

**Alternative Rent Rules Group Participant (Head of Household)**  
**Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

[Shaded and bracketed text indicates notes for the interviewer]

**Research team introductory script**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am with MDRC (or Urban Institute, a research organization working with MDRC), the organization that has worked with HUD and the housing agency on the alternative rent rules and procedures implemented as part of the Rent Reform demonstration. My goal today is to learn about your experiences with the alternative rent policy. I will try to be as brief as possible.

This research is conducted under the authority of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to undertake programs of research, studies, testing and demonstration related to the mission and programs of HUD (12 USC 1701z-1 et seq.). Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 90 minutes per response. HUD may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection information unless that collection displays or reports a valid OMB control number. The OMB control number for this collection is 2528-0306, and it expires XX-XX-XXXX.

The information will be used to understand an alternative rent policy for voucher holders and housing authorities that issue them. If you have any comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions to reduce this burden, please send them to the Marina L. Myhre, Office of Policy Development and Research, US. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, DC 20410-3600. When providing comments, please refer to OMB Approval No. xxxx. HUD may not conduct and sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless the collection displays a valid control number.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. There is no right or wrong answer – we just want to understand your experiences. There are no program consequences (i.e., loss of any current or future benefits) for deciding not to participate in the interview, or for deciding not to answer any particular question.

This interview will be conducted in [language].<sup>1</sup> If you need any additional assistance to complete this interview, please let me know.

Also, please note that your name will not be associated with any information you provide. MDRC and Urban researchers will not use your name in any reports or in any discussions with housing authority staff. We will protect your responses from disclosure

Do you agree to participate? Would it be okay for me to record so I don't have to take notes while we're talking? (If joined by team member: NAME will take notes as backup to the recording.)

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. To thank you for your participation in this interview you will receive a \$30 [store TBD] gift card.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**HUD introduction (If joined by HUD)**

<sup>1</sup> Since the interviews will be scheduled in advance, MDRC will be aware of the language in which the respondent will prefer to complete this interview. That language will be mentioned in the introduction.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am with Office of Policy Development and Research at HUD, the agency working with the PHA [name] on the alternative rent rules and procedures. If you agree, I would like your permission to observe how MDRC conducts this interview. I would like you to know that I am only here to monitor the research and I will not use any of your personal information or discuss any of the experiences you describe during this interview for any other purpose. Your responses will remain private.

[Interviewer: at start of audio, state date, time, & interview #]

## I. INTRODUCTION

Before we dive in, could you tell me:

1. How long have you lived in [city]?
2. How long have you lived in your current home?
3. Have you recently had a recertification for your housing voucher?
  - a. Are you scheduled to have one soon?
4. Before we turn to your experiences with the alternative rent rules, how has your family been coping during Covid-19. [Note that we will want to hear more about how Covid-19 may have affected their work or other aspects of their life.]

[Note: Households in SAHA and LMHA that had a recent recertification will now be on the regular rent rules. Households in LHA will remain on the alternative rent rules. Depending on the sample member's status, adjust how questions are framed.]

## II. GENERAL REACTIONS TO THE ALTERNATIVE RENT POLICY

**As you may remember, in 2015/2016 your household was selected to participate in the Rent Reform study and as such your rent was/is calculated using a new or different set of rent rules. Throughout the interview we'll refer to these rent rules as the "alternative rent rules." I'd like to start with a few general questions to get your impressions on the alternative rent rules.**

5. Can you share any general feelings / impressions you have about the alternative rent rules? Do/did you like them?
  - a. Do you feel differently now about the alternative rent rules than you did when they first changed back in 2015/2016?
6. Are there certain features of the alternative rent rules that you particularly like?
  - a. What do/did you like about the alternative rent rules/new rent rules? Explain.
  - b. Have you always felt this way about [the feature] or has the way you felt changed recently?
7. Are there features of the alternative rent rules that you don't like or that concern you? What don't you like about the alternative rent rules? Explain.
  - a. Have you always felt this way about [the feature] or has the way you felt changed recently?
8. Have you had questions or concerns about any aspect of the alternative rent rules?
  - a. What questions have you had?
  - b. Have you been able to talk with someone at the housing agency about your questions?
  - c. Have you received answers to your questions?

- d. What responses did you receive?
  - e. Were you satisfied with the responses you received? Why/why not?
9. Did you receive any flyers in the mail from the housing agency reminding you of the benefits of the alternative rent rules? [Show participant a sample flyer]
- a. Was it useful to get these types of reminders? Can you describe why you found them helpful? What did they make you do?
  - b. Do you have suggestions about other types of messaging or reminders that might be more useful?

