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Certified Public Manager Project

Consistency and Customer Service in Lexington County

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South Carolina State Housing Finance and Development Authority

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STATE DOCUMENTS



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Project Statement and Goal

To implement a process to improve the consistency of Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspections and customer service in Lexington County by fall 2001.

The Housing Authority's mission is to "promote and provide safe, decent, and affordable housing for the citizens of South Carolina". One of the programs administered by the Housing Authority in support of its' mission is Section 8 Rental Assistance. The program is funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Authority is the contract administrator. In the Rental Assistance Department, there are 11 Housing Program Coordinators who administer the program in 11 different counties. Each coordinator manages a caseload of approximately 235 families within a county or group of counties. With the exception of Lexington County, each county has one coordinator. Lexington County on the other hand has 4 coordinators. One coordinator administers the Section 8 Program in two apartment complexes that are contracted specifically for Section 8 participants. The other 3 coordinators manage their caseload throughout the entire county. Many Section 8 property owners have multiple properties and it is not uncommon for an owner to deal with multiple coordinators at the same time.

As in most federal programs, there are rules and policies that govern how the program is administered. How the rules are carried out varies from one employee to another. The impact of inconsistencies on the counties that have only one coordinator is minimal but the impact of applying the rules differently in Lexington County is multiplied. The level of experience and training of each individual employee plays a part in this inconsistency as well as other factors. Normally, each coordinator is out in the field on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of each

week. The field visits are necessary to re-certify family eligibility for rental assistance and to conduct HQS property inspections. An HQS inspection must be conducted on every rental unit prior to beginning the initial lease under Section 8 and at least annually thereafter. Because of the close proximity of Lexington County to the Housing Authority's only office, many phone calls and walk-in visitors are received. At times the Authority is not able to provide the desired level of customer service because no one is available at the time to speak with these clients and provide program support.

A goal of the Housing Authority is to provide customer service to all of its' clients in a professional, prompt, and courteous manner. The Authority's 2000 Strategic Plan describes our customer focus as "We strive to know and understand our customers and their needs. We respect all persons and value their diversity. We continually seek ways to improve our service. We encourage and appreciate our partnerships." Customer service in this context means being available to our customers and applying program rules, to include HQS, consistently. The staff needs to be available to provide service during normal business operating hours. A process needs to be developed that will increase consistency in applying the rules and policies that govern the Section 8 Rental Assistance Program, especially in Lexington County.

Cause Analysis

Essentially there are two separate issues being addressed in the project statement and goal. First, there is a lack of consistency when conducting HQS inspections. The physical inspection is being conducted in accordance with policy but deficiencies being noted are not consistent among the inspectors. Each program coordinator completes an HQS certification-training course soon after employment. Although the HQS standards have not changed for several years, the way they are being applied varies with each inspector.

Management reviews 25% of all case files are reviewed annually for compliance with all program elements. This internal audit includes completed inspection forms. From these reviews, training can be formulated to correct noted deficiencies. HQS irregularities have been identified in the past and monthly training sessions addressing HQS have been conducted. This has been an on-going process over the past three years. A more recent review of completed inspection forms continues to confirm an inconsistency in applying the inspection standards. This is not only the case for the Lexington County coordinators; inconsistencies exist throughout the entire staff of 11 employees. There has been an apparent decline in the number of inconsistencies from initial reviews. This would indicate training might have had an impact on the problem. Also, as an on-going effort to identify the root cause of the differing standards, individual meetings were held over the past year with each staff member. During the course of the interviews, two major factors surfaced as to potential causes for the varying standards. First and most evident, was the amount of time that had past since certification and the interview. The experience level of the staff varies from 16 years to less than a year. Secondly, previous

management philosophy and interpretation of the standards might have been partially responsible for the discord in HQS consistency. Management allowed employees to make independent HQS determinations based on their own interpretation of the requirements.

