Waitlist Data Management and Burden Improvement

Discussion Guide for Focus Groups and Interviews

Discussion Outline

It is not the intent to ask participants a standardized set of questions. Instead, participants will engage in a loosely guided conversation with facilitators in which they will be asked to share their lived experiences and opinions related to a set of topics. Specific question phrasing and areas of deeper exploration will be determined on an ad hoc basis by facilitators during the conversation. Facilitators will cover key areas of participant's lived experience to unearth experiences in the waitlist ecosystem. The questions below represent the types of things a facilitator may ask the participant.

These sessions (for both focus groups and interviews) will be timed to ensure they do not exceed 60 minutes for an interview or 90 minutes for a focus group. The facilitator will be responsible for ensuring that they leave adequate time to wrap up the conversation before the end of the session within the allotted time.

Introductory Script

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

The goal of these conversations is to gain an understanding of the different perspectives and experiences people have around the housing waitlist experience.

HUD is exploring how they can support local partners and housing agencies to help improve the experience of individuals and families finding affordable housing through waitlists. To better understand the needs, HUD is starting by talking to a variety of customers including, public housing agencies, housing providers, families, and others.

Throughout this conversation, we urge you to share your honest, candid feedback. We are trying to understand your experiences and thoughts.

I'm also required to read the following statement.

[For focus groups]

A Federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, nor shall a person be subject to a penalty for failure to comply with an information collection subject to the requirements of the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 unless the information collection has a currently valid OMB Control Number. The approved OMB Control Number for this

information collection is 2511-0001. The expiration date for this Control Number is 09/30/2024. Without this approval, we could not conduct this focus group. Public reporting for this information collection is estimated to be approximately 90 minutes per response. All responses to this information collection are voluntary. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this information collection, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Mac Bailey at mac.bailey@hud.gov.

[For interviews]

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[Remind them of the consent form]

1.0 General background

1.1 Introduction: building rapport
- Tell me a little about yourself.

2.0 HUD programs and partner organizations

2.1 Intersection with other federal agencies

- What are the intersections with other federal agencies when it comes to housing waitlists?
- What programs align or overlap with assistance?
- How do customers typically navigate the many types of programs (and waitlists) for housing?

2.2 Intersection of state and local agencies for waitlists

- What are the intersections with other state or local agencies when it comes to housing waitlists?
- What programs align or overlap with assistance?
- How do local PHAs and state housing agencies work together? What data is shared? How does communication work?
- How do customers typically navigate these various programs?

2.3 Multifamily vs. PIH programs for waitlists

- What assistance programs have waitlists?
- Are there differences in how PIH programs and MFH programs deal with waitlists?
- Do these programs overlap?
- How are they the same? How are they different?

2.4 Partner relationships

- How does HUD currently work with its partners when it comes to waitlists?
- What role does HUD currently play?
- How would relationships need to change if moving to a centralized waitlist? What would the impact be?

2.5 Continuums of care (CoCs)

- How do CoCs tie into waitlists?
- Do they have their own set of waitlist systems? Or are they somehow connected to existing waitlist systems?
- Are participants in CoCs considered different in any way from other customers try to join housing waitlists?
- How does the HMIS data standard affect your processes?

3.0 Current state of waitlist management

3.1 Waitlist preferences and prioritization

- How are waitlist preferences (prioritization) decided upon?
- What complexities arise from implementing preferences?
- What ethical and equity considerations are there?
- Is prioritization (or even application approval) automated or manual? If automated, is any AI/ML (machine learning) utilized?

3.2 Current state of managing waitlists

- Can you walk me through the process of adding someone to the waitlist?
- Can individuals apply directly to affordable housing units (for example, using the resource locator and applying directly to the property manager/management)?
- How do the waitlist and resource locator work together?
- Can you walk me through the process of receiving a voucher spot, contacting the applicant and awarding funds?
- How is the opening/closing of waitlists managed?
- Are there other parts of the process that we haven't covered?
- Is the waitlist the primary tool for the tenant pipeline?
- How are waitlist updates or denials being communicated to customers (i.e., mail, email, digital portal)?
- How has the managing and administration of waitlists changed since Covid?

3.3 Administrative burden

- What administrative difficulties are there when it comes to maintaining, managing, and utilizing waitlists?
- How much effort does it take to manage and maintain your waitlist currently (FTE, hours per week, etc.)?

3.4 Waitlist policy

- What federal laws and regulations impact waitlist systems?
- What are policy considerations on introducing new regulations or processes? What are some of the "unintended consequences"?
- What local laws and regulations impact waitlist systems?
- Are there any state laws/regulations that apply to application data collection/drive processes?

3.5 Business processes

- What data is needed to provide annual funding?
- What support is available to people who have issues completing applications?
- Is an applicant notified in the event of a waitlist denial? Can they appeal? How long does that take?
- In general, what does it look like for your team to manage a waitlist?
- Do you verify eligibility through the waitlist applications or does that happen later in the process?

3.6 Closed waitlists

- Explain to us the processing of closing/opening a waitlist.
- How does closing a waitlist affect customers? How does opening a waitlist affect customers?
- What do the spillover effects look like when waitlists are closed or opened in regions where customers have waitlist options?
- What are the main drivers behind opening and closing a waitlist?

