include links to relevant pages or resources (e.g., an ERA program page or FAQ) directly in posts, captions and account bios. *Note: URLs included in Instagram post captions are not clickable, so include links in the account's stories or bio and direct users there*
- **Collaborate:** Work with other eviction prevention service provider accounts to cross-post content, or ask to be featured in their stories or on their page
- **Direct outreach:** Use the location or hashtag function to see what residents are talking about and engage with users as appropriate, without spamming

TIP: Collaborative posts or content series can be a powerful way to tap into a new audience and to expand your followers. Reach out to local service providers and landlord groups, tag them in content, and ask them to repost or share your posts with their followers. Alternatively, identify community members with a strong social media following by monitoring posts tagged to the city's geographic location, and approach them about creating PSA-style content for ERA through their platform.

Paid Advertising, Promotion and Boosting Posts

Cities and ERA providers can also pay to further amplify reach on social media with promoted posts, advertisements, and other paid ways of attracting more of an audience. The most common and impactful way to do this through Facebook and Instagram requires setting up a Facebook Business page and Facebook Ads Manager account to develop "sponsored," "promoted," or "boosted" posts. Facebook Ads Manager is used for paid promotion across both platforms.

Paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram might suit ERA providers' objectives well because it comes with the added functionality of a built-in "call-to-action" feature. This "call-to-action" button or link is included at the bottom of a post and prompts users to navigate directly to outside webpages, such as an ERA program or city website. Alternatively, the "call-to-action" button can be tailored to cultivate additional followers for an account by navigating users back to the account's profile page. Facebook Ad Manager will guide account managers through the process of developing an ad with a "call-to-action" that best fits their goals.

Instagram also provides the option of paying to "boost" an existing grid post to expand its reach to a targeted audience, though with less specificity than a direct ad. Ads and boosted posts appear in similar ways as typical grid posts (e.g., as a photo, video or carousel with multiple visuals), but will be flagged as "Sponsored." Given that Instagram does not otherwise allow hyperlinks on a grid post or in a caption, having the "call-to-action" feature on boosted posts can be very impactful.

Ads or promoted content should feature strong images and concise messaging. Any headline should be five or fewer words, and descriptive captions should be limited to one sentence. Accompanying messaging or text should be tailored to meet the goal of the ad and the action that it prompts users to take:

- *Is the ad intended to drive general awareness of ERA?* Consider driving users to the account page to gain more followers.
- *Is the goal specifically to encourage community members to apply?* Choose to have the "Call to Action" button to direct users to the ERA program website.
- *Does it aim to reach tenants or landlords?* Navigate to relevant program resources accordingly.

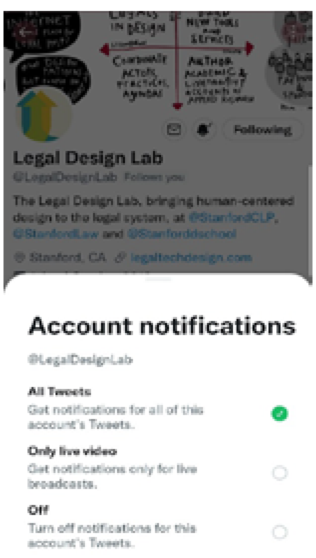
Be selective, and use text and images that support your goal.

Paying for ads or to boost posts allows social media account managers to target their content based on location, gender, age, language, interests, behaviors and connections. Refine your targeting strategy once you see how the content performs with the intended audience. Coordinate with communications or marketing specialists, along with others who work on diversity, equity, and inclusion, to refine the ad strategy to more effectively reach target groups.

TIP: If you are trying paid content strategies for the first time, start small — but do not be intimidated. Advertising on these platforms is often charged on a "cost per click" basis in which the account manager sets a defined budget, so you will not be charged unexpected amounts.

Deploy a small ad budget for initial targeting to help refine your audience and to see how the content performs. An appropriate budget will vary significantly based on city size, region and level of targeting, but consider starting with a budget of roughly $30 with promotion running for about a week. Explore the data insights available through the Facebook Business and Ad Manager tools to more narrowly define the target audience or to identify trends in what content performs well, both of which can help lower the "cost per click." Lowering the "cost per click" will help future ad spending go further.

