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Chapter 14 Program Integrity

Introduction

The PHA is committed to ensuring that subsidy funds made available to the PHA are spent in accordance with HUD requirements.

This chapter covers HUD and PHA policies designed to prevent, detect, investigate, and resolve instances of program abuse or fraud. It also describes the actions that will be taken in the case of unintentional errors and omissions.

Part I: Preventing, Detecting, and Investigating Errors and Program Abuse. This part presents PHA policies related to preventing, detecting, and investigating errors and program abuse.

Part II: Corrective Measures and Penalties. This part describes the corrective measures the PHA must and may take when errors or program abuses are found.

Part I: Preventing, Detecting, and Investigating Errors and Program Abuse

14-I.A. Preventing Errors and Program Abuse

HUD created the Enterprise Income Verification (EIV) system to provide PHAs with a powerful tool for preventing errors and detecting program abuse. PHAs are required to use the EIV system in its entirety in accordance with HUD administrative guidance [24 CFR 5.233]. PHAs are further required to:

- Provide applicants and participants with form HUD-52675, “Debts Owed to PHAs and Terminations,” and
- Require all adult members of an applicant or participant family to acknowledge receipt of form HUD-52675 by signing a copy of the form for retention in the family file.

Commerce Policy

To ensure that Commerce’s HCV program is administered according to the highest ethical and legal standards, Commerce will employ a variety of techniques to ensure that both errors and intentional program abuse are rare.

For purposes of this chapter the term error refers to an unintentional error or omission. Program abuse or fraud refers to a single act or pattern of actions that constitute a false statement, omission, or concealment of a substantial fact, made with the intent to deceive or mislead.

Commerce will discuss program compliance and integrity issues during the voucher briefing sessions described in Chapter 5.

Commerce will provide each applicant and participant with a copy of “Is Fraud Worth It?” (form HUD-1141-OIG), which explains the types of actions a family must avoid and the penalties for program abuse.

Commerce will provide each applicant and participant with a copy of *What You Should Know About EIV: A Guide for Applicants & Tenants of Public Housing & Section 8 Programs* (RHIP Notice). In addition, Commerce will require the head of each household to acknowledge receipt of the guide by signing a copy for retention in the family file.

Commerce will place a warning statement about the penalties for fraud (as described in 18 U.S.C. 1001 and 1010) on key Commerce forms and form letters that request information from a family or owner.

Commerce will be required to review and explain the contents of all HUD and Commerce required forms prior to requesting family member signatures.

At every regular reexamination, Field Agency staff will explain any changes in HUD regulations or Commerce policy that affect program participants.

Commerce will provide first-time owners (or their agents) a packet of information for

participating in the HCV program.

Commerce will provide owners with ongoing information about the program, with an emphasis on actions and situations to avoid.

Commerce will provide each employee with the necessary training on program rules and the organization's standards of conduct and Ethics.

14-I.B. Detecting Errors and Program Abuse

In addition to taking steps to prevent errors and program abuse, the PHA will use a variety of activities to detect errors and program abuse.

Quality Control and Analysis of Data

Under the Section 8 Management Assessment Program (SEMAP), HUD requires the PHA to review a random sample of tenant records annually to determine if the records conform to program requirements and to conduct quality control inspections of a sample of units to ensure HQS compliance [24 CFR, Part 985]. (See Chapter 16 for additional information about SEMAP requirements).

Commerce Policy

In addition to the SEMAP quality control requirements, Commerce will employ a variety of methods to detect errors and program abuse.

Commerce routinely will use HUD and other non-HUD sources of up-front income verification. This may include the Department of Health and Human Services database, Department of Labor system, Montana Cadastral, The Work Number, HUD's Enterprise Income Verification (EIV) database, and any other private or public databases available to Commerce.

During eligibility review and when adding any new household members, Commerce will review the Existing and Former Tenant searches in HUD's EIV database.

