

# A RECOMMENDED APPROACH TO RESIDENT SERVICES FOR FAMILIES

Today in America, nearly 5 million low-income families are living in affordable rental housing that was built with some form of public financing. Some of these families are stable and are gradually increasing their personal and financial assets. But far more families—many headed by single women—are struggling. They are struggling to overcome the negative repercussions of an inadequate education, an underdeveloped understanding of sound financial practices and a job market that is demanding more and more skills. They cannot locate quality, affordable child care that would help them get an education and keep a job. And often they are plagued by crime-laden streets, domestic violence and substance abuse.

There are supports available to help families overcome these challenges, but they are delivered through an extraordinarily and increasingly complex array of government and privately funded services, each with its own requirements and logistical challenges. Resident services coordinators are the critical link between these supports and the families that need them. In addition, when existing services in the community are inadequate, unavailable or inconvenient, affordable housing providers can design a resident services program that offers needed services on-site.

A well-designed and effectively implemented resident services program can play a large role in providing the modest support families need to overcome barriers to success and build the assets that will move them toward economic self sufficiency and improve their quality of life. Anecdotal evidence shows that a quality resident services program not only offers benefits to families and children, it also has a positive financial impact on a property's performance.

This manual is intended to serve as a guide for affordable housing planners, developers and managers, as well as resident services practitioners who wish to plan and implement effective resident services programs.

A property-based resident services program is defined as permanent rental housing in which social services focusing on personal and community asset building are available to residents through referrals and, in some cases, on-site, depending on residents' goals and available resources. At least one staff person is assigned to coordinate and deliver services full- or part-time, depending on the size of the development and level of services.

In the past, many resident services programs focused primarily on referring residents to services, but did not ensure the quality of the services received. Now, affordable housing organizations are realizing that to more fully respond to their residents' needs and goals and to build sustainable funding support for resident services, their programs must demand and demonstrate positive outcomes for the families served. Therefore, this manual contains guidance on set-

ting targets for success, establishing productive partnerships and tracking and reporting outcomes.

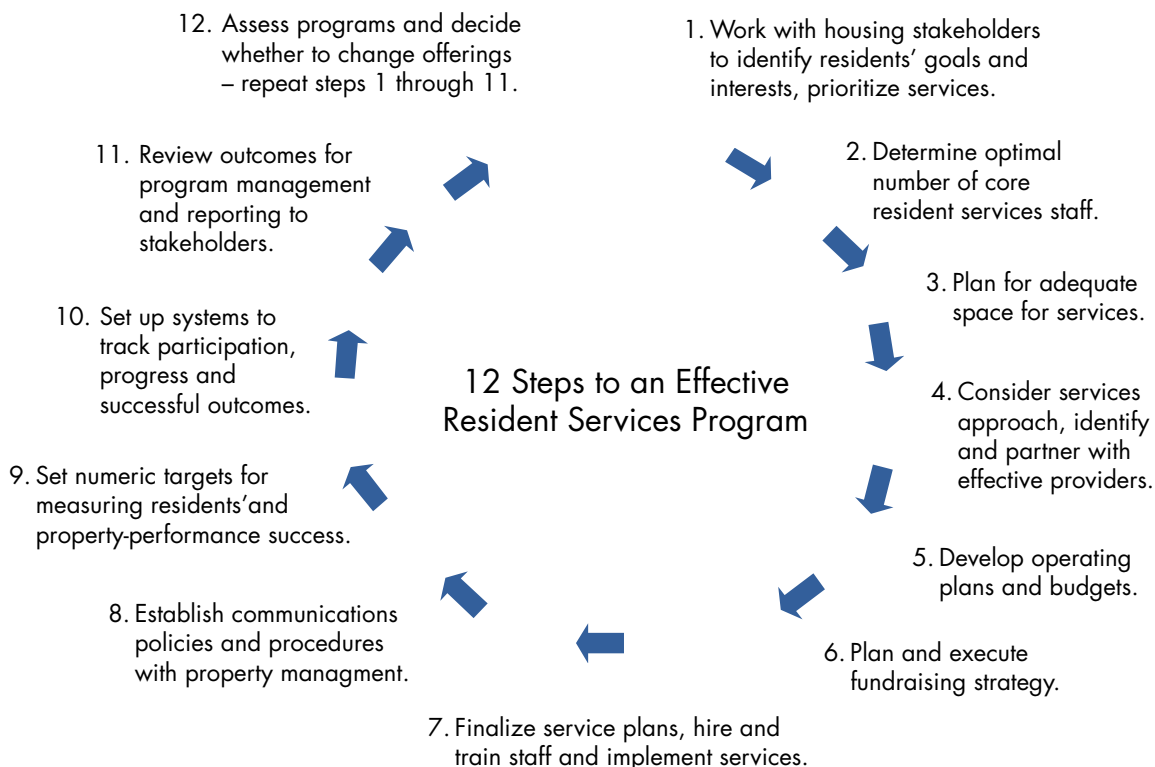
It is important to recognize that the role of a resident services coordinator is complex and varied. The coordinator must help residents assess their barriers and assets, establish realistic plans for achieving their personal goals and locate the necessary services; evaluate the capacity and quality of the programming; and establish relationships with the agencies that can best serve their residents. Resident services staff members must also complete written progress reports on their program outcomes for housing and services stakeholders and in some instances, write grant proposals to raise funds for their services. Organizations are fortunate to find people who can fulfill these myriad roles as a resident services coordinator. The Design Process section of this manual will help you clearly define what you need, so that your chances of finding the right person are greatly improved.