Example of Turning on Notifications for Twitter



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

Ask Users to Turn on Notifications

The algorithms deployed by social media platforms do not always highlight the most recent posts for users, and policies are frequently updated to change how or why certain posts are prioritized on a feed. This means posts can "get lost" without many users seeing or engaging with them — even for users who follow your account or page.

To prevent a post from getting lost, ask your channel followers to turn on notifications for the relevant social media account. The notification button is usually displayed as a bell at the top of the profile page. Once followers have selected to be notified, they will receive a push message on their phone every time the account uploads new content.

Keep Refining and Streamlining Your Approach to Social Media

Maximize your use of social media by employing a range of tools — such as technology add-ons that automize posting or improve user services and strategies — in addition to regularly evaluating and refining your social media strategy.

Employ a Social Media Management Tool

Social media management platforms enable account administrators to schedule and manage content and posts across multiple platforms. As your city's social media presence grows, or if an account is shared across multiple departments, these tools can streamline coordination.

By scheduling posts, you will be able to see what other content is scheduled to go out on a given day, making it possible to spread out posts and avoid overwhelming or spamming followers with multiple posts in a short period of time. Posts can also be scheduled in advance for important days, such as when an ERA application window opens or closes. Many of these tools can also track when someone responds to a post, comments or sends a direct message.

Popular social media management tools include:

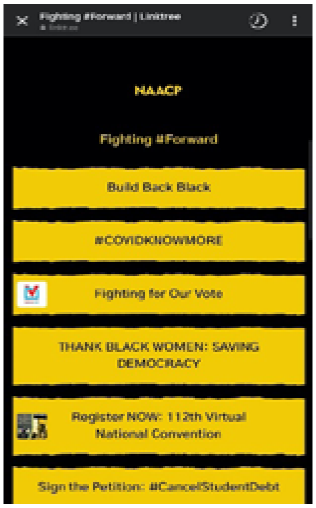
- **Hootsuite:** hootsuite.com
- **Later:** later.com
- **Buffer:** buffer.com

Create a Centralized Social Media Landing Page

Most social media platforms only allow one permanent link in an account profile. A social media landing page can house multiple links that direct tenants and landlords to relevant webpages, such as an ERA program landing page, application materials, FAQs, contact pages or the city website.

Posts or captions can direct followers to the "link in bio" for additional information related to a post, and the link can often be embedded directly in stories. By highlighting a single link to an established social media landing page in an account bio or profile, cities can direct users to one central directory for additional resources.

Example of Using Linktree



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the NAACP

Popular social media landing page tools include:

- **Linktree:** linktr.ee
- **Lnk.bio:** lnk.bio
- **MilkShake:** milkshake.app
- **Campsite:** campsite.bio

Track Engagement and Demographics

To begin tracking engagement and demographic information, the account needs to be verified or designated as a business. Once that step has been taken, program staff or account managers will be able to:

- Analyze the type of posts that are the most popular with users — this can be a signal to create similar types of content
- Analyze the timestamps of when followers most often view the account's posts — this can inform the best time to schedule future posts
- Analyze user locations — this will help guide the creation of more location-oriented content or target users in underserved areas
- Analyze how often users click on posted links — this can help you create more content that is likely to drive users to outside resources and webpages
- Analyze the demographics of users engaging with your content — this can help determine whether your content and strategies are resonating with your target audience

After analyzing the metrics above, you will be able to craft and design social media output that targets your intended audience.

Suggested Resources

Cities and ERA providers looking to expand or refine their use of social media to promote available assistance can consult the resources below for additional information.

Social Media Outreach Toolkit for Eviction Prevention

(Legal Design Lab)

This toolkit offers tools, links and resources to support cities and other organizations to design and manage social media channels.