At each annual reexamination, current information provided by the family will be compared to information provided at the last annual reexamination to identify inconsistencies and incomplete information.

Commerce will compare family-reported income and expenditures in instances of possible unreported income.

Independent Audits and HUD Monitoring

OMB Circular A-133 requires all PHAs that expend \$500,000 or more in federal awards annually to have an independent audit (IPA). In addition, HUD conducts periodic on-site and automated monitoring of PHA activities and notifies the PHA of errors and potential cases of program abuse.

Commerce Policy

Commerce will use the results reported in any IPA or HUD monitoring reports to identify

potential program abuses as well as to assess the effectiveness of Commerce's error detection and abuse prevention efforts.

Individual Reporting of Possible Errors and Program Abuse

Commerce Policy

Commerce will encourage staff, program participants, and the public to report possible program abuse.

14-I.C. Investigating Errors and Program Abuse

When the PHA Will Investigate

Commerce Policy

Commerce will review all referrals, specific allegations, complaints, and tips from any source including other agencies, companies, and individuals, to determine if they warrant investigation. For Commerce to investigate the allegation it must contain at least one independently verifiable item of information, such as the name of an employer or the name of an unauthorized household member.

Commerce will investigate when inconsistent or contradictory information is detected through file reviews and the verification process.

Consent to Release of Information [24 CFR 982.516]

The PHA may investigate possible instances of error or abuse using all available PHA and public records. If necessary, the PHA will require HCV families to sign consent forms for the release of additional information.

Analysis and Findings

Commerce Policy

Commerce will base its evaluation on a preponderance of the evidence collected during its investigation.

Preponderance of the evidence is defined as evidence which is of greater weight or more convincing than the evidence which is offered in opposition to it; that is, evidence that as a whole shows that the fact sought to be proved is more probable than not. Preponderance of evidence may not be determined by the number of witnesses, but by the greater weight of all evidence.

For each investigation Commerce will determine (1) whether an error or program abuse has occurred, (2) whether any amount of money is owed Commerce, and (3) what corrective measures or penalties will be assessed.

Consideration of Remedies

All errors and instances of program abuse must be corrected prospectively. Whether the PHA will enforce other corrective actions and penalties depends upon the nature of the error or program abuse.

Commerce Policy

In the case of family-caused errors or program abuse, Commerce will take into consideration (1) the seriousness of the offense and the extent of participation or culpability of individual family members, (2) any special circumstances surrounding the case, (3) any mitigating circumstances related to the disability of a family member, and (4) the effects of a particular remedy on family members who were not involved in the offense.

In the case of owner-caused errors or program abuse, Commerce will take into consideration (1) the seriousness of the offense, (2) the length of time since the violation has occurred, and (3) the effects of a particular remedy on family members who were not involved in the offense.

Notice and Appeals

Commerce Policy

Commerce will inform the relevant party in writing of its findings and remedies within 14 calendar days of the conclusion of the investigation. The notice will include (1) a description of the error or program abuse, (2) the basis on which Commerce determined the error or program abuses, (3) the remedies to be employed, and (4) the family's right to appeal the results through the informal review or hearing process, if applicable (see Chapter 16).

Part II: Corrective Measures and Penalties

14-II.A. Subsidy Under- or Overpayments

A subsidy under- or overpayment includes (1) an incorrect housing assistance payment to the owner, (2) an incorrect family share established for the family, and (3) an incorrect utility reimbursement to a family.

Corrections

Whether the incorrect subsidy determination is an overpayment or underpayment of subsidy, the PHA must promptly correct the HAP, family share, and any utility reimbursement prospectively.

Commerce Policy

Increases in the family share will be implemented on the first of the month following a written 30-day notice, unless family fails to report a change within the required time frames or fails to provide all required information within the required time frames, the increase will be applied retroactively, to the date it would have been effective had the information been provided on a timely basis.

Any decreases in family share will become effective the first of the month following the discovery of the error.