## TWELVE STEPS TO BUILDING A RESIDENT SERVICES PROGRAM

Organizations wishing to design or improve a resident services program must consider such issues as the size and configuration of the housing development, the level and types of services desired, the available funds and fundraising potential, and the mix of existing, quality services available off- or on-site. This manual is designed to help organizations through these issues.

The following steps are recommended for designing and implementing or improving a resident services program, and can be viewed as a cycle to be repeated when circumstances change from year to year. Organizations will likely follow some of these steps simultaneously or in different order, based on their unique situations. In addition, some organizations may not need to address every step if, for example, they already have sufficient financial resources or already have an outcomes tracking systems. We hope this manual will provide the guidance and tools needed to lead you through the critical decisions, policies and practices for each of these steps.

## Design and Implementation Process



Note: Process and graphic illustration developed in partnership with NeighborWorks America

### **Step 1: Work with housing stakeholders and residents to identify residents' goals and interests in services; prioritize services goals in the event of limited resources.**

In order to ensure that a resident services program is both successful and sustainable, engage local affordable housing stakeholders from the start. Such stakeholders may include senior management and boards of directors, housing development and management staff as well as residents of the development and surrounding community. Together, you will need to set goals for the residents, the program and the property.

#### Communicating with Residents

Before selecting your program offerings, you must first assess residents' goals and interests. Surveys are the best way to capture such information. You can use the information gleaned from surveys to determine residents' interests, goals and demographic information. The challenge is having enough residents complete the survey so that the data you receive are reliable.

Holding focus groups or talking one-on-one with a representative sample of residents is essential for understanding the interests and goals of housing residents. Communicating with your current or prospective residents will enable you to more accurately plan your key services and the goals for these services.

### Communicating with Property Management

Often property management staff will have keen insight into the types of services that would be supportive to residents and at the same time supportive of the property's performance. They may be able to identify certain services that would be particularly attractive as a marketing amenity or helpful to keeping the property in good condition. A common example is after-school programs for properties with lots of children—they are a marketing amenity and help prevent graffiti and other vandalism problems. Another way to gather information is to review rental applications. These applications can provide you with information on residents' income, employment and housing history.

### Setting and Prioritizing Goals for Services

Some sample goals for helping families to build assets, for example, would be:

- Obtain employment or better employment to increase family income.
- Attain a higher level of education or training that may lead to improved employment.
- Assist children with homework to improve their educational performance.
- Increase access to quality child care.
- Increase potential for building financial assets through financial literacy and homeownership readiness.

The most critical and defensible priority service areas are those that are first drawn from resident goals and then supported throughout the organization—by the board of directors, senior management, property management, real estate development and fundraising staff.