Social Media for Nonprofits

(Techsoup)

This guide introduces basic principles for how to use social media effectively and offers several tips and tricks for improving user engagement. Though it is written with nonprofits in mind, many of the lessons also apply to municipal social media accounts.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

LEGAL DESIGN LAB
Stanford Law School

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION:

Website and Webpage Evaluation for Emergency Rental Assistance Programs

Well-designed websites or webpages can play a crucial role in increasing awareness of and participation in emergency rental assistance (ERA) programs and other eviction prevention services among tenants and landlords. This worksheet offers guidance to cities and their partners on how to evaluate and improve websites and webpages that offer information about these programs and services.

The worksheet includes a step-by-step guide for cities on how to conduct a website or webpage evaluation, along with a sample **Website Evaluation Worksheet** and a **Response Compilation Worksheet**, which provides a framework for prioritizing necessary improvements. Users of this resource are encouraged to engage both internal and external stakeholders in answering — and acting on — the worksheet questions.

By following the guidance in this worksheet, cities and their partners will be better equipped to help residents find the information they need online for accessing critical assistance.

> **NOTE:** This worksheet was developed for the evaluation of websites related to local ERA programs, but is also applicable to websites for other eviction prevention services, such as mediation programs.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Preparing for a Web Audit

The purpose of an evaluation or web audit is to assess how a website or a single webpage is operating and performing. Cities and ERA providers can follow the steps below to consider whether existing digital resources, such as an ERA program webpage or collection of pages about an ERA program on a city website, are meeting community needs and effectively connecting residents with resources.

Key facets of an effective audit include tapping into fresh perspectives to identify bugs or formatting issues, and working to streamline navigation for an improved user experience.

1 Define the Scope of the Evaluation

Begin by determining what website or webpages will be reviewed and evaluated as part of the audit. If an ERA program has a dedicated website with a central landing page and additional pages with resources and information, consider evaluating the entire website. Alternatively, information about an ERA program may be featured on a city or departmental website, with or without subpages. Decide what web resources will fall within the scope of the evaluation, but keep in mind that a larger scope will likely result in less detailed feedback.

Once the relevant website or webpages have been identified, determine who is responsible for maintaining them and what the process is for making edits. Connect with this individual or team before conducting the review to discuss your goals, gain an understanding of what is technically possible to change, and bring them in on the process.

Key Questions to Answer Prior to a Web Evaluation

- What website or webpages will be evaluated?
- What web platform or content management system is used? (E.g., Wordpress or Drupal)
- Who is the website or webpage administrator?
- What website performance metrics are available?
  - Is Google Analytics and Search Console enabled?
- Are there currently any large website strategic shifts or initiatives to be aware of?
  - E.g., Is a website redesign planned for the near future, or is the organization engaging a new website contractor?

2 Outline Evaluation Objectives

Align internally around the goals for the website review. How you define the objective will impact how the evaluation process proceeds, what evaluators focus on, and the resulting next steps. The evaluation objective(s) should be informed by, but not dictated by, conversations with the relevant website administrator about the status quo and what is technically feasible.

For example, if a website overhaul or redesign has recently taken place, it is unlikely that you will be able to spur significant structural stages or establish a completely new web style. Instead, you might focus on the new website's functionality and on the content itself. Alternatively, web administrators may raise concerns about engagement with certain pages (e.g., users routinely clicking off certain pages, or being misdirected), which can help focus the evaluation on problem areas.

3 Identify the Evaluators

Seek to engage a wide range of individuals in the web audit as evaluators. These people will be tasked with clicking through the website, reading the content, and rating it based on a provided rubric.

To achieve a well-rounded evaluation, bring in both colleagues who are familiar with the relevant webpages, along with people from other teams who are not well-versed in the content and can offer a fresh perspective. Volunteers from the city's broader eviction prevention network can bring valuable insights as well.

It is important to engage evaluators with a diverse set of backgrounds. This will help ensure that the evaluation reflects a wide variety of voices and perspectives, including cultural differences.

TIP: Consider inviting community advocates, eviction prevention service providers or legal aid providers to participate in the evaluation. Including these partners will bring additional perspectives and can improve the website or webpage for the end user.