### III. Rent Features

**Next, I'd like to ask you about some of the features of the alternative rent rules and your experiences with them.**

[General guideline for this section: gauge participant understanding of the alternative rent rules and try to learn about any positive or negative experiences they have had.]

<b>Three -Year Recertification</b>
Under the alternative rent rules, families do not need to recertify for three years.

10. What do/did you think about only having to recertify for your housing voucher every three years?
- a. Were you aware that you only had to recertify for your housing voucher every three years?
  - b. Did you like it? Why or why not?
  - c. Overall, was/is it beneficial or harmful to your household in any way? Why?
11. How, if at all, has your rent changed over the past few years? Has it **increased, decreased, or stayed the same?** When?
- a. Did it go up or down recently? When?
  - b. **[If rent has gone up recently]**
    - i. Did you know why your rent changed over the past few years?
    - ii. Did it go up by the amount you expected?
    - iii. Before your rent went up, did you make plans to pay this higher rent? If so, what plans did you make? Did you create a budget? Did you put money aside?
    - iv. Have you had any issues paying the higher rent? Have you had to not pay some bills or make any other changes to be able to pay the higher rent? Have you received any help to pay the higher rent? Describe.
12. Is your rent scheduled to go up or down soon? By how much? Do you know why your rent is scheduled to go up or down soon?
- a. **[If rent is scheduled to go up soon]** Do you have concerns about paying the higher rent?

- i. Are you making plans to pay the higher rent? What plans are you making? Are you creating a budget? Are you putting money aside? Are you making any lifestyle changes?

[Next question is relevant for sample members who have not completed their recertification.]

**13.** Do you expect it to go up or down at any point in the future? Why? By how much?

- a. **[If expecting rent to go up]** Do you have concerns about paying the higher rent?
  - i. Will you make plans to pay the higher rent? What plans will you make? [probe: Will you create a budget? Will you put money aside? Will you need to make any lifestyle changes?]

**Grace period**

[As a safeguard at each triennial, if the household’s current gross income is more than 10% below the household’s income in the last 12 months, the household will qualify for a 6-month temporary grace period rent based on current gross income.]

Under the alternative rent rules, households can get a Grace Period Rent at recertification.

**14.** Have you ever received a Grace Period Rent at recertification—a temporary lower rent for six months following recertification?

- a. **[If no]** Are you aware of the grace rent policy and how it works?
  - i. **[If no]** [State policy]. Does that sound familiar?
- b. **[If yes]** Do you remember why you qualified for this temporary lower rent?
  - i. Was this temporarily lower rent helpful? If not, why not? [probe to understand concerns – is 6 months too short?]
  - ii. Do you remember if your household’s income went up or down during those six months when you were paying a lower rent?
  - iii. What happened when the rent went up again six months later?
    - 1. How did you adjust to paying the higher rent again?
    - 2. Did you have any challenges?
  - iv. Do you have any general reactions to the grace period rent?

**Rent Calculation**

The alternative rent rules use income you received in the 12 months prior to recertification to calculate rent. You are required to provide the housing specialists with income documents for this 12-month period.

**15.** Have you had any challenges providing this past income information? What was your understanding of which income documents you needed to provide? Were you able to provide the required income documents?

- a. What kind of information was more difficult to provide?
- b. What happened when you had these challenges?

**Rent payment to landlord**

Minimum rent by site:

- Lexington Housing Authority: \$150
- Louisville Metropolitan Housing Authority: \$50
- San Antonio Housing Authority: \$100

Under the alternative rent rules, families pay a portion of their rent (at least the “minimum rent”) to the landlord directly.

16. What are your thoughts about the housing authority requiring a minimum rent for households? [probe: is it reasonable/unreasonable? Why, why not?]
17. Prior to the alternative rent rules, did you pay monthly rent to your landlord?
- a. **[If no]** Have you had any challenges with this change?
18. Do you think there any benefits to paying the landlord directly? Explain.
- a. Have you ever had to work out an agreement with your landlord, or has your landlord ever accommodated you, because you had a short-term difficulty in paying rent? Please describe.

**Household composition**

[Under the alternative rent rules, income from a new adult member in the household does not need to be reported to the housing agency until the next triennial recertification (unless the voucher size increased). If a household member is removed, their income is immediately removed.]

Under the alternative rent rules, your rent may or may not be affected when someone moves in or out of a household depending on your specific situation.

19. Are there other adult household members living with you? How many?
20. Has anyone left or joined your household since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015? Explain.
- a. Did this make your rent go up or down?
  - b. Did you know how this would affect your rent? Explain.
21. Did the alternative rent rules have any effect on who left or joined your household in the last few years? Were you aware that under the new rent rules, you can add a partner or spouse to the household without it affecting rent until your next recertification (or request for a rent reduction)?
- a. **[If yes]** In what ways has it changed your decisions? Explain. [ Probe: whether additional adult household members were added because their income would not need to be reported to the [PHA] ?
  - b. **[If no]** Do you think you would have made the same changes under the regular rent rules?