The second issue is the availability of the Lexington County coordinators during normal business hours to the external customers. Availability of each coordinator, not just the Lexington County coordinators, is an important issue. Lexington County magnifies this problem primarily because of its' close proximity to the Housing Authority. Most telephone calls are local (toll free) and many tenants live within an easy commute to the Authority. This is not the case for the other 10 counties the Housing Authority services. Each coordinator has voice mail, which records messages when they are away from the office. In order to assess the number of phone calls received by voice mail while the coordinators were out of the office, a check sheet was utilized. Each Lexington County coordinator collected data for a 3-week period on the number of voice mail messages that were left. Check sheet totals are at Appendix I. The volume of voice mail messages suggests that coordinators from Lexington County are not available to their clients as often as necessary.

The Lexington County coordinators have indicated that the volume of voice mail messages left while they are in the field is consistent over time. At this point, there does not seem to be any value in continuing to collect data in this area. It would be beneficial to collect data on the number of unscheduled visitors who come to the Housing Authority when the coordinators are in the field. This effort is currently underway and will be in place for a period of one month.

Based on management's current observation, the number of unscheduled visitors to the Housing Authority is minimal.

Implementation Plan

The data which includes the number of voice mail messages, personal interviews, and case file reviews support the problem with HQS inspections being inconsistent and the lack of availability of the Lexington County coordinators to the external customers. Consolidating the Lexington County coordinators into a single cell may help reduce both the inconsistencies with HQS and make someone available to the external customers during normal business hours.

Families receiving Section 8 rental assistance are required to be re-certified for continued eligibility at least annually. This represents approximately 70% of the current workload of each coordinator. The other 30% is allocated to assisting new Section 8 participants and maintaining current participants. Maintenance involves completing interim examinations between annual re-certifications for changes in family composition and income. The amount of assistance that a family receives in the Section 8 Program is determined by household income and composition, which makes interim examinations necessary as changes occur.

Each coordinator manages a caseload of approximately 235 families. The annual re-certification process begins 120 days prior to the client's anniversary date of the assistance. For example, in the month of June 2001, the coordinator will begin the process of re-certifying families with a November 2001 anniversary date. The average number of re-certifications each month for Lexington County is 20 per coordinator or 60 in total.

There are several issues that must be addressed in order to reduce HQS inconsistencies and employee availability to our Lexington County customers. First, consolidating the operation involves a gradual approach almost like operating two separate activities at the same time. In other words, continue to function as individual work units at the same time start the scheduling of future appointments for consolidation. Each coordinator must ensure their individual work processes are current and any problems are addressed and resolved prior to the final reorganization. The project plan timeframe is at Appendix II.

Under the current organization, each coordinator is responsible for preparing all correspondence, scheduling appointments, conducting HQS inspections, identifying and documenting required repairs, obtaining documentation to support continued family eligibility, and completing the case file for administrative processing. Under the consolidation plan, each coordinator will work as part of a team. One coordinator will conduct the HQS inspections and gather documentation from the family while the other 2 coordinators will be in the office to answer telephone calls, take care of visitors, prepare all correspondence, and complete the case files for submission to the administrative department. It is further anticipated that the duties of the inspector will rotate among the coordinators every 4 – 6 months. It is anticipated that problems will arise in the area of communications between staff members. Under the current operation, each coordinator is responsible for the entire process independent of their peers. Under the consolidated plan, they must rely on each other to be successful as a team. Each coordinator has successfully completed team skills training and are familiar with working as team members.

Evaluation Method

The Rental Assistance Department conducted a Section 8 tenant survey to evaluate the service being provided by each Housing Program Coordinator (a copy of the survey is at Appendix III). This survey has been in use for two years. The survey targets participants within a certain anniversary date. The anniversary date is the date the participant in the Section 8 Program is re-certified for continued eligibility. The date is selected randomly and it provides feedback for each coordinator. It is envisioned that the department will continue to utilize this tool to evaluate and improve our customer service.

Personal observation is a key element in evaluating the effectiveness of this project. Management is a vital component of its' success. Management will work closely with the Lexington County team to assist in the formulation of workflow processes as well as defining each coordinator's functional role on the team. Data collection in the areas of unanswered telephone calls (voice mail messages) and unscheduled visitors will be conducted within two months from the completion of the consolidation efforts.