Conducting a Web Audit

The goal of the audit or evaluation is to allow cities, ERA program staff and selected partners to critically review how the ERA website or webpages are currently performing. Provide evaluators with guidance on what to look for and how "deep" to go in their analysis (e.g., how many levels of pages to click through). Once the audit is complete, program administrators can identify key themes in the feedback, areas for improvement, and immediate and long-term next steps.

> **NOTE:** An interactive **Website Evaluation Worksheet** is included at the end of this resource for use by cities and their partners. Circulate a digital or printed version for completion by evaluators. A **Response Compilation Worksheet** is also provided for internal use by program staff. This offers a framework for aggregating feedback from reviewers, along with prioritizing necessary improvements through the development of an Action Plan.

4 Develop the Evaluation Criteria and Rubric

City or program staff coordinating the website review should provide evaluators with specific instructions and clear criteria for assessing or grading the website. Having a shared blueprint will set the team up for success for compiling, reconciling and acting on evaluator feedback.

The evaluation criteria can draw attention to specific aspects of a website or webpage that could benefit from a closer look — for example, functionality, text hierarchy or color scheme.

Cities or program staff should develop the following materials for evaluators to use in their review:

- General guidance on what is expected of evaluators
- A recommended process or methodology to follow (e.g., starting from the program landing page, or Google searching key phrases and navigating from the first page users are directed to)
- Evaluation criteria in a rubric or worksheet format
- Instructions for how to grade or rate elements against the criteria (e.g., 1 to 5 with 5 being "exceptional"; or a three-tier scale such as "needs improvement," "average," or "excellent")

Sample Criteria for a Website Evaluation Rubric

Focus Areas for Evaluation	Specific Criteria
General Layout and Visual Design	Visual consistency White space Hierarchy Headings Spacing and line breaks Menus and sidebars Organization of referrals and resources Justification and alignment Color scheme Media types Media quality
Accessibility of Layout and Visual Design	Language accessibility Alt-text Font style Font size Color contrast
Content	Key topic coverage Key jurisdiction coverage Responsiveness to immediate needs Relevance to current events Plain language Action-oriented messaging Range of content types Content format
Technical Performance and Discoverability	Technical errors and bugs Loading speed Responsiveness Mobile compatibility Discoverability

These criteria align with the evaluation worksheet at the end of this resource. In addition to specific criteria, offer space for evaluators to provide open-ended responses and general feedback that might not fit into any one particular bucket of the evaluation.

5 Conduct the Evaluation

With evaluation criteria defined, program staff can reach out to evaluators to facilitate their review of the website or webpages. Encourage evaluators to conduct their review independently and submit written feedback. Alternatively, facilitate a call during which evaluators are divided into small groups and navigate the website independently, but compile shared feedback.

Encourage evaluators to explore and engage with the website as if they are a new user who has never visited the site before. They should consider how the content would be perceived by a tenant or landlord who is coming to the site in need of help.

TIP: Customize the evaluation worksheet included at the end of this resource to provide additional direction to evaluators based on municipal or ERA program priorities. This might include adjusting the criteria, the instructions for evaluators, or the grading scale to better fit the scope of your review and local needs.

6 Synthesize the Results

After completing the audit and collecting feedback forms from evaluators, city and program staff should compile and review responses. This might mean tallying total or average points for specific criteria, or noting the number of evaluators who designated an element as falling into particular category, such as “needs improvement,” “average,” or “excellent.”

After tallying audit responses from each evaluator, the next step is to develop a list of priority actions for improving the ERA program website or webpage.

Program staff should set up an action plan based on the priority list and coordinate with the website administrator on needed improvements. Establish a timeline for expeditiously tackling issues flagged as needing improvement, as well as moving “average” aspects of the website or webpage to “excellent.”

TIP: After improvements from the action plan have been made to the website or webpage, invite some of the original evaluators to review the changes and provide additional feedback.

Suggested Resources

For further guidance related to website audits and evaluation, see the resources below:

Eviction Help Webpage Guide
(Stanford Legal Design Lab)
The Eviction Help Webpage Guide provides direction on how to conduct a thorough review of a website to ensure that it is a user-friendly, modern web resource. It includes a downloadable review rubric in PowerPoint format that can be adapted for use by city or program teams.