**Reporting Income Changes**

[Households do not need to report increases in income to the housing authority under most circumstances. If they did report income increases, try to determine whether it was reported purely with the intent of compliance with a perceived requirement to report increases in income.]

Under the alternative rent rules, income reporting rules changed.

22. What is/was your understanding of income reporting requirements between required recertifications?
23. Did you ever reach out to anyone at the housing authority to get clarification about this policy? What were you told?
24. Have/had you reported increases in household earning to the housing authority between recertifications?
- [If reported increase]** Do you remember what happened when you reported this increase to the housing authority?
  - [If unclear of reporting requirements]** [State policy]. Does that sound familiar?
25. Do/did you like this feature of the policy? Why or why not?
- Was not having to report income increases in between recertifications helpful for you? How? Why?
  - Did you have any challenges because of this feature? What sort of challenge? What happened as a result?
26. Have your earnings (or that of others in your household) increased over the past few years? When?
- Was your rent affected as a result? How?

**Safeguards: Interim Recertification to reduce rent, Temporary Hardship Rent, Related hardships**

**[Interim Recertification to reduce rent:** A household may receive one interim reduction in rent each year (the year begins on the household's recertification effective date). To qualify, the household's income (from all adults) from the 12 months just prior to the request (including income from any new qualifying household members) must have dropped more than 10% below the past income used to calculate the household's current rent. This cannot not reduce rent below the minimum rent. The new rent remains in effect until the next triennial or until the next qualifying interim recertification.]

**[Temporary Hardship Rent:** Families can request a hardship remedy at any time. If they qualify, a hardship remedy can temporarily reduce rent for up to 6 months. To qualify, rent must be more than 40% of the family's current gross monthly income. Families at risk of eviction may also qualify. Hardship Remedies may include: Allowing an additional interim recertification; setting the household's portion of rent at minimum rent for up to 180 days; setting the household's portion of rent at 28 percent of current gross income, for up to 180 days; and/or offering a "transfer voucher" to support a move to a more affordable unit.]

Under the alternative rent rules, households can get help if they lose income.

27. Has the difference between an interim recertification to reduce rent and a temporary hardship rent been explained to you?

[Families will not likely distinguish between an interim to reduce rent and a hardship rent when initially reporting a decrease to the housing agency or when asking for a rent reduction.]

- a. [If needed, remind the participant of the qualifications for an interim recertification and for a hardship]
28. Since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015, have you had difficulty paying your rent or utilities? What caused the situation? How did you cope? Explain.  
[Try to determine if the alternative rent rules had anything to do with it]
29. Did your household ever lose income between recertifications?
- a. Explain. What happened?
    - Did you or someone in the household lose a job or have a reduction in work hours?
    - Was your household income affected by COVID?
    - Was this loss temporary?
30. **[If household lost income]** Did you ask the housing authority to lower your rent when you lost income?
- a. **[If no]** Why not? Do you think you would have qualified for a lower rent?
  - b. **[If yes]** How? What did you have to do to request a lower rent?
    - i. **[If yes]** What happened as a result? Did your rent get lowered? For how long?
31. Since the start of these new rules, have you asked the housing authority for an interim recertification to reduce/lower your rent?
- a. **[If yes]** When was your most recent request? What was the reason for the request?  
[Focus on the most recent one if more than one interim has been requested]
    - i. What was the outcome of your request?
      1. **[If granted]** Did the lower your rent help you? Explain.
      2. **[If denied]** Do you know why your request was denied? How did you manage to pay your rent without the interim?
32. Since the start of these new rules, have you asked for a temporary hardship rent from the [PHA]? How many times?
- a. **[If yes]** What was the reason for your request?  
[Focus on the most recent one if more than one hardship has been requested]
    - i. Was your request approved or denied?
      1. **[If approved]** What remedy or solution was offered? Was the remedy helpful? Why or why not?
      2. **[If denied]** What did you do about the denied hardship request? How did you manage to pay your rent without the hardship rent?
33. Were there times when you could have requested a hardship remedy but decided not to?
- a. Why didn't you request a hardship remedy?



- b. How did you manage to pay your rent without a hardship remedy?
34. Since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015, have you experienced any hardships unrelated to paying the rent such as not having enough money to buy food that you or your family needed? How did you cope?
35. Since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015, have you experienced any hardships such as not having enough money to see a doctor or buy prescription medicine? How did you manage?
36. Since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015, have you experienced any hardships related to paying for utilities? How did you manage?
37. Overall, since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015, would you say your financial situation has **gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse**? Explain.
- a. Had your situation gotten better, stayed the same, or gotten worse before the COVID-19 pandemic started? How did it change after the start of the pandemic (around March 2020)?

