

**PHA Housing Specialist Group Implementation Interview Guide (Round 3)****Housing Specialists and Property Managers Working with Alternative Rent Rules Group****Semi-Structured Group Interview Guide****Round 3 Staff Interviews**

[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. Only data collection instruments that are approved by Office of Management and Budget (OMB) may be fielded in this study. This data collection instrument is approved by the OMB, and assigned OMB Approval No. 2528-0339.

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:

- Nina Castells, Study Co-Principal Investigator and Project Director, [nina.castells@mdrc.org](mailto:nina.castells@mdrc.org)
- Nandita Verma, Study Co-Principal Investigator, [nandita.verma@mdrc.org](mailto:nandita.verma@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**

We'd like to start with some background information.

1. Please confirm your job title?
2. How long have you been in your current role? How long have you been working at PHA?
3. What are your responsibilities related to the [stepped/tiered Rent] policy?

**II. GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF NEW RENT POLICIES**

4. What are your current thoughts about the [stepped/tiered Rent] policy?
  - a. What do you like most about this policy?
5. At this time, what is the most challenging part to administering the alternative rent policy?
  - a. Is this something that continues to be a challenge since the initial certifications, or is it a new challenge?
  - b. Are there any other parts that are challenging to administer? In what ways?
6. Compared to the standard rent rules policy, do you think the [stepped/tiered rent] policy better or worse for residents? Why/in what ways?
7. Compared to the standard rent rules, would you say that the new policy is easier or harder to administer? Explain why it is easier/more challenging, in what way(s)?

**III. OPERATIONAL, PROGRAM, POLICY CONTEXTS AND CHANGES**

8. Have there been any significant changes to how your program or your department operates in terms of staffing, data systems, income verification, or other policies over the last two years? Describe.
9. Have any of these changes affected how you implement the [stepped/tiered rent policy]? Probe: verification of retrospective income, hardship durations, etc.

**IV. COMMUNICATION WITH HOUSEHOLDS**

10. Prior to these triennial eligibility checks/recertifications -- how has your agency communicated or reminded households about the [stepped/tiered rent] policy?
  - a. Are these mainly targeted communications (e.g., to those with hardships) or sent to all households in the [stepped/tiered] group?
  - b. Have the communication [strategies] about [stepped/tiered rent] policies changed over time? If so, why and how have households reacted?
11. Where do you think households get information about [stepped/tiered rent] policy? Probe: web site, they call staff, flyers.
12. Which aspects of the [stepped/tiered rent] policy do you think participants MOST need to be reminded about?
  - a. At what point in time would it be most helpful to hear these reminders?
  - b. Are these the same as the aspects are most confusing to participants?
  - c. Are there questions or topics that households raise or that keep coming up?

13. [Stepped Rent agencies only:] What have households' reactions been to the annual step increases? Have the reactions changed over the past three years (three increases)?
14. Describe the communication to households about the triennial eligibility checks/recertifications process?
  - a. When did this communication occur?
  - b. What form did it take? (e.g., letter)
  - c. What were they told? (if we don't have on file, ask for a copy of material sent to stepped/tiered households)

## **V. TRIENNIAL ELIGIBILITY CHECK/RECERTIFICATION**

15. When (what month) did you/your agency begin conducting triennial eligibility checks /recertifications?
16. How prepared did you feel to conduct the triennial eligibility checks/recertifications when you started conducting them this year?
  - a. Did you recertify households under the new rent policy during the first [stepped/tiered] recertification three years ago?
17. What kind of planning and/or retraining took place before you began conducting the triennial eligibility checks/recertifications?
  - a. When did planning start? How long was this process?
  - b. What did the preparation/training entail?
  - c. Would additional training or support be useful now? Describe.
18. What is most challenging about the triennial eligibility checks/recertifications?
19. Has anything surprised you about the triennial eligibility checks/recertifications?
20. Are there any aspects that you find confusing or have questions about?
21. [Stepped Rent agencies only:] How are households responding to the triennial eligibility check?
  - a. What kinds of reactions do you get?
  - b. Do households understand why they are providing current income documentation?
  - c. How do you respond to the reactions/questions you get from households? What do you say to them?
22. [Tiered Rent agencies only:] How are households responding to the triennial recertification?
  - a. What kind of reactions do you get?
  - b. How do you respond to the reactions/questions you get from households? What do you say to them?
23. Based on the recertifications/reviews completed so far, are you finding households have increased their earned income?
  - a. What types of households? Probe: are those who were already working - working more hours? Are people going to work who weren't working?]
  - b. How does this compare to your expectations about how households would fare under the new rent rules?
  - c. Do you hear from households that they have increased earnings BECAUSE of the [stepped/tiered] policy?
  - d. [Tiered rent PHAs only:] How do households with significant income increases react to new rent amounts? Probe: were they surprised/prepared for the increase?
24. Based on the recertifications/reviews completed so far, do you think the [stepped/tiered rent] policy has resulted in more households reaching Zero HAP/Flat Rent than those in the standard rent policy?