U.S. Web Design System
(U.S. General Services Administration)
The U.S. Web Design System is a toolkit of principles, guidance, and code that makes it easier to build accessible, mobile-friendly government websites. It applies human-centered design to the development of user-friendly websites.

Lighthouse
(Google Developers)
Lighthouse is an open-source, automated tool for improving the quality of web pages. It can be run against any web page and has audits for performance, accessibility, progressive web apps, SEO and more. After running a Lighthouse audit, the tool will generate a report on how the page performed.

Make Your Website or App Accessible and Publish an Accessibility Statement
(UK Government)
This resource provides guidance on how to determine whether websites and applications are accessible and was developed to help public sector websites and applications meet new standards established through legislation in the United Kingdom. While specific to UK regulations, these approaches can also be applied to U.S.-based program websites.

Guidelines for Program Web Sites
(U.S. Department of the Treasury and the U.S. Digital Service)
This resource provides guidelines for developing websites and webpages that will effectively inform renters and landlords about an ERA program. It includes guidance on what to include on an ERA webpage, how to improve accessibility, and more.

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Website Evaluation Worksheet

Instructions for Evaluators

This worksheet will guide you through a thorough evaluation of the relevant website. You will be prompted to focus on specific elements one-by-one, including the general layout and visual design, accessibility considerations, the content itself, and finally the technical performance of the site.

The full evaluation should take no more than 45 minutes to complete and should be done in one sitting. To complete the evaluation, imagine that you are a tenant or landlord in need of assistance and you are accessing this website for the first time. Open the website from your computer, mobile device or tablet and begin exploring it as if you are a new user who has never seen it before.

First, scan the content quickly and note your first impressions about how information is presented. Test out different scenarios. For example, explore the website as if you are a new user trying to find the answer to a specific question, like whether you are eligible for rental assistance or what your immediate next steps should be if you have received an eviction notice. Click on different links, open the related resources and, as you take a deeper dive, read the webpage content to get a sense of the information being shared.

Respond to each of the questions that follow. Space for open-end responses and general comments has also been provided. Your open and honest feedback will help us improve the website and better serve our community — thank you!

WEBSITE BEING REVIEWED

What website or webpage(s) are being reviewed through this worksheet?

EVALUATOR INFORMATION

What is your name?

What department or organization do you work with?

General Layout & Visual Design

1. **Visual Consistency:** Overall, does the website look visually appealing and consistent from page to page, and from section to section?

    - ☐ a. No, the pages and sections do not look similar at all
    - ☐ b. Mostly, but some pages or sections look out of place
    - ☐ c. Yes, it looks very visually consistent

2. **White Space:** Is there sufficient white space between sections and on the pages so the website does not look overwhelming or too busy?

    - ☐ a. No, it looks very busy
    - ☐ b. There is a small amount of white space
    - ☐ c. Yes, there is sufficient white space

3. **Hierarchy:** Does each page have clear distinctions between headings, important messages and body text so you know where to focus your attention? Or is the content presented in large blocks of text with no prioritization, making it difficult to navigate or identify priority information and messages? *Look at the heading and title fonts. Are they clearly "the important messages" because of the relative size, font style or color contrast? Is the page scannable and do you know where to focus?*

    - ☐ a. No, the content is largely undifferentiated with headlines and text all competing with each other
    - ☐ b. There is some hierarchy, but it is inconsistent or could be more clear
    - ☐ c. There is a clear message, strong hierarchy of headings, and signals for the user about where to focus attention

4. **Headings:** Does each page effectively use headings and subheads that are differentiated from the body text and given clear priority based on font size, color and style?

   - [ ] a. No, there are no clear headings and subheadings breaking up the text
   - [ ] b. There are some headings and subheadings, but they are inconsistent, unclear, or not effective
   - [ ] c. Yes, there are effective headings and subheads that support quick scanning for information

5. **Spacing and Line Breaks:** Is the spacing between lines, paragraphs and sections consistent, and are paragraph breaks frequent?

