

The National Industry Standards for Rental Housing Counseling

Draft: May 2015

Purpose of the Standards

To ensure consistency in the quality of rental counseling and educational efforts nationwide, and adopt industry best practices.

In order to best serve clients, organizations providing rental counseling and individual counselors agree to adopt the following:

Core Operating Standards

- 1. Competency:** Possess a strong knowledge of: local, state, and federal rental assistance program qualifications and requirements, financial management skills necessary to analyze the family budget and ascertain the maximum affordable rental expense, federal, state, and local laws in regards to tenant and landlord's rights and responsibilities, including consequences of breaking a lease, the eviction process, community referrals available for assistance with finding and securing rental housing, an awareness of the availability of rental housing in the appropriate geographical area where the client is interested in renting, and Fair Housing Law and Regulations.
- 2. Skills:** Exhibit professional communication and organization skill set, including listening skills, customer service, cultural competency and time management. Rental Counselors must demonstrate the skills necessary to effectively provide a sound rental counseling session addressing all topics which are determined to be in immediate need for rental crisis counseling and long term need for successful and sustainable rental housing.
- 3. Training:** As soon as possible but within 18 months of being hired, Rental Counselors will obtain minimum training as a Rental Counselor equivalent to and no less than 30 hours of facilitated instruction covering topics included in Core Operating Standards 1 and 2 above, utilizing a variety of methods which could include lecture, interactive, demonstration, on-line and case study.
 - Recommended Benchmark:** Individuals new to the field of Rental Counseling should obtain appropriate orientation and introductory level training during the initial six months of employment.
- 4. Certification:** A certification standard is critical to establishing the professionalism and value of rental counseling. After completing minimum training, certification will require a rental counselor to take and pass a comprehensive exam demonstrating at least 80% proficiency. The exam will test skills and core competency areas included in Standards 1 and 2 above, as well as the related content and activities identified in Exhibit C herein.
 - Recommended Benchmark:** Certification should be completed as soon as reasonably possible, but no later than within 18 months of employment.



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5. **Continuing Education:** Complete a minimum of 10 hours of continuing education annually in subjects primarily related to the core content and delivery of rental counseling.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Professional certification continuing education requirements may meet or exceed this standard.
6. **Rental Counseling Operations:** Implement effective program operations for rental counseling including techniques, outreach and marketing of services available to the community, partnership building with private sector partners including tenant groups, public and private rental assistance organizations, and legal services for renters, fundraising, reporting, program evaluation and program design.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** These skills can be obtained through training and experience.
7. **Code of Ethics and Conduct Statement:** Sign and adopt the written National Industry Standards Code of Ethics and Conduct policy that specifically addresses any real and apparent conflicts of interest, guidelines for professional behavior, privacy and confidentiality, payment for services, consultation, referrals, quality assurance and integrity.

Performance Standards

1. **Delivery:** Perform individual, personalized rental counseling to clients which may include rental workshops or online sessions:
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Rental counseling should occur before the client pursues obtaining new or alternative rental housing, while experiencing a challenge within a current rental situation, and immediately if the client is facing eviction.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Content, delivery and format of the counseling is tailored to meet the needs of the client.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Clients should be consulted in a timely manner, requisite with the service need. At a minimum, upon request clients should receive acknowledgement of inquiry within two business days of initial contact, with the intake appointment within a one-week timeframe.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Rental Counselors must complete a formal intake, needs assessment and develop a written action plan.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Active open client files should be closely monitored, with timely follow-up in accordance with the stated action plan. When no contact from the client has taken place for six consecutive months, the file may be classified as inactive.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Where appropriate, Rental Counselors should review and analyze client's credit report.
 - **Recommended Benchmark:** Customer satisfaction surveys are used to evaluate the effectiveness of the rental counseling.
2. **Expected Counseling Outcome:** Upon completion of rental counseling, clients will be able to demonstrate an understanding of the following: renting vs. buying, rental affordability and public assistance programs, finding

acceptable rental housing, understanding the terms of a rental agreement, rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords, consequences of breaking a lease, the eviction process, and Fair Housing Law and Regulations.

- **Recommended Benchmark:** Comprehensive, effective delivery should be determined based upon the individual need of the client to reach the desired outcome. The minimum standard for delivery of individual counseling should be at least one session of at least 30-60 minutes.

3. **Recordkeeping:** Collect and maintain specific information from clients in accordance with all laws and governing organizations (i.e., HUD, Intermediary, etc.).

- **Recommended Benchmark:** An intake form should be completed and collected with client profile information to include contact information, services sought/provided, household size, ethnicity (optional), and household income.
- **Recommended Benchmark:** Aggregate information for clients should be maintained including total number of persons served and other demographic information.
- **Recommended Benchmark:** Utilize a checklist to ensure files maintained are consistent and meet reporting standards and quality assurance.
- **Recommended Benchmark:** Files should be maintained in secured file cabinets in order to protect client privacy. Scanned documents or electronic files should maintain the highest level of client security.
- **Recommended Benchmark:** Files should be maintained for a minimum of three years. Longer file retention requirements may be required if the household has received affordable rental assistance through state or federal subsidy programs. At the time of disposal, files should be shredded.

4. **Reporting:** Utilize an electronic Client Management System (CMS) for collecting and reporting data.

- **Recommended Benchmark:** An electronic method in place for collecting and reporting data may be as basic as an Excel spreadsheet or Access database application that captures needed data fields from each client, but preferably should be a software application compliant with HUD's CMS vendor list or equivalent. Visit www.hud.gov to view HUD's CMS vendor list.

5. **Service Thresholds:** Establish referral networks for individuals and families seeking services that the Rental Counselor does not provide or possess sufficient competency to adequately and effectively deliver.

- **Recommended Benchmark:** Examples of such services include homeownership centers, tenant networks, and legal aid.

EXHIBIT A

Minimum Standard Activities for Rental Counseling

- Intake – gather baseline information from client
- Identify client’s goals and objectives
- Document household income and expenses and develop a household budget
- Make recommendations for debt management and savings plans
- Determine maximum sustainable rent payment – 31% of gross monthly income
- Perform rent vs. buy analysis with a discussion of pros and cons of both
- Review local, state, and federal rental assistance programs if appropriate
- Discuss availability of rental units with emphasis on location and transportation costs
- Explain Fair Housing Law and discrimination as it applies to rental housing
- Explain the major parts of a lease and resultant liability for breaking a lease
- Review tenants and landlords rights and responsibilities
- Discuss the need for rental insurance
- Give an overview of the eviction process
- Refer to community groups that can assist in finding safe and secure rental housing
- Develop a written action plan
- Provide client follow-up and document outcomes
- File maintenance and closure