### Goals for Property Performance

Resident services programs are best when they also support property performance and are viewed by property management as adding value to the net operating income. Resident services can, for example, support the following key operating aspects:

- High occupancy rates: An outstanding program helps with marketing to new residents and retaining existing residents.
- Low turnover: Strong programs will lead to residents renewing their leases and reducing costs for preparation of housing units for new residents.
- High rent collection rates: Resident services staff can reinforce the importance of paying rent on time.
- Low maintenance costs: Resident services can help prevent residents from vandalizing or otherwise mistreating the property.
- Low evictions rate: Resident services can help families with budgeting, paying their rent on time or, if necessary, getting rental assistance. This will help to prevent costly evictions.

Part 1 of this manual, The Design Process, provides a guide for integrating resident services into housing development planning, suggestions for obtaining res-

ident input into program planning, a sample resident survey and recommended software for analyzing and reporting survey results.

**Step 2: Determine the optimal number of core resident services staff needed for referral services and outcomes management.**

Using the experiences of other resident services programs as a guide, calculate how many core resident services staff members are necessary for serving your target population.

You will need to take into account residents' history and current status. If, for example, a large number of the residents are formerly homeless or currently unemployed, the ratio of coordinators to residents will be relatively higher than if residents arrived from other stable housing or are mostly employed.

Also keep in mind that it may not be cost effective to have full-time resident services staff in housing developments with fewer than 50 units, unless the staff can also serve nearby developments of similar size. Other benchmarks you can use are available in the resource "Budgeting, Staffing and Other Benchmarks from Seven Organizations Offering Resident Services."

**Step 3: Plan for adequate space for services and community building activities.**

It is critical to plan for enough space in or adjacent to the building where your residents live. Space needs will vary depending on what on-site services are offered and how many resident services staff members are required. However, multipurpose community rooms as well as office space for staff members are essential for even the most basic programs. Keep in mind that you can retrofit existing space as needed to serve your needs. The resource "Designing and Establishing Space for a Resident Service Program" will help you.

**Step 4: Consider services approach; identify and build partnerships with service providers.**

Common approaches to service delivery are referral to existing services, partner service delivery (on- or off-site); and direct service delivery (by your organization for very high priority services if a partner cannot be found).

Before deciding to offer services directly, you should always determine whether needed services can be provided through referral to quality, existing services or through partnerships with service providers, and, if so, whether the providers would assist residents on- or off-site. In order to do this you will need to:

- Assess existing services in the neighborhood.
- Negotiate with effective service providers to accept residents into their programs.
- Negotiate with effective service providers to bring appropriate services on-site.

You can enter into a formal partnership with service providers by signing a memorandum of understanding or you may choose to enter into an informal

partnership. Keep in mind that most service providers need clients to participate in their programs. Therefore, a partnership would be mutually beneficial and may not require any additional funding on your part. The Service Referral and Outcome Management section provides guidance on assessing service providers and developing partnerships. And Part 2 of this manual, Resident Services In-Depth, contains advice on how to identify quality services in specific program areas including employment, adult education, financial literacy, children and youth and community safety. It also contains resources for working with residents.

#### **Step 5: Develop resident services operating plans and budgets.**

Based on your services goals, use information from the experiences of effective resident services programs to plan operations, staffing and budgets. Operating procedures should be established in writing to ensure that organizational best practices are not lost when staff turns over and that roles and responsibilities are clear among staff and managers. Several documents in The Design Process section will help you with operating plans and budgeting.

#### **Step 6: Plan and execute a resident services fundraising strategy.**

Once you have determined how many core resident services staff members you need, you need to secure funding to support those staff members. There are two principal avenues for funding resident services programs: resources from the project, and fundraising from public and private sources.

Financial resources from the housing development are usually planned upfront as part of the operations budget or project reserves. An estimated \$450 to \$650 per unit, per year, of property income, can support a resident services coordinator (depending on the size of the development) who can provide core referral services. The coordinator can then, in turn, raise additional funds to support the program and leverage existing services. Public dollars could be federal, through Community Development Block Grants, or from state and local trust funds or other revenues. Private fundraising could include grants from foundations and corporations as well as contributions from individuals.

Organizations will need to create a resource development plan and raise public and private funds for on-site programs to cover staff, furnishings, program operating costs and supplies. Both public and private funding can go through a cycle of boom and bust, so it is important to diversify your funding sources. Senior management and the board of directors should be included in the fundraising strategy, as their buy-in is essential to long-term sustainability. The Fundraising section provides some basic resources to help as well as recommendations for other resources.

