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Chapter 2

Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity

Introduction

This chapter explains the laws and HUD regulations requiring PHAs to affirmatively further civil rights and fair housing in all federally-assisted housing programs. The letter and spirit of these laws are implemented through consistent policies and processes. The responsibility to further nondiscrimination pertains to all areas of the PHA's HCV operations.

This chapter described HUD regulations and PHA policies related to these topics in three parts:

Part I: Nondiscrimination. Part I presents the body of laws and regulations governing the responsibilities of the PHA regarding nondiscrimination.

Part II: Policies Related to Persons with Disabilities. Part II discusses the rules and policies of the HCV program related to reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities. These rules and policies are based on the Fair Housing Act (42.U.S.C.) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and incorporate guidance from the Joint Statement of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Justice (DOJ), issued May 17, 2004.

Part III: Prohibition of Discrimination Against Limited English Proficiency Persons. Part III details the obligations of the PHA to ensure meaningful access to the HCV program and its activities by persons with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). Part III incorporates the Final Guidance of Federal Financial Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons published January 22, 2007, in the Federal Register.

Part I: Nondiscrimination

2-I.A. Overview

Federal laws require PHAs to treat all applicants and participants equally, providing the same opportunity to access services, regardless of family characteristics and background. Federal law prohibits discrimination in housing on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, familial status, and disability. In addition, HUD regulations provide for additional protections regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital status. The PHA will comply fully with all federal, state, and local nondiscrimination laws and ordinances, and with rules and regulations governing fair housing and equal opportunity in housing and employment, including:

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964;
- Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (as amended by the Community Development Act of 1974 and the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988);
- Executive Orders 11063 and 13988;
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973;
- The Age Discrimination Act of 1975;
- Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (to the extent that it applies, otherwise Section 504 and the Fair Housing Amendments govern);
- The Equal Access to Housing in HUD Programs Regardless of Sexual Orientation or Gender Identify Final Rule, published in the *Federal Register* February 3, 2012 and further clarified in Notice PIH 2014-20; and
- Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA).

When more than one civil rights laws applies to a situation, the laws will be read and applied together. Any applicable state laws or local ordinances and any legislation protecting individual rights of tenants, applicants, or staff that may subsequently be enacted will also apply.

Commerce Policy

In additional to the federal fair housing and equal opportunity laws, Commerce will apply any applicable state laws and any legislation protecting individual rights of tenants, applicants, or staff that may subsequently be enacted.

2-I.B. Nondiscrimination

Federal regulations prohibit discrimination against certain protected classes and other groups of people. State and local requirements, as well as PHA policies, can prohibit discrimination based on other factors. The PHA shall not discriminate because of race, color, sex, religion, familial status, age, disability, or national origin (called “protected classes”).

Familial status includes children under the age of 18 living with parents or legal custodians, pregnant women, and people securing custody of children under the age of 18.

The PHA will not discriminate on the basis of marital status, gender identity, or sexual orientation [FR Notice 02/03/12| Executive Order 13988].

Commerce Policy

Commerce does not identify any additional protected classes.

The PHA will not use any of these factors to:

- Deny to any family the opportunity to apply for housing, nor deny to any qualified applicant the opportunity to participate in the HCV program;
- Provide housing that is different from the provided to others;
- Subject anyone to segregation or disparate treatment;
- Subject anyone to sexual harassment;
- Restrict anyone's access to any benefit enjoyed by others in connection with the housing program;
- Treat a person differently in determining eligibility or other requirements for admission;
- Steer an applicant or participant toward or away from a particular area based on any of these factors;
- Deny anyone access to the same level of services;
- Deny anyone the opportunity to participate in a planning or advisory group that is an integral part of the housing program;
- Discriminate in the provision of residential real estate transactions;
- Discriminate against someone because they are related to or associated with a member of a protected class; and
- Publish or cause to be published an advertisement or notice indicating the availability of housing that prefers to excludes persons who are members of a protected class.

Providing Information to Families and Owners

The PHA must take steps to ensure that families and owners are fully aware of all applicable civil rights laws. As part of the briefing process, the PHA must provide information to HCV applicant families about civil rights requirements and the opportunity to rent in a broad range of neighborhoods [24 CFR 982.301]. The Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) contract informs owners of the requirement not to discriminate against any person because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, familial state, or disability in connection with the contract.

Discrimination Complaints

If any applicant or participant believes that any family member has been discriminated against by the PHA or an owner, the family should advise the PHA of the alleged discrimination. The PHA should make every reasonable attempt to determine whether the applicant's or participant's assertions have merit and take any warranted corrective action. In addition, the PHA is required to provide the applicant or participant with information about how to file a discrimination complaint [24 CFR 982.304].

Upon receipt of a housing discrimination complaint the PHA is required to:

- Provide written notice of the complaint to those alleged and inform the complainant that such notice was made;
- Investigate the allegations and provide the complainant and those alleged with findings and either a proposed corrective action or an explanation of why corrective action is not warranted; and
- Keep records of all complaints, investigations, notices, and corrective actions [Notice PIH 2014-20].

Commerce Policy

Applicants or participants who believe that they have been subject to unlawful discrimination may notify Commerce or their Field Agency in writing.

The Field Agency will forward any discrimination complaints to Commerce within 7 calendar days of receipt. Within 20 calendar days of receiving the complaint, Commerce will provide a written notice to those alleged to have violated the rule, including a copy of the complaint if available. Commerce will also send a written notice to the complainant informing them that notice was sent to those alleged to have violated the rule, as well as information on how to complete and submit a housing discrimination complaint form to HUD's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity (FHEO). If another state or federal agency is investigating the same discrimination complaint, Commerce will coordinate with the complainant and review the investigation and decision by the relevant state or federal agency.

Commerce will attempt to remedy discrimination complaints made against Commerce and will conduct an investigation into all allegations of discrimination.

Within 14 calendar days following the conclusion of Commerce's investigation, Commerce will provide the complainant and those alleged to have violated the rule with findings and either a proposed corrective action plan or an explanation of why corrective action is not warranted.

Commerce will keep a record of all complaints, investigations, notices, and corrective actions (Chapter 16).

Part II: Policies Related to Persons with Disabilities

2-II.A. Overview

One type of disability discrimination prohibited by the Fair Housing Act is the refusal to make reasonable accommodation in rules, policies, practices, or services when such accommodation may be necessary to afford a person with a disability the equal opportunity to use and enjoy a program or dwelling under the program.

The PHA must ensure that persons with disabilities have full access to the PHA's programs and services. This responsibility begins with the first contact by an interested family and continues through every aspect of the program.

Commerce Policy

Commerce will ask all applicants and participants if they require any type of accommodations, in writing, on the intake application, reexamination documents, and notices of adverse action by Commerce, by including the following language:

“If you or anyone in your family is a person with disabilities, and you require a specific accommodation in order to fully utilize our programs and services, please contact the Field Agent in your area.”

Commerce Will display posters and other housing information and signage in locations throughout Commerce office in such a manner as to be easily readable from a wheelchair.

2-II.B. Definition of Reasonable Accommodation

A reasonable accommodation is an adjustment made to a rule, policy, practice, or service that allows a person with a disability to have equal access to the HCV program. For example, reasonable accommodations may include making home visits, extending the voucher term, or approving an exception payment standard in order for a participant to lease an accessible dwelling unit.

Federal regulations stipulate that requests for accommodations will be considered reasonable if they do not create an “undue financial and administrative burden” for the PHA or result in a “fundamental alteration” in the nature of the program or service offered. A fundamental alteration is a modification that alters the essential nature of a provider's operations.

Types of Reasonable Accommodations

When needed, the PHA will modify normal procedures to accommodate the needs of a person with disabilities. Examples include:

- Permitting applications and reexaminations to be completed by mail;
- Conducting home visits;

- Using higher payment standards (either within the acceptable range or with HUD approval of a payment standard outside the PHA range) if the PHA determines this is necessary to enable a person with disabilities to obtain a suitable housing unit;
- Providing time extensions for locating a unit when necessary because of lack of availability of accessible units or special challenges of the family in seeking a unit;
- Permitting an authorized designee or advocate to participate in the application or certification process and any other meetings with PHA staff.

2-II.C. Request for An Accommodation

If an applicant or participant indicates that an exception, change, or adjustment to a rule, policy, practice, or service is needed because of a disability, HUD requires that the PHA treat the information as a request for a reasonable accommodation, even if no formal request is made [Joint Statement of the Departments of HUD and Justice: Reasonable Accommodations under the Fair Housing Act].

The family must explain what type of accommodation is needed to provide the person with the disability full access to the PHA's programs and services.

If the need for the accommodation is not readily apparent or known to the PHA, the family must explain the relationship between the requested accommodation and the disability. There must be an identifiable connection, or nexus, between the requested accommodation and the individual's disability.

Commerce Policy

Reasonable accommodation requests can be made orally or in writing, however, it is helpful for both the applicant/participant and Commerce if the request is made in writing. The request can be made by a family member or someone else who is acting on their behalf. Commerce will encourage the family to make their request in writing using a reasonable accommodation request form. However, Commerce will consider the accommodation any time the family indicates that an accommodation is needed whether or not a formal written request is submitted.

2-II.D. Verification of Disability

The regulatory civil rights definition for persons with disabilities is provided in Exhibit 2-1 at the end of this chapter. The definition of a person with a disability for the purpose of obtaining a reasonable accommodation is much broader than the HUD definition of disability which is used for waiting list preferences and income allowances.

Before providing an accommodation, the PHA must determine that the person meets the definition of a person with a disability, and that the accommodation will enhance the family's access to the PHA's programs and services.

If a person's disability is obvious or otherwise known to the PHA, and if the need for the requested accommodation is also readily apparent or known, no further verification will be required [Joint Statement of the Department of HUD and Justice: Reasonable Accommodations under the Fair Housing Act].

If a family indicates that an accommodation is required for a disability that is not obvious or otherwise known to the PHA, the PHA must verify that the person meets the definition of a person with a disability, and that the limitations imposed by the disability require the requested accommodation.

When verifying a disability, the PHA will follow the verification policies provided in Chapter 7. All information related to a person's disability will be treated in accordance with the confidentiality policies provided in Chapter 16. In addition to the general requirements that govern all verification efforts, the following requirements apply when verifying a disability:

- Third-party verification must be obtained from an individual identified by the family who is competent to make the determination. A doctor or other medical professional, a peer support group, a non-medical service agency, or a reliable third-party who is in a position to know about the individual's disability may provide verification of a disability [Joint Statement of the Department of HUD and Justice: Reasonable Accommodations under the Fair Housing Act],
- The PHA must request only information that is necessary to evaluate the disability-related need for the accommodation. The PHA will not inquire about the nature or extent of any disability.
- Medical records will not be accepted or retained in the participant file.
- In the event that the PHA does receive confidential information about a person's specific diagnosis, treatment, or the nature or severity of the disability, the PHA will dispose of it. In place of the information, the PHA will note in the file that the disability and other requested information have been verified, the date the verification was received, and the name and address of the knowledgeable professional who sent the information [Notice PIH 2010-26].

2-II.E. Approval/Denial of a Requested Accommodation [Joint Statement of the Departments of HUD and Justice: Reasonable Accommodations Under the Fair Housing Act, Notice PIH 2010-26]

The PHA must approve a request for an accommodation if the following three conditions are met:

- The request was made by or on behalf of a person with a disability.
- There is a disability-related need for the accommodation.
- The requested accommodation is reasonable, meaning it would not impose an undue financial and administrative burden on the PHA, or fundamentally alter the nature of the PHA's HCV operations (including obligation to comply with HUD requirements and regulations).

Requests for accommodations must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors such as the overall size of the PHA's program with respect to the number of employees, type of facilities and size of budget, type of operation including composition and structure of workforce, the nature and cost of the requested accommodation, and the availability of alternative accommodations that would effectively meet the family's disability-related needs.

Before making a determination whether to approve the request, the PHA may enter into discussion and negotiation with the family, request more information from the family, or may require the family to sign a consent form so that the PHA may verify the need for the requested accommodation.

Commerce Policy

The family will submit their request for an accommodation to the Field Agency. The Field Agency will submit the request to Commerce within 7 calendar days of receipt of the request. Commerce will respond, in writing, within 14 calendar days [of a completed request](#).

If Commerce denies a request for an accommodation because it is not reasonable or there is no nexus between the request and the disability (it would impose an undue financial and administrative burden or fundamentally alter the nature of Commerce's operations), Commerce will discuss with the family whether an alternative accommodation could effectively address the family's disability-related needs without a fundamental alteration to the HCV program and without imposing an under financial and administrative burden.

2-II.F. Program Accessibility for Persons with Hearing or Vision Impairments

HUD regulations require the PHA to ensure that persons with disabilities related to hearing and vision have reasonable access to the PHA's programs and services [24 CFR 8.6].

At the initial point of contact with each applicant, the PHA shall inform all applicants of alternative forms of communication that can be used other than plain language paperwork.

Commerce Policy

To meet the needs of persons with hearing impairments, Commerce utilizes the Montana Relay service by dialing 7-1-1.

To meet the needs of persons with vision impairments, large-print and audio versions of key program documents will be made available upon request. When visual aids are used in public meetings or presentations, or in meetings with Commerce staff, one-on-one assistance will be provided upon request.

Additional examples of alternative forms of communication are sign language interpretation; having material explained orally by staff; or having a third-party representative (a friend, relative, or advocate, named by the applicant) to receive, interpret, and explain housing materials and be present at all meetings.

2-II.G. Physical Accessibility

The PHA must comply with a variety of regulations pertaining to physical accessibility, including the following:

- Notice PIH 2010-26;
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973;
- The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990;
- The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968; and
- The Fair Housing Act of 1988.

The PHA's policies concerning physical accessibility must be readily available to applicants and participants. They can be found in three key documents:

- This plan describes the key policies that govern the PHA's responsibilities with regard to physical accessibility.
- Notice PIH 2010-26 summarizes information about pertinent laws and implementing regulations related to nondiscrimination and accessibility in federally-funded housing programs.
- The PHA plan provides information about self-evaluation, needs assessment, and transition plans.

The design, construction, or alteration of PHA facilities must conform to the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS). Newly-constructed facilities must be designed to be readily accessible to and usable by persons with disabilities. Alterations to existing facilities must be accessible to the maximum extent feasible, defined as not imposing an undue financial and administrative burden on the operations of the HCV program.

When issuing a voucher to a family that includes an individual with disabilities, the PHA will include a current list of available accessible units known to the PHA and will assist the family in locating an available accessible unit, if necessary.

In general, owners must permit the family to make reasonable modifications to the unit. However, the owner is not required to pay for the modification and may require that the unit be restored to its original state at the family's expense when the family moves.

2-II.H. Denial or Termination of Assistance

A PHA's decision to deny or terminate the assistance of a family that includes a person with disabilities is subject to consideration of reasonable accommodation [24 CFR 982.552(2)(iv)].

When applicants with disabilities are denied assistance, the notice of denial must inform them of the PHA's informal review process and their right to request an informal review. In addition, the notice must inform applicants with disabilities of their right to request reasonable accommodations to participate in the informal review process.

When a participant family's assistance is terminated, the notice of termination must inform them of the PHA's informal hearing process and their right to request a hearing and reasonable accommodation.

When reviewing reasonable accommodation requests, the PHA must consider whether any mitigating circumstances can be verified to explain and overcome the problem that led to the PHA's decision to deny or terminate assistance. If a reasonable accommodation will allow the family to meet the requirements, the PHA must make the accommodation.

Part III: Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency

2-III.A. Overview

Language for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) persons can be a barrier to accessing important benefits or services, understanding, and exercising important rights, complying with applicable responsibilities, or understanding other information provided by the HCV program. In certain circumstances, failure to ensure that LEP persons can effectively participate in or benefit from federally-assisted programs and activities may violate the prohibition under Title VI against discrimination on the basis of national origin. This part incorporates the Final Guidance to Federal Assistance Recipients Regarding Title VI Prohibition against National Origin Discrimination Affecting Limited English Proficient Persons, published January 22, 2007, in the *Federal Register*.

The PHA will take affirmative steps to communicate with people who needs services or information in a language other than English. These persons will be referred to as LEP.

LEP is defined as persons who do not speak English as their primary language and who have a limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English. For the purposes of this administrative plan, LEP persons are HCV applicants and participants, and parents and family members of applicants and participants.

In order to determine the level of access needed by LEP persons, the PHA will balance the following four factors: 1) the number of proportion of LEP persons eligible to be served or likely to be encountered by the HCV program; 2) the frequency with which LEP persons come into contact with the program; 3) the nature and importance of the program, activity, or service provided by the program to people's lives; and 4) the resources available to the PHA and costs. Balancing these four factors will ensure meaningful access by LEP persons to critical services while not imposing undue burdens on the PHA.

2-III.B. Oral Interpretation

The PHA will offer competent interpretation services free of charge, upon request, to the LEP person.

Commerce Policy

Commerce will utilize electronic services, such as Google Translate as necessary to effectively communicate with limited English speakers. Where LEP persons desire, they will be permitted to use, at their own expense, an interpreter of their own choosing, in place of or as a supplement to the free language services offered by Commerce. The interpreter may be a family member or friend.

Commerce will analyze the various kinds of contacts it has with the public, to assess language needs and decide what reasonable steps may be taken. "Reasonable steps" may not be reasonable where the costs imposed substantially exceed the benefits.

2-III.C. Written Translation

Translation is the replacement of a written text from one language into an equivalent written text in another language.

Commerce Policy

In order to comply with written-translation obligations, Commerce will take the following steps:

Commerce has determined that the number or proportion of LEP persons eligible to be served or likely to be encountered by the HCV program is minimal and the frequency with which LEP persons come into contact with Commerce program does not require translation of Commerce documents.

Commerce will provide all HUD-published documents in the language preferred by the LEP family.

2-III.D. Implementation Plan

After completing the four-factor analysis and deciding what language assistance services are appropriate, the PHA shall determine whether it is necessary to develop a written implementation plan to address the identified needs of the LEP populations it serves.

If the PHA determines that it is not necessary to develop a written implementation plan, the absence of a written plan does not obviate the underlying obligation to ensure meaningful access by LEP persons to the PHA's HCV program and services.

Commerce Policy

Commerce serves very few LEP persons. Commerce has not developed a written LEP plan but will consider alternative ways in a reasonable manner to provide meaningful access to Commerce housing programs. If an LEP plan is developed, entities having significant contact with LEP persons, such as schools, grassroots and faith-based organizations, community groups, and groups working with new immigrants will be contacted for input into the process.

**Exhibit 2-1: Definition of a Person with a Disability Under
Federal Civil Rights Laws [24 CFR Parts 8.3 and 100.201]**

A person with a disability, as defined under federal civil rights laws, is any person who:

- Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual, or
- Has a record of such impairment, or
- Is regarded as having such impairment.

The phrase “physical or mental impairment” includes:

- Any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic or disfigurement or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological, musculoskeletal, special sense organs, respiratory, including speech organs, cardiovascular, reproductive, digestive, genito-urinary, hemic and lymphatic, skin, and endocrine, or
- Any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities. The term “physical or mental impairment” includes but is not limited to: such diseases and conditions as orthopedic, visual, speech and hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, autism, epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, mental retardation, emotional illness, drug addiction, and alcoholism.

“Major life activities” includes, but is not limited to, caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, breathing, learning, and/or working.

“Has a record of such impairment” means has a history of, or has been misclassified as having, a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.

“Is regarded as having an impairment” is defined as having a physical or mental impairment that does not substantially limit one or more major life activities but is treated by a public entity (such as the PHA) as constituting such a limitation; has none of the impairment defined in this section but is treated by a public entity as having such an impairment; or has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, only as a result of the attitudes of others toward that impairment.

The definition of a person with disabilities does not include:

- Current illegal drug users,
- People whose alcohol use interferes with the rights of others, and
- Persons who objectively pose a direct threat or substantial risk of harm to others that cannot be controlled with a reasonable accommodation under the HCV program.

The above definition of disability determines whether an applicant or participant is entitled to any of the protections of federal disability civil rights laws. Thus, a person who does not meet this disability is not entitled to a reasonable accommodation under federal civil rights and fair housing laws and regulations.

The HUD definition of a person with a disability is much narrower than the civil rights definition of disability. The HUD definition of a person with a disability is used for purposes of receiving the disabled family preference, the \$400 elderly/disabled household deduction, the \$480 dependent deduction, the allowance for medical expenses, or the allowance for disability assistance expenses.

The definition of a person with a disability for purposes of granting a reasonable accommodation request is much broader than the HUD definition of disability. Many people will not qualify as a disabled person under the HCV program, yet an accommodation is needed to provide equal opportunity.