   - [ ] a. No, spacing is inconsistent or there are large blocks of text without line breaks
   - [ ] b. There is some inconsistent spacing or large blocks of text in some sections
   - [ ] c. Spacing is consistent and the content is broken up into short, easily digestible paragraphs by frequent line breaks

6. **Menus and Sidebars:** Is information hierarchy and navigation supported by effective menus and/or sidebars directing the user to subpages or other areas of the website?

   - [ ] a. No, the website does not have menus and sidebars, or the menus and sidebars are confusing
   - [ ] b. There are menus and/or sidebars, but they are not well organized
   - [ ] c. Yes, there are menus and/or sidebars that clearly support the hierarchy and allow for easy navigation

7. **Organization of Referrals and Resources:** Are referrals to other assistance programs or lists of available resources (e.g., directories to other sources of financial assistance or services, links to helpful materials for completing ERA applications) clean and prioritized?

- [ ] a. No, referrals and resource lists are not well organized and are presented in more of a "link dump"
- [ ] b. Referrals and resource lists are somewhat clear and cleanly laid out, but there are some issues or it is not easily navigable
- [ ] c. Referrals and resource lists are cleanly laid out in categories and/or prioritize frequently-used resources and the most relevant referrals

8. **Justification and Alignment:** Are body paragraphs and large blocks of text justified (aligned) to the left?

- [ ] a. No, a lot of body text is centered or right-justified
- [ ] b. Most body text is left-aligned, but there are inconsistencies
- [ ] c. Yes, text is justified to the left

9. **Color Scheme:** Does the website use a consistent and appealing color palette? *Colors should be pleasant, but not distracting. A good rule of thumb is for any one page to use two to four neutral colors and one bright accent color.*

- [ ] a. No, there is either too much color or not enough
- [ ] b. The use of color is not detrimental to the user experience, but it could be improved
- [ ] c. Yes, there is a consistent and appealing color palette

10. **Media Types:** What kind of media (e.g., photos, clipart or icons, illustrations and videos) are used throughout the website or on the webpage to offer variety and appeal to different users?

- [ ] a. There is no or almost no media used, it is all text
- [ ] b. There is limited use of media, such as a few stock photos or clipart
- [ ] c. Mixed media is presented effectively, with a variety of photos, illustrations and/or videos to convey information

11. **Media Quality:** What is the quality of media (e.g., photos, videos, illustrations) used?

- ☐ a. Poor quality (e.g., small or grainy photos, amateur clip art)
- ☐ b. Medium quality
- ☐ c. High quality (e.g., clear and professional-looking images and videos)

12. **Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the general layout or design?** *(Optional)*

Accessibility of Layout & Visual Design

13. **Language Availability:** Is the content accessible in other languages relevant for community members?

- ☐ a. No, it is English-only
- ☐ b. Content is available in English and one other language
- ☐ c. Content is available in English and two or more other languages

14. **Language Access:** Is how to access content in a different language clear and simple?

- ☐ a. No, it is difficult to decipher
- ☐ b. Somewhat, but a user might easily miss it
- ☐ c. Yes, it is immediately apparent how to access content in another language

15. **Alt-Text:** Do images include alt-text describing the image?

- ☐ a. No, images do not include alt-text
- ☐ b. Some images contain alt-text
- ☐ c. Yes, alt-text is available for all images

16. **Font Style:** Is the font legible and consistent?

- [ ] a. No, the font style is not easily readable
- [ ] b. The font style is generally readable, but inconsistent
- [ ] c. Yes, the font style is both readable and consistent

17. **Font Size:** Is the font size legible and consistent?

- [ ] a. No, the font is either too small or too large to be easily readable
- [ ] b. The font size is generally readable, but inconsistent
- [ ] c. Yes, the font size is both readable and consistent

18. **Color Contrast:** Are contrasting colors used effectively to distinguish between sections and levels of text, without such a high contrast that it is difficult to read?

- [ ] a. No, looking at the webpages hurt my eyes, or the content all blends together
- [ ] b. The text is readable, but the color contrast could be improved
- [ ] c. Yes, the content is readable and pleasing to the eye; contrasting colors are used to distinguish different sections of the page

19. **Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the accessibility of the layout or design?** *(Optional)*

Content

20. **Key Topic Coverage:** Does the content address the needs of users who would be coming to the page (e.g., a tenant who is falling behind on rent, or a landlord looking to apply for ERA on behalf of a tenant)?

