

Core Components of Centralized Landlord Engagement Programs and Community Landlord Engagement Initiatives

As [I mentioned previously](#), it takes more than one housing strategy to end homelessness. Communities must create both a solid affordable housing development plan and leverage existing units in the private rental market. Creating partnerships with private market landlords is a critical step to be able to move people out of homelessness quickly and fully utilize local, state, and federal subsidies.

In high-cost, low-vacancy markets, the challenge of finding available rental units is great. Cities across the country are seeking creative ways to increase housing options and secure units quickly, and [First Lady Michelle Obama has appealed directly to landlords and property owners](#) about the vital roles that they can play in ending homelessness.

Centralized Landlord Engagement Programs

Communities faced with skyrocketing rents have created centralized landlord engagement programs, where landlords can call a single number if they have a unit to rent or if an issue arises. In both Seattle, WA and Portland, OR, where vacancy rates hover around 2%, they operate programs that focus on finding and retaining landlords. Both of these programs, and others like them, include most of these core components:

- **A centralized program and phone number for landlords to call:** Since there are often many non-profits assisting with housing searches, landlords don't always know which agency to call when they have a unit available or if a tenant needs help. Landlords want to be able to call one number and have someone respond quickly. Programs provide a number that is staffed 24/7 so landlords can reach an "on-call" staff person.
- **Housing search assistance:** Having identified staff whose sole job is to outreach to and build relationships with landlords is key. These are not typically case managers. Those most successful in this job are focused entirely on cultivating housing opportunities. They are usually people who have worked in real estate, business, or property management and can relate on a personal level with a landlord. This is a business relationship, it involves helping someone negotiate a lease, participating in unit inspections, and sometimes paying move-in or rent costs. Staff usually frequent landlord association meetings, rental forums, and regularly outreach to business associations and faith communities.
- **Landlord mitigation funds:** As I [mentioned in a previous article](#), landlord mitigation funds have been a top tool to help landlord engagement programs to secure units. Often

they are designed as a fund that is accessed when there is excessive damage done to a unit beyond what the security deposit will pay. There is usually a limit to the amount that will be covered by the fund, and programs require more than one quote for the repair work. Interestingly, [communities with these funds](#) have found that they are not accessed as frequently as they expected. But having this added protection in place can be a game changer when asking landlords to rent to someone that they consider “high risk,” such as people with a poor rental history, low or no income, and/or past involvement with criminal justice system.

- **Neutral mediation:** If something happens with a tenant, such as rent not being paid or disruption on the property, an intervention can often make the difference between someone remaining in housing or having to leave. Evictions are costly and time consuming and landlords would like to avoid them if at all possible. In Seattle, the [Landlord Liaison Project](#) has a staff member who spends a large amount of his time responding to landlord concerns and helping to mediate conflict.
- **Flexible funds:** Funds for movers, deposits, rent to hold a unit until the housing and/or subsidy applications are complete or the inspection is performed, utility deposits, or eviction prevention assistance to cover rent for a month or two if the tenant is unable to pay are helpful when you have to work fast to secure and retain units in a competitive market.
- **Landlord and tenant education:** Programs provide classes or one-on-one coaching to both landlords and tenants on their rights and responsibilities, fair housing, etc.

While communities with these types of programs say that having a “package” of tools and resources is appealing to landlords, it is not necessary to implement all of these strategies for a landlord engagement program to be successful. The components of the program may vary depending on access to funding and the needs of the community.

Community Landlord Engagement Initiatives

Alongside a centralized landlord engagement program, here are three other examples of ways communities have built awareness and engagement with the larger community in their work to end homelessness:

1) Public-private partnerships

The real estate website Zillow has used their technological savvy and desire to give back to the community to create the [Community Pillar Program](#). On the Zillow website, a landlord can self-identify as a “community pillar” and share how they have reduced rental barriers. The landlord

then receives a community pillar badge next to their profile. Renters can search Zillow's community pillar page to find units that are available in their area based on size and cost.

2) Landlord events

In cities from Tampa and Atlanta to Detroit, Chicago, Honolulu, Los Angeles, and [Seattle](#), landlord events have been held to draw attention to the goal of ending homelessness among Veterans. These large events bring together community leaders, elected officials, and landlords. They are most effective when landlords can hear from other landlords about their successes partnering to end homelessness. The National League of Cities, as part of their overall efforts to [encourage participation](#) in the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness and support local officials, held four landlord events and will be releasing a summary report in the coming weeks.

3) Leadership and involvement at the highest level

In Portland, Oregon, Mayor Charlie Hales and the Multnomah County Chair, Deborah Kafoury have made personal phone calls to landlords to ask them to rent to Veterans experiencing homelessness. Several communities across the country, like [Miami](#), [Delaware](#), and [Portland](#), have also created public service announcements about the need for landlords to support the community's work to end homelessness among Veterans. In all of these efforts, landlords were given a single number to call to get information.

Regardless of your community's strategy to create housing options for those experiencing homelessness, we know that it will take new partnerships and multiple tactics to get the job done. As we have seen through the great successes in the last year housing Veterans, it takes an "all in" attitude to work quickly, think creatively, and leverage the resources needed to solve the crisis of homelessness.

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