**VI. RETROSPECTIVE INCOME [TIERED RENT PHAS ONLY]**

25. Now that you are processing triennial recertifications, what are your current thoughts about the use of retrospective income under the tiered rent policy?
  - a. Has your perspective changed since you last collected retrospective income for the initial certifications? How?
26. How easy or difficult is it for households to obtain the necessary documents for retrospective income?
  - a. Are there types of households / families who have more trouble providing the necessary documents for retrospective income? Describe.
27. Are there data sources or tools that makes retrospective income easier to calculate (e.g. EIV, WorkNumber)? Provide an example or two of how these data sources are used.
28. How frequently do you accept self-certifications as an income source for retrospective income? In what situations? Probe: If not used much, ask why?
29. Is accuracy of self-certifications an issue?
30. Does your agency do any subsequent checks (e.g., with EIV) to learn about any discrepancies in reported income? If so, what types of issues do you see?
31. Are there any changes you would propose to how retrospective income is verified or how rent is calculated under the [stepped/tiered rent] policy? Why/why not?

**VII. HARDSHIP IMPLEMENTATION**

32. Overall, how well do you feel that the hardship policies are working to protect households?
33. Describe the process for requesting and approving hardships.
  - a. How does it start? Probe: Does it start with a phone call? Who do they call? Do they walk in?
  - b. Who approves hardships? Probe: Do specialists approve or deny the request or does it go to a supervisor?
34. [Stepped Rent agencies only]: What are your thoughts about the 40% threshold needed to qualify for a hardship?
35. [Stepped Rent agencies only:] Of the hardship requests you have processed, have any households requested hardships because their income did not increase to cover the step rent increase (i.e., they did not have an income loss but could not cover rent increase)? How many?
36. [Tiered Rent agencies only:] Of the hardship requests you have processed, are you finding that some households who request hardships have income decreases but not enough to drop them to a lower tier? If so, is this a few/some/most?
37. How easy or difficult are hardship requests to process compared with interim recerts under the standard rent policy? Explain.
  - a. Have there been issues with income documentation, verification, or the approval process?
38. [Tiered Rent agencies only:] What share of households qualify for automatic hardships at the triennial recertification?

- a. Do you think any/some/most of these households would have qualified for a hardship if they had requested one prior to the recertification?
  - b. Do you have to manually identify/calculate automatic hardship qualification or does the software flag this for you?
  - c. What is communicated to households when they qualify for an automatic hardship? Probes: will they know they are getting a hardship/when it ends/what their rent will be afterwards? Have there been any changes to what is communicated to households who qualify for automatic hardships?
  - d. Do you provide the households with any written materials/documents about the hardship in addition to the rent notice?
39. About how many hardship requests do you receive per month?
- a. Do you receive more/fewer hardship requests under the stepped/tiered rent than income-related interim requests under the standard rent rules? A lot less, about the same, a lot more.
  - b. Are most hardship requests approved? Probe: What would lead to a request being denied?
40. What share of households in your caseload have received multiple and/or continuous hardships? Do these households differ from those that have received only one hardship?  
Probe: different work history, length of time in housing, family size and composition
41. [Stepped Rent agencies only] Does your agency have criteria for determining when to conduct a stepped rent reset? Probe: additional criteria beyond the criteria for being on a hardship for one year?
- a. Do staff initiate this process or does the household request it? Probe: Do households even know about step resets?
  - b. How easy or difficult are step resets?
42. Do you think the hardship policy may keep some households from working more/going back to work? Explain why/why not.
43. Are there changes to the hardship policies that you recommend?
- a. Would you keep or change the hardship duration? Why?
  - b. Would you keep the ability to provide hardships for extenuating circumstances?

## VIII. OVERALL REFLECTIONS AND WRAP UP

- 44. Which aspects of the [stepped/tiered rent] rules are working well?
- 45. 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?
- 46. Should [PHA] continue implementing [stepped/tiered rent] policy after the study ends? Why/why not?
- 47. Is there anything you would recommend changing about any aspect of the [stepped/tiered rent policy] that you have not already shared?