   - ☐ a. No, there are significant gaps in content and missing information that users likely need
   - ☐ b. The content addresses the bulk of questions or user needs, but falls short in important areas
   - ☐ c. Yes, all of the key information and resources users might need are provided

21. **Key Jurisdiction Coverage:** Is there location-specific content for users about city, county or state eligibility requirements or regionally-specific services and policies?

   - ☐ a. No, it is not clear whom the content is relevant for based on jurisdiction or locality
   - ☐ b. The jurisdiction is mentioned (e.g., in the context of benefit eligibility), but someone could easily miss it or there is no other regionally-specific content
   - ☐ c. Yes, it is immediately clear what jurisdiction this content is relevant to, and there is regionally specific content such as explanations of relevant city, county or state policies

22. **Responsiveness to Immediate Needs:** Is there clear direction and content for users looking for immediate assistance (e.g., if a household has received an eviction notice, or a tenant has been removed from their home)?

   - ☐ a. No, there is general information but nothing clearly responsive to immediate needs
   - ☐ b. There is limited guidance on steps to take in specific situations
   - ☐ c. Yes, there is clear information about next steps that users should take if they are facing urgent challenges

23. **Relevance to Current Events:** Is the content up-to-date and relevant to any recent events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to regional eviction moratorium policies, natural disasters)?

- ☐ a. No, there is content that is out of date and no longer correct or relevant
- ☐ b. Most of the content is up-to-date and relevant with respect to current events
- ☐ c. Yes, all of the content is up-to-date and relevant with respect to current events

24. **Plain Language:** Is the content written in plain, easily comprehensible language (e.g., with no "legalese" and in a way that an 8th grader could understand it)?

- ☐ a. No, there is a lot of jargon and the content is overly complicated
- ☐ b. The content is generally understandable, but there is still some jargon or "insider baseball" language used
- ☐ c. Yes, the content is written in a clear, straightforward way and would be easily understood

25. **Action-Oriented Messaging:** Does each page have a clear action that users should take, or a task that it helps users to complete?

- ☐ a. No, there are no headers or lead messages that indicate what a user can achieve or gain from each page
- ☐ b. There is some indication of what users should do or take away from each page, but it is somewhat unclear or inconsistent
- ☐ c. Yes, it is immediately clear what actions users should take or what the goal of the page is

26. **Range of Content Types:** Is information and resources available in a range of useful styles or types of content? *This might include having information available through FAQs, step-by-step guides, ordered lists, chatbots, interactive surveys, or message boards.*

- ☐ a. No, the information and resources are presently purely as "text on the page"
- ☐ b. Information is available in a few different formats, but it is mostly plain text
- ☐ c. Yes, a good mix of content formats are used

27. **Content Format:** Is key content presented directly on the webpage, or is important information only accessible through PDFs, .Docs, or other file formats?

- ☐ a. A lot of critical information is only viewable in PDF, .Doc or other file formats
- ☐ b. Most of the critical information is included directly on the webpage, but users will often need to access other file formats
- ☐ c. The important content is always available in a native web format on the page, though it may be supplemented with optional files

28. **Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the content?** *(Optional)*

Technical Performance & Discoverability

29. **Technical Errors and Bugs:** Is the website free of any technical errors and bugs? Did you run into broken links, pages that misdirect or do not load properly, or other technical issues?

- ☐ a. There are significant technical issues or a lot of bugs
- ☐ b. There are a few minor technical issues or bugs
- ☐ c. There do not seem to be any technical issues

30. **Loading Speed:** Do pages appear and load quickly?