4.0 Understanding the end-customer experience

4.1 How life events factor into waitlists (e.g., disaster, homelessness)

- What different life events factor into waitlists?
- How do these life events impact the management of waitlists?
- Are preferences changed/updated due to disaster related life events? What is that process? (For example, what if a customer experiences a Presidentially declared disaster? Homelessness?)

4.2 Customer experience

- What advice would you give to someone who was looking to join a housing waitlist?
- How might you explain the housing waitlist process to someone who has never done it before?
- What resources do you find most helpful for someone looking to join a housing waitlist?
- How do customers tend to find affordable housing? (i.e., PHAs, resource locater)
- How do customers access updates about their waitlist status?
- How do customers apply to your waitlist? Do you require applications be made in-person? If so, why?
- How long does it take you (the customer) to complete a waitlist
- How did you (the customer) find the waitlist/programs you have applied to?
- How do you (the customer) access or maintain your waitlist status?

4.3 Knowledge of the home buying process

- What is your sense of what the home buying process looks like?
- What questions do you have about the process? (Probe: where would you go for answers?)

- Based on what you currently know, what kinds of upfront costs are there when buying a home?
- Can you tell me about any class, webinar, or activity you participated in to learn more about buying a house or how to budget your money?

5.0 Considerations for centralized waitlists

5.1 Financial implications

- What are the financial requirements to establish and maintain your current waitlist program?
- What was the financial impact of moving to a centralized waitlist? (ask those with centralized programs)
- Can you estimate how much your current system costs financially? Set up costs? Current costs?
- How are costs shared across different stakeholders?
- Who is responsible for management?

5.2 Centralized or universal waitlists

- What are the differences between a centralized and universal waitlist?
- What is the difference in complexity?
- What are additional considerations for a universal list?
- What are the cost savings for switching to a centralized waitlist?
- How are different preference systems managed for different stakeholders?
- How is data shared across programs and stakeholders? Particularly for individuals on multiple waitlists?
- Can customers remain on waitlists for different programs even after receiving one type of benefit? For example, can a customer remain on a waitlist for a housing choice voucher even after being placed in public housing or receiving a PBV spot?

5.3 Complexity of implementing a centralized waitlist

- What would the process be to move to a centralized waitlist?
- What potential challenges would you face?
- Who in your organization would need to be involved in transitional decision making? In implementation?
- In an ideal world, who would you want as a part of your centralized waitlist? Would it truly be universal across the country? By state? By county?

6.0 Considerations for waitlist technology

6.1 Privacy

- What privacy protections are currently in place?
- What circumstances require increased confidentiality and privacy? (VAWA)
- How do you maintain confidentiality in your organization?
- How do you handle identity and access management for waitlist data?

6.2 Third party software requirements

- How many PHAs are you working with?
- How do you handle legacy data from before your system was implemented?
- Is the same standard for data collection used across all of your customers? If not, are there commonalities between standards? Would a common standard be useful?
- How often are you changing your system to meet changes? Do you have a change management process?
- What challenges do you have in working with multiple PHAs?
- Who gets contacted when waitlist application problems arise? How are those problems resolved?
- Is your data schema version controlled?
- Does your software offer an exportable data format?

- How might you compare distinct PHAs' systems? How similar or different are they? How "easy" would it be to "universalize" the systems?

6.3 Data management

- How is data migrated from the waitlist application to its destination?
- Are any aggregated analytics captured for trends in the likelihood of waiting list approval?
- Are there any data standards you follow?
- Is application data reviewed before entry? What's the timetable between collection and addition to waitlist?
- How is data corrected and validated before entry into the waiting list?
- Is there a way for application to validate the data once it's in the waiting list (to account for copy errors)?
- How is missing/incomplete data handled?
- Are all collected data fields used when making decisions (approval/prioritization)? Are non-decision fields clearly marked? Can they be skipped?
- What is the retention period for application data?
- What data storage challenges do you deal with?
- Are you required to export this data to any other agencies?
- Is the data that is collected on the application transferred to another medium? If so, what fields are not needed?
- Are applications stored in a computer system?
- Are there any storage/format limitations that are problematic? (i.e., names that are too long and need to be shortened)
- Are applications searchable?
- What are some of the searchable field types?
- Are record modifications tracked (e.g., "last modified date")?
- How do you handle old applications when application process is updated and new fields added?
- Are data backups done?
- Is a third party used to store data or is it done in-house?
- If records are not computerized: How often are records accessed?

- How do you ensure records don't deteriorate over time?
- How do you ensure record standardization?
- How are records disposed of when no longer needed?
- Are there restrictions in place that make it difficult to cross-reference other waitlists?
- How can someone remove themselves from a waitlist?
- Is there a formula in place to determine when a waitlist is full?
- What type of demographic data is being collected and how is it used?
- Are there equity considerations in how things are being asked/collected (i.,e., gender, race)?
- Is there a separate application once a customer receives a benefit? If so, is any of the existing data automatically migrated over?

7.0 Closeout

7.1 Other resources

- What other resources exist that would be helpful in our efforts?
- Who else should we be speaking to?
- Are there other lines of inquiry we should consider?
- If you had a magic wand, what would you change about the waitlist experience for yourself and for others?