Procedures are already in place to monitor HQS consistency throughout the entire program. Management will continue to review 25% of all case files are reviewed annually for compliance with all program requirements. This requirement will remain in place and will be used to assist in evaluating not only HQS inconsistencies but also as a method to evaluate the completeness of each case file. Using these tools, which are already in place, will provide information necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of this project.

Appendix I

Voice Mail Messages Received – Lexington County Coordinators

Date	June O’Neal	Beverly Broadaway	Tammy Gallman	Totals
12/5	5	6	14	25
12/6	13	8	23	44
12/7	6	12	11	29
12/8	9	16	20	45
12/11	10	16	13	39
12/12	11	7	13	31
12/13	4	4	8	16
12/14	11	17	7	35
12/15	14	21	9	44
12/18	9	36	16	61
12/19	8	5	6	19
12/20	15	6	16	37
12/21	9	5	12	26
12/22	0	8	0	8
Totals	124	167	168	459

Note – When the number of voice mail messages is under 10, the coordinator was in the office completing administrative work. When the number of voice mail messages were over 10, the coordinator was in the field conducting HQS inspections and gathering information on the family for program participation.

Total Number of Families Assisted by Coordinator

June O’Neal	Beverly Broadaway	Tammy Gallman	Total
268	240	236	744

Appendix II

Project Plan Timeframe

October 2000	Met with coordinators from Lexington County to discuss the possibility of consolidating Lexington County into one work group. Requested they meet as a team to determine if this approach was feasible.
November 2000	Lexington County coordinators met on several occasions to discuss the possibility of consolidating the Lexington County operation. Also, identify specific areas of concern they have with consolidation.
January – February 2001	Met with the coordinators and discussed problems and concerns identified by the coordinators concerning consolidating the Lexington County operation.
March – April 2001	Identify problems in the individual work process and begin working on solutions. As a team, the Lexington County coordinators, along with management, will begin to meet regularly to finalize consolidation efforts. This includes assigning initial functional responsibilities for each coordinator.
June 2001	Begin scheduling appointments under the consolidation plan for participants with a November 2001 anniversary date. Continue to work on problem areas in each individual work unit.
July – August 2001	Begin working as one work unit and evaluate problems as they arise. Potential problems in the area of communications between staff members are anticipated.
September 2001	Monitor work processes and customer service. Review HQS inspection reports, voice mail data, and employee feedback on consolidation efforts.
October 2001	Case files for November 2001 anniversary dates are due to the Administrative Department for processing. Continue to monitor, make adjustments and refine the consolidation process.

Section 8 Tenant Survey

Teresa Barnes
 229 Chandler Dr 7B
 Gaffney, SC 29340

Please take a few moments to complete the following questionnaire and return it in the envelope provided. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Your Housing Program Coordinator (HPC) is: Bob Bradley

Please respond to each question and provide additional comments below	Please circle and explain any "No" Responses
(1) Was your HPC courteous and professional?	Yes No
(2) Did the HPC answer all your questions?	Yes No
(3) Did the HPC explain each form you were required to complete and sign?	Yes No
(4) Did the HPC ask you if there were any problems in your residence?	Yes No
(5) Did the HPC conduct a complete inspection of your residence?	Yes No
(6) Did you receive a letter from your HPC informing you of his/her scheduled visit?	Yes No
(7) Did your HPC visit you on the date as indicated?	Yes No
(8) Have you had trouble contacting your HPC by telephone?	Yes No
(9) Did your HPC return your telephone calls?	Yes No
(10) Do you have an answering machine?	Yes No
(11) Are the letters sent by the Authority clear and readable?	Yes No
(12) Have you read your Tenant Handbook?	Yes No
(13) How do you rate the overall service of your HPC?	1 2 3 4 5 Low-----High
(14) How do you rate the overall service of other employees at the Housing Authority that you may have had contact with?	1 2 3 4 5 Low-----High
(15) How do you rate the Section 8 Tenant Handbook you received? (Please provide suggestions on how we can make any improvements in the comment section below.)	1 2 3 4 5 Low-----High

Please use reverse side for additional comments