- ☐ a. No, pages are noticeably slow to load or are laggy
- ☐ b. Pages load somewhat quickly, but are a little slow or laggy
- ☐ c. Yes, pages load very quickly

31. **Responsiveness and Mobile Compatibility:** Does the website adjust to display correctly on different screen sizes (e.g., a mobile phone or tablet) or when the browser window is resized? *Change the size of your browser window to test how the website reacts and displays, and view the website on a phone or tablet.*

- ☐ a. No, the website is not responsive to different screen sizes and does not display well on mobile
- ☐ b. The website is somewhat responsive, but there are some issues with how text and images display in different formats
- ☐ c. Yes, the website is fully responsive and displays correctly in a range of formats, screen sizes and on a mobile device

32. **Discoverability and Page Rank:** Does the website show up high on search engine result pages when you search using likely search terms and phrases? *Using Google or another search platform, experiment with a range of terms and phrases that community members might use if they are in need of emergency rental assistance, and see how the relevant website ranks in the search results. Examples include: "help with eviction in [city name]"; "behind on rent in [city name]"; "eviction filing help in [city name]."*

- ☐ a. No, the website does not appear anywhere on the first page of search results
- ☐ b. The website generally appears toward the bottom of the first page of search results
- ☐ c. Yes, the website is often one of the first five search results returned

33. **Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the technical performance or discoverability of the website?** *(Optional)*

34. **Do you have any additional feedback on the website as a whole?** *(Optional)*

Website Evaluation Response Compilation Worksheet

How to Use this Worksheet

After evaluators have completed their review of the relevant website or webpage, collect their evaluation worksheets and tally their responses in the **Summary of Evaluation Results and Responses** table included here. Note the following:

- Every (a.) response corresponds to "Needs Improvement"
- Every (b.) response corresponds to "Average"
- Every (c.) response corresponds to "Excellent"

Additional feedback from evaluators can also be compiled or summarized in the **Open-Ended Responses and Additional Responses** space provided.

Review the tallied responses and identify the areas or criteria that have the most "needs improvement" votes. Addressing these issues should be prioritized for website redesign efforts. Criteria with high numbers of "average" votes should also be considered for improvements after basic functionality and design challenges have been addressed.

Use the **Action Plan Overview** portion of this resource to identify top priorities and next steps based on the feedback received.

Summary of Evaluation Results and Responses

Use the table below to compile responses from the evaluation worksheet. Tally the answers to each question: Every (a.) response corresponds to "Needs Improvement"; every (b.) response corresponds to "Average"; and every (c.) response corresponds to "Excellent."

FOCUS AREA	SPECIFIC CRITERIA	RESPONSES FROM EVALUATORS		
		A. Needs Improvement	*B. Average*	*C. Excellent*
General Layout & Visual Design	1. Visual consistency			
	2. White space			
	3. Hierarchy			
	4. Headings			
	5. Spacing and line breaks			
	6. Menus and sidebars			
	7. Organization of referrals and resources			
	8. Justification and alignment			
	9. Color scheme			
	10. Media types			
	11. Media quality			

FOCUS AREA	SPECIFIC CRITERIA	RESPONSES FROM EVALUATORS		
		A. Needs Improvement	*B. Average*	*C. Excellent*
Accessibility of Layout & Visual Design	13. Language availability			
	14. Language access			
	15. Alt-text			
	16. Font style			
	17. Font size			
	18. Color contrast			
Content	20. Key topic coverage			
	21. Key jurisdiction coverage			
	22. Responsiveness to immediate needs			
	23. Relevance to current events			
	24. Plain language			
	25. Action-oriented messaging			
	26. Range of content types			
	27. Content format			
Technical Performance & Discoverability	29. Technical errors and bugs			
	30. Loading speed			
	31. Responsiveness and mobile compatibility			
	32. Discoverability and page rank			

Summary of Open-Ended Responses and Additional Feedback

Compile open-ended responses and additional feedback from evaluators in the space below.

Action Plan Overview

Use the space provided below to identify and prioritize website changes based on feedback received through the evaluation process. Consider what are the most critical and timely changes, as well as what adjustments might be straightforward or easier to implement. Identify a point person who will take the lead on implementing the change or following through on any next steps that are indicated.

Top Priority Changes

1.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

2.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

3.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

Secondary Priority Changes

1.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

2.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

3.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

Long-Term Changes

1.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

2.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person:

3.

Notes and immediate next steps

Name of Point Person: