Attachment F: Housing Specialist Interview Guide

Housing Specialists Working with Alternative Rent Rules Group
Semi-Structured Group Interview Guide
[Shaded and bracketed text indicates notes for the interviewer]

Research team introductory script

My name is _____, and I am with MDRC, the research organization that is working with HUD and your agency on the alternative rent policies and procedures as part of the Stepped and Tiered Rent Demonstration. Thank you all for your time. My goal during this meeting is to understand how the alternative rent policies are being implemented. I am also interested in understanding how households understand and experience the alternative policies and their questions about it.

I (we) know that each of you is busy and will try to be as brief as possible. The public reporting burden for this group interview is estimated to average 90 minutes, including the time for reviewing instructions and completing the interview.

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 Reports Management Officer, Paperwork Reduction Project, to the Office of Information Technology, US. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, DC 20410-3600. When providing comments, please refer to OMB Approval No. XXXX.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This interview is not part of an audit or a compliance review. We are interested in learning about your experiences. There is no right or wrong answer. Additionally, you can refuse to answer any question, and can stop the interview at any time without penalty. We will protect your responses from disclosure. MDRC researchers will not release your name and identity on any reports or in any discussions with supervisors or colleagues at the housing authority.

[Group interview-specific script] I am (we are) interested in each of your perspectives on the questions that I ask. I will do my best to ensure that you each have a chance to speak to a certain question. However, to save time, if one of your colleagues says something you agree with, you may simply say "I agree." And, if you would like to expand upon or offer as an addition to something that has already been shared, you should feel free to do so.

Does each of you agree to participate? Would it be okay for me to record so I don't have to take notes while we're talking? (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.

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

[A note to interviewers on facilitating a group interview with housing specialists: The intended goal of a group interview is to obtain shared reflections on the questions that are posed, rather than to obtain standalone responses to all questions from each respondent. In a group interview dynamic, interviewers are encouraged to rotate the respondent to whom questions are first asked, and then ask if other respondents have additional detail to add or differing perspectives. If respondents do have differing take,

then a full hearing of responses is appropriate. The goal is a somewhat free-flowing discussion, with responses informed by all respondents.]

I.   INTRODUCTION AND STAFF BACKGROUND

1. What are your roles at the [PHA]?
    a. I'm curious to know if each of you has experience verifying and calculating rent for households who are subject to the standard rent rules (i.e., households not subject to the [alternative rent policy], or control group)? (If no for all respondents, skip Question 15 below.)
    b. Please describe your [alternative rent policy]-specific responsibilities.
2. How large would you say your caseload or the number of households you work with is?
    a. Do you work with any households who are not receiving the [alternative rent policy]? (If yes) please describe how your time is split between households in the [alternative rent policy] versus those subject to standard rent rules.

II. GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF NEW RENT POLICIES

3. What are some of the biggest differences between the standard rent rules and the new rent rules?
4. What are biggest advantages of the [alternative rent policy]? Disadvantages?
5. How do you feel that families will fare under the [alternative rent policy]?
    a. Are there certain types of households that you feel may fare better or worse than others?

III. IMPLEMENTING ALTERNATIVE RENT POLICY RECERTIFICATION

6. How would you describe the process that your agency uses to verify and calculate retrospective income?
7. How well would you say that these procedures are working?
    a. Possible probes:
        i. Are there any challenges to getting documentation from families and third parties that you need to verify income? What are some examples?
        ii. Are there any sources of income that are particularly easy or difficult to verify? Please explain.
        iii. How frequently would you say that you rely on household self-certifications of income?
        iv. Once you have verified family income, what is the process you use for calculating retrospective income and TTP? What tools are used; how is PHA software used to calculate, if at all?
        v. Are there certain retrospective income scenarios that are more challenging to calculate than others? Please describe.
8. Is there anything about verifying or calculating retrospective income that you find confusing? If so, tell me about it.
9. The tiered/stepped rent is usually based on retrospective income, but sometimes you need to use current income, such as for hardships. How well do you understand when to use retrospective income and when to use current income?
10. Are there any changes you would recommend at this stage about how income is verified or how rent is calculated?
11. How were you trained on the details of the (alternative rent policy) and the process of recertifying families?

     a. Do you feel that the training was sufficient?

     b. Would any additional supports be useful now?

12. How were you trained on using PHA software (specify) to implement [alternative rent policy]?

     a. Do you feel that the training was sufficient?

     b. Would any additional supports be useful now?

13. Are there any additional modifications to PHA software to support implementation of the [alternative rent policy] that you would recommend at this time? Please describe.

14. Thinking about the time it takes overall to complete a recertification under the [alternative rent policy]—and excluding the time that is spent enrolling households into the Stepped and Tiered Rent Demo or explain the [alternative rent policy]—would you say that it takes more time to complete the process than the standard rent rules, less time, or about the same.

     a. (If significantly more or less time spent on [alternative rent policy] recertification) What would you say are the main factors that explain the difference in the time it takes?

IV. HOUSEHOLD REACTIONS AND CIRCUMSTANCES

15. How do households react when they first learn about the [alternative rent policy]?

     a. Are there common questions they ask?

     b. Are there particular points in time that families ask questions or share concerns? (Probe: at enrollment / at recert meetings / upon learning of their TTP/family share under the new rent rules)?

16. Are there any aspects of the [alternative rent policy] that you feel households react positively to? Negatively?

17. How well do you think households understand the [alternative rent policy]?

     a. What makes you think this?

18. Are there certain topics that households have a harder time understanding the [alternative rent policy] than others?

19. Are there ways in which you feel communication to households about the [alternative rent policy] could be improved?

20. Do certain types of households respond to [alternative rent policy] information differently than others?

     a. Probe: Household size, Race, Employment Status, Housing Choice Voucher vs Public Housing Households, New Admissions vs. Existing Participant

V. HARDSHIP IMPLEMENTATION

21. Could you please describe the process for requesting, reviewing, approving, and giving [alternative rent policy]-specific hardships at your PHA?

     a. Possible probe: timing of each step, application process, documentation required, levels of review

22. Is the PHA's software system adequately set up to help your PHA track and manage hardship requests?

     a. Possible probe: Are any requests not being tracked inside the system?

23. What types of hardship remedies are typically offered to households that qualify?

     a. Are any of these remedies offered more often to families who qualify? Less often?

24. Have any households reached out to you to request hardships after their initial certification under the [alternative rent policy]?
    a. Possible probes:
        i. About how many hardship requests have you received?
        ii. Were these hardships at enrollment or in-between regular reexams?
        iii. What types of hardship conditions existed?
        iv. How did the process play out? Outcomes?
25. Do you feel that households subject to the [alternative rent policy] are sufficiently aware that they may request hardships and the process for doing so?
26. Are there types of households experiencing hardship who are not covered by the hardship policies available to households in the [alternative rent policy]?
27. The housing authority has the ability to provide hardships for "extenuating circumstances." Are there examples of hardships that meet this criterion that your agency has granted?
28. Overall, how well do you feel that the hardship policies are working?
29. Are there any changes to the hardship policies that you might recommend?

VI. OVERALL REFLECTIONS AND WRAP UP

30. What have been the greatest successes of [alternative rent policy] implementation?
31. What have been the greatest challenges of [alternative rent policy] implementation?
32. Looking forward, are there any particular concerns you have about future implementation of [the alternative rent policy]?
33. Is there anything you would recommend changing about any aspects of the [alternative rent policy] that you have not already shared?
34. What measures would you recommend to another PHA that was considering implementing the [alternative rent policy]?
35. Is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't covered?
36. Do you have any questions for me?