#### IV. WORK INCENTIVE & SUPPORTS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE INCENTIVE

Next, I'd like to ask you about your work history.

38. Are you currently working?
- a. **[If currently working]** Describe your employment situation.
- i. Are you working more than one job?
  - ii. How long have you been at your current job(s)?
  - iii. How many hours per week do you work? Do you work the same hours every week? Or does your schedule change?
  - iv. Do you feel safe from exposure to Covid-19 in your workplace?
39. Has your employment status changed since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015?
- a. Did you change jobs? When? Why?
  - b. Did you start working a new job or take on an additional job? When? Why?
  - c. Have the number of hours you work per week changed? Have the number of hours you work per week increased, decreased, changed often, or stayed the same?
    - i. When? How did they change?
    - ii. If changed more recently: Since the Covid-19 virus crisis hit, has your employer(s) ever changed (reduced) your hours? Please describe.

40. Do you think the alternative rent policy, especially the 3-year recertification where you do/did not have to report income increases, affected decisions you or members of your family have made related to work (such as whether to work, working more hours, taking an additional job, etc.)?
- b. **[If yes]** In what ways has it changed your *decisions* related to employment (such as whether to work, working more hours, taking an additional job, etc.)? Explain.
41. Are you currently looking for a new, different, or additional job or are you trying to increase the number of hours you work?
- c. **[If currently looking]** Do you think you would be making the same effort if you were not under the alternative rent rules and concerned about an increase in rent due to earning a higher income?
  - d. **[If not currently looking]** Why not? (probe: unable to look at the moment, concerned that an increase in income will increase your rent, lack childcare, lack transportation, lack steady employment opportunities, or because taking care of a sick, elderly, or disabled family member?)
    - i. Since the start of the alternative rent rules in 2015, was there a time that you were looking for a new, different, or additional job or are you trying to increase the number of hours you work? Describe.
      1. **[If yes]** Do you think you would have made the same effort if you were not under the alternative rent rules?
      2. Has the Covid-19 virus crisis, affected your job search effort? How?
42. **[If ever looked for work at some point since 2015]** Are there resources or services in the community to help support your employment efforts? Describe.
- e. What resources have you used? Were they helpful?
  - f. What resources do you wish you could have to support your employment efforts?
43. **[If there are other adult household members]** To the best of your knowledge, do you think the alternative rent rules have affected the work choices or decisions of other adult members in your household (such as looking for work, going to work, working more hours, taking an additional job, stopping work, etc.)?
- [If more than one work able adult, ask for detail about each.]
44. Are you currently enrolled in any education and training or certification classes or employment-related services?
- b. Have you enrolled in any education and training or employment-related services since 2015?
  - c. **[If have participated in these services since 2015]** Do you think the alternative rent rules affected your decision to participate in these services?

#### IV. WRAP-UP

45. Overall, what did you like the most / the least about the alternative rent rules? Describe.

- 46. Do you think the policy was fair and reasonable to families? Did it do enough to protect families from rent hardship?
- 47. Are there certain parts of the alternative rent rules that were confusing, hard to remember, or that you didn't understand? How would you suggest that the [PHA] or HUD could simplify the alternative rent rules to make them easier to understand?

**[SAHA/LMHA ONLY]**

- 48. **[If still under alternative rent rules]** What do you think you will miss about the alternative rent rules now that you will be transitioning to the regular rent rules at your next recertification? **[IF PHA has not notified families about the policy change, ask: If the PHA decided to stop using this rent policy, what would you miss about it?]**
  - d. Are there any aspects of the alternative rent rules you wish the housing authority would keep? Why?
  - e. If you had a choice, would you prefer to continue having your rent calculated under the alternative rent rules?
- 49. **[If no longer under alternative rent rules]** What do you miss about how your rent was calculated under the alternative rent rules?
  - f. Are there any aspects of the alternative rent rules you wish the housing authority would have kept?
  - g. If you had a choice, would you prefer to have your rent calculated under the alternative rent rules?

**[LHA ONLY]**

- 50. What do you think about the housing authority extending the alternative rent rules to other households? Do you think is a good thing? Why or why not?
  - a. If you had a choice, would you prefer to go back to the old rules (traditional rent rules)?
- 51. **[All]** Is there any feedback you would like to give your housing authority (or HUD) about the alternative rent rules and your experience?

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions for me?

[Provide gift card and request a signature on receipt sheet; For phone interviews, confirm contact information and how the gift card will be provided]