Housing Specialist and Property Manager Interview Guide

Housing Specialists and Property Managers 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. 2528-0339. An agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection information unless that collection displays a valid OMB control number.

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. MDRC researchers will not release your name and identity in any reports and will not share your responses with colleagues or supervisors at your housing authority or with HUD in such a way that you may be identified.

[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.

Finally, if you have questions after the interview, you may contact:

- James Riccio, Study Co-Principal Investigator, james.riccio@mdrc.org
- Nandita Verma, Study Co-Principal Investigator, nandita.verma@mdrc.org
- Nina Castells, Study Project Director, nina.castells@mdrc.org
- Jonathan Bigelow, Implementation Study Lead, jonathan.bigelow@mdrc.org

Does each of you agree to participate?

Would it be okay for me to record this interview so I don't have to take notes while we're talking? (NAME will take notes as backup to the recording.) We will keep any recording and notes in a secure network that only members of the research team may access.

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 authority staff: 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/supplemental response, then a full hearing is encouraged. The goal is a somewhat free-flowing discussion, with responses informed by (but not required from) all respondents.]

I. INTRODUCTION AND STAFF BACKGROUND

1. Please confirm your job title?
2. How long have you been working at PHA? How long have you been in your current role?
3. What is your role related to the [alternative rent policy]?
    a. Probes:
        i. Do/did you have responsibilities related to study enrollment and orientation?
        ii. Do/did you verify income and calculate rent for households who are subject to the [alternative rent policy]?
        iii. Do/did you also have experience verifying income 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)?
        iv. Do you have any other PHA roles or responsibilities?
4. How large would you say your caseload or the number of households you work with is?
    a. Has the number of households that you work with changed in the last year? If so, has it increased or decreased? What do you think might explain the change? (Probe for alternative policy caseload vs. other policies/programs)

II. GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF NEW RENT POLICIES

5. What do you think about the [alternative rent policy]?
    a. Has your opinion evolved since the start of enrollment? How/why?
6. What do you think the goals of the [alternative rent policy] at your agency are?
    a. Do you think the agency is achieving or is on track to achieve those goals? Why/why not/say more?
7. Between the standard policy and the new policy, is there one that is better for residents? Why/in what ways?
8. Between the standard policy and the new policy, would you say that one is easier or harder to administer? If yes, in what way(s)?
9. If another housing agency asked you for advice about implementing an alternative rent policy like [the stepped/tiered rent policy], what advice would you give them?
    a. Is there anything that you would change about the rent policy?

III. OPERATIONAL, PROGRAM, POLICY CONTEXTS AND CHANGES

10. Are there any significant changes to how your program / department operates since enrollment into [the alternative rent policy] ended?
    a. Do you think any of these changes have affected or will affect how your agency implements the [alternative rent policy]?

IV. IMPLEMENTING THE CORE ALTERNATIVE RENT POLICY FEATURES

11. Thinking about the final months of the enrollment period to today,has your agency changed anything about your processes to implement the [alternative rent policy] more efficiently or effectively? If so, what were they, and how well would you say that the procedures are working now?
    a. Probes:
        i. Related to getting documentation from families or third parties needed to verify income?

ii. Related to verifying income, such as the verification hierarchy and how often you are allowed to accept self-certifications?

iii. Related to calculating household TTP? (Probes: Tools that are used; how the software systems are/are not being used to streamline this step)?

12. Are there any changes you would recommend about how income is verified or how rent is calculated <u>at this point</u>? Why?

13. Would any training or additional supports be useful now to help you administer the [alternative rent policy]?

14. Are there any additional <u>modifications</u> to PHA software to support implementation of the [alternative rent policy] that you would recommend <u>at this point</u>? Please describe.

V. HOUSEHOLD COMMUNICATION, REACTIONS, AND CIRCUMSTANCES

15. What are most of your household interactions about, would you say?

16. Thinking about your recent interactions with households, what types of feedback or impressions have you heard from them about the [alternative rent policy]?
    a. Are there common questions they ask?
    b. Are there particular reasons why households ask questions or share concerns?
    c. Probes (ask all):
       a. When they signal that they might need a hardship due to income changes or other events?
       b. When they add or remove members of their household?
       c. When other interim actions are triggered?

17. [Stepped Rent agencies only:] I'm curious what, if any, household reactions there have been to the first stepped rent increases? How common were these reactions?
    a. Required probes:
       i. Did any households seem surprised by the step increase?
       ii. Have households reached out to you when they received the letter of the first step rent increase? How many? What have they expressed or asked?

18. Thinking about your recent interactions with households, are there any specific parts of the [alternative rent policy] that you feel households react positively to? Negatively?

19. Based on your interactions with households, what share of them do you think recall that they are subject to the [alternative rent policy]? What makes you think this?

20. How well do you think households understand the [alternative rent policy]? Why?
    a. Are you finding that you are reminding or reeducating households about the [alternative rent policy] when you interact with them? Are there any particular policy features that you are focusing on?

21. Are there certain topics that households have a harder time understanding related to the [alternative rent policy] than others? An easier time understanding?

22. What approaches has your agency used to communicate or remind households about the [alternative rent policy] over the past year?
    a. Probes:
       i. How well have these communication strategies worked, do you think? What was the reaction (if any)?

      ii. What are the best ways of communicating to households like the ones you serve, do you think?

23. Do you think there are any ways to increase household awareness about the [alternative rent policy] that could be tried?

24. A main goal of the [alternative rent policy] is to encourage households to increase earned income by verifying their income and recalculating their TTP less frequently. Do you feel that households understand this possible benefit and are taking steps to realize that goal? (Probes: how many / what types of households?)

25. From your perspectives, do you think the [alternative rent policy] has resulted in more households reaching any of the following circumstance than those in the standard rent policy?
    a. Zero HAP or Flat Rent due to increased income
    b. End of Program / Termination for negative reasons

VI. HARDSHIP IMPLEMENTATION

26. 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?

27. Have any households reached out to you to request hardships after their initial certification under the [alternative rent policy], separate from automatic hardships?
    a. *Required* probes:
        i. About how many hardship requests have you received? Probe for frequency (e.g., monthly)?
        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—were most households who made a request eligible to receive a hardship? If they say no, it would be good to understand why that's the case? Does it indicate gaps in understanding?

28. [If staff have households where hardships have been requested and approved] Of the households that requested received hardships—excluding automatic hardships—have any of them expired? Have any been renewed?
    a. Do a lot of households request renewals when their hardships expire?
    b. When do households typically reach out to request renewals if they need them?
        i. Probe: When they get their rent notice for the upcoming expiration? Ahead of receiving that letter? After the non-hardship rent goes into effect?

29. Could you please describe the process for requesting, reviewing, approving, and giving [alternative rent policy]-specific hardships at your PHA?
    b. Possible probes: timing of each step, application process, documentation required, levels of review/approval.

30. Have any changes been made to the hardship policy in the past year?

31. [Stepped rent PHAs only] Have any households had a hardship that lasted for more than a year and that you've reset their TTP for?
    a. If yes, what are some types of situations where a household's hardship lasted for more than one year?

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

      c.   Possible probes: Are any requests not being tracked inside the system? Is the system adequately flagging households that are eligible for automatic hardships?

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

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

34. Are there types of households experiencing hardship who are not covered by the hardship policies available to households in the [alternative rent policy]?

35. Your housing agency has the ability to provide hardships for "extenuating circumstances." Are there examples of hardships that meet this criterion that your agency has granted?

36. HUD gave your agency flexibility to determine the duration of hardship periods granted to eligible households. Are you satisfied with your agency's hardship duration? Why/why not?

37. Overall, how well do you feel that the hardship policies are working?

38. Are there any changes to the hardship policies that you might recommend at this time?

VII. OVERALL REFLECTIONS AND WRAP UP

39. What have been the greatest successes of [alternative rent policy] implementation so far?

40. What have been the greatest challenges of [alternative rent policy] implementation so far?

41. Looking forward, are there any particular concerns you have about future implementation of [the alternative rent policy]?

42. Is there anything you would recommend changing about any aspects of the [alternative rent policy] that you have not already shared?

43. Would you recommend that another housing agency adopt the [alternative rent policy] as it's currently operated at your agency? Why/why not?

44. Is there anything else that you would like to share that we haven't covered?

45. Do you have any questions for me?