#### **Step 7: Finalize service plans, hire and train staff, and implement the resident services program.**

The hiring process should take into account the many diverse functions of the resident services coordinator, including:

- Identifying resident goals
- Managing services toward desired outcomes and using technology to track progress
- Evaluating quality and scope of services in the community
- Developing and managing partnerships with service organizations
- Referring residents to appropriate services and following up to ensure quality outcomes
- Planning and raising funds to deliver on-site services
- Coordinating with property management to ensure that families are successful tenants
- Teaching or training experience or familiarity with instructional design are helpful, because most services include educational elements.

Once you have hired the resident services coordinator, it is imperative for him or her to access training on fair housing laws, compliance issues related to housing subsidies and confidentiality and other matters, in order to mitigate operational risks.

The job expertise needed for a resident services coordinator who is delivering on-site services will differ from the expertise needed by one providing overall program management and referral services. For example, after-school programs will require staff with teaching experience, and computer labs will require staff with technology expertise. Resident services managers should keep this in mind when hiring additional staff members to implement services. The Design Process section provides insights into the multifaceted aspects of resident services coordination as well as a sample job description.

#### **Step 8: Establish communications policies and procedures with property management staff.**

The relationship between property management and resident services staffs must run smoothly to ensure successful property performance and stable tenancy. Organizations with resident services must establish clear policies and procedures for communications between resident services staff and property management staff. Early notification of lease violations to resident services staff will enable them to work with residents and service agencies to provide immediate help, such as emergency rent assistance, followed by long-term help, such as obtaining better paying jobs or improving financial management. It is also important to develop well-defined roles between property management and resident services with respect to dealing with residents, beginning with resident selection policies. The Impact on Property Management section contains guidance on the critical interrelationship between resident services and property management.

#### **Step 9: Set numeric targets for measuring resident success and property performance.**

Establishing numeric targets for performance has been found to improve performance in government and business. Resident services managers should set desired outcome targets for service referrals as well as for direct service delivery.

Management should also set numeric targets for better property performance. Include all organization stakeholders in the development of these targets.

Targets for resident services should take into consideration the baseline of past performance, program improvements, number of participants and participants' demographics and goals. Targets should be realistic but challenging to motivate residents and resident services staff to higher achievement. The Design Process section provides advice on target setting.

**Step 10: Set up systems and track participation, progress and final outcomes.**

Agreements with service providers should include processes for feedback so that outcomes for residents are relayed back to resident services coordinators. When directly providing services, documenting outcomes as they occur should be part of the resident services staff's daily responsibilities.

Spreadsheet programs can be used to log and track progress toward desired outcomes for families. For organizations providing services to hundreds of residents, specialized software for data tracking is available from several sources, some of which are discussed in this manual. It is also critical to verify resident outcomes through standard documents such as report cards, pay stubs and education certificates, or through a post-program assessment. The Service Referral and Outcome Management section introduces a spreadsheet tool for tracking resident services outcomes.

**Step 11: Review outcomes for managing the program and reporting to stakeholders.**

Reviewing outcomes is essential to successful program management. Monitoring progress enables staff to adjust programs as needed to make them more effective and to engage program partners in resolving poor performance issues.

Finally, reporting resident services program results to stakeholders will contribute to ongoing resource development by inspiring funder confidence in these programs. Positive property performance may provide additional funds from the property to support resident services as well as helping to preserve valuable affordable housing assets over the long-term. The Design Process section provides sample formats for analyzing and reporting outcomes to stakeholders.

**Step 12: Assess programs and decide whether to change offerings or fill gaps by providing direct, on-site programs.**

Once outcomes are analyzed from referral and partnership programs, resident services staff should identify the service gaps between needed services and available services. Prioritize which would be the most critical services to provide directly on-site using existing or potential funds. Some of the most common on-site services offered by affordable housing providers are:

- After-school programs for children or teens for learning and recreation
- Multipurpose computer labs that residents can use to assist in job searches and for various learning opportunities
- Classes in parenting, financial literacy and homeownership counseling

Part 2 of this manual, Resident Services In-Depth, provides guidance on specific programs that are most common in resident services.

Finally, if the organization decides to add on-site programs to its resident services offerings, it is advised to repeat the first 11 steps in this process.