Reimbursement

Whether the family or owner is required to reimburse the PHA or the PHA is required to make retroactive subsidy payments to the owner or family depends upon which party is responsible for the incorrect subsidy payment and whether the action taken was an error or program abuse. Policies regarding reimbursement are discussed in the three sections that follow.

14-II.B. Family-Caused Errors and Program Abuse

Family obligations and general administrative requirements for participating in the program are discussed throughout this plan. This section deals specifically with errors and program abuse by family members.

An incorrect subsidy determination caused by a family generally would be the result of incorrect reporting of family composition, income, assets, or expenses, but also would include instances in which the family knowingly allows the PHA to use incorrect information provided by a third party.

Family Reimbursement to PHA [HCV GB pp. 22-12 to 22-13]

Commerce Policy

In the case of family-caused errors or program abuse, the family will be required to repay any excess subsidy received. Commerce may, but is not required to, offer the family a repayment agreement in accordance with Chapter 16. If the family fails to repay the excess subsidy, Commerce will terminate the family's assistance in accordance with the policies in Chapter 12.

PHA Reimbursement to Family [HCV GB p. 22-12]

Commerce Policy

Commerce will not reimburse the family for any underpayment of assistance when the underpayment clearly is caused by the family.

Prohibited Actions

An applicant or participant in the HCV program must not knowingly:

- Make a false statement to the PHA [Title 18 U.S.C. Section 1001].
- Commit fraud, bribery, or any other corrupt or criminal act in connection with any federal housing program [24 CFR 982.552(c)(iv)].

Commerce Policy

Any of the following will be considered evidence of family program abuse:

- **Payment to the owner in excess of amounts authorized by Commerce for rent, security deposit, and additional services;**
- **Offering bribes or illegal gratuities to Commerce employees, contractors, or other Commerce and/or Field Agency representatives;**
- **Offering payments or other incentives to the owner or a third party as an inducement for the third party to make false or misleading statements to Commerce on the family's behalf;**
- **Use of a false name or the use of falsified, forged, or altered documents;**
- **Intentional misreporting of family information or circumstances (e.g. income, family composition);**
- **Omitted facts that were obviously known by a family member (e.g., not reporting employment income); and**
- **Admission of program abuse by an adult family member.**

Commerce may determine other actions to be program abuse based upon a preponderance of the evidence, as defined earlier in this chapter.

Penalties for Program Abuse

In the case of program abuse caused by a family the PHA may, at its discretion, impose any of the following remedies.

- The PHA may require the family to repay excess subsidy amounts paid by the PHA, as described earlier in this section.
- The PHA may require, as a condition of receiving or continuing assistance, that a culpable family member not reside in the unit. See policies in Chapter 3 (for applicants) and Chapter 12 (for participants).
- The PHA may deny or terminate the family's assistance following the policies set forth in Chapter 3 and Chapter 12 respectively.
- The PHA may refer the family for state or federal criminal prosecution as described in section 14-II.E.

14-II.C. Owner-Caused Error or Program Abuse

Owner requirements that are part of the regular process of offering, leasing, and maintaining a unit (e.g., HQS compliance, fair housing) are addressed in the appropriate chapters of this plan. This section focuses on errors and program abuse by owners.

An incorrect subsidy determination caused by an owner generally would be the result of an incorrect owner statement about the characteristics of the assisted unit (e.g., the number of bedrooms, which utilities are paid by the family). It also includes accepting duplicate housing assistance payments for the same unit in the same month, or after a family no longer resides in the unit.

Owner Reimbursement to the PHA

In all cases of overpayment of subsidy caused by the owner, the owner must repay to the PHA any excess subsidy received. The PHA may recover overpaid amounts by withholding housing assistance payments due for subsequent months, or if the debt is large, the PHA may allow the owner to pay in installments over a period of time [HCV GB p. 22-13].

Commerce Policy

In cases where the owner has received excess subsidy, Commerce will require the owner to repay the amount owed in accordance with the policies in Section 16-IV.B. If the owner has other active HAP contracts with Commerce, Commerce will recoup any monies owed from future HAP check, or may, at its sole discretion enter into a repayment agreement with the owner.

Prohibited Owner Actions

An owner participating in the HCV program must not:

- Make any false statement to the PHA [Title 18 U.S.C. Section 1001].
- Commit fraud, bribery, or any other corrupt or criminal act in connection with any federal housing program [24 CFR 982.453(a)(3)]

Commerce Policy

Any of the following will be considered evidence of owner program abuse:

- **Charging the family rent above or below the amount specified by Commerce;**
- **Charging a security deposit other than that specified in the family's lease;**
- **Charging the family for services that are provided to unassisted tenants at no extra charge;**
- **Knowingly accepting housing assistance payments for any month(s) after the family has vacated the unit;**
- **Knowingly accepting incorrect or excess housing assistance payments;**
- **Offering bribes or illegal gratuities to Commerce employees, contractors, or other Commerce and/or Field Agency representatives;**
- **Offering payments or other incentives to an HCV family as an inducement for the family to make false or misleading statements to Commerce and/or Field Agency;**
- **Residing in the unit with an assisted family;**

- **Certifying that HQS deficiencies have been corrected prior to correcting the deficiencies;**
- **Committing sexual or other harassment, either quid pro quo or hostile environment, based on the protected classes defined in Chapter 2; and**
- **Retaliating against any applicant or participant reporting/alleging sexual or other harassment, either quid pro quo or hostile environment, based on the protected classes defined in Chapter 2.**

Remedies and Penalties

When the PHA determines that the owner has committed program abuse, the PHA may take any of the following actions:

- Require the owner to repay excess housing assistance payments, as discussed earlier in this section and in accordance with the policies in Chapter 16.
- Terminate the HAP contract (See Chapter 13).
- Bar the owner from future participation in any PHA programs.
- Refer the case to state or federal officials for criminal prosecution as described in section 14-II.E.

14-II.D. PHA-Caused Errors or Program Abuse

The responsibilities and expectations of PHA staff with respect to normal program administration are discussed throughout this plan. This section specifically addresses actions of a PHA staff member that are considered errors or program abuse related to the HCV program. Additional standards of conduct may be provided in the PHA personnel policy.

PHA-caused incorrect subsidy determinations include (1) failing to correctly apply HCV rules regarding family composition, income, assets, and expenses, (2) assigning the incorrect voucher size to a family, and (3) errors in calculation.

Repayment to the PHA

Neither a family nor an owner is required to repay an overpayment of subsidy if the error or program abuse is caused by PHA staff [HCV GB. 22-12].

PHA Reimbursement to Family or Owner

The PHA must reimburse a family for any underpayment of subsidy, regardless of whether the underpayment was the result of staff-caused error or staff or owner program abuse. Funds for this reimbursement must come from the PHA's administrative fee reserves [HCV GB p. 22-12].

Prohibited Activities

Commerce Policy

Any of the following will be considered evidence of program abuse by PHA staff:

- **Failing to comply with any HCV program requirements for personal gain;**
- **Failing to comply with any HCV program requirements as a result of a conflict of interest relationship with any applicant, participant, or owner;**

- Seeking or accepting anything of material value from applicants, participating families, vendors, owners, contractors, or other persons who provide services or materials to Commerce;
- Disclosing confidential or proprietary information to outside parties;
- Gaining profit as a result of insider knowledge of PHA activities, policies, or practices;
- Misappropriating or misusing HCV funds;
- Destroying, concealing, removing, or inappropriately using any records related to the HCV program; or
- Committing any other corrupt or criminal act in connection with any federal housing program.

14-II.E. Criminal Prosecution

Commerce Policy

If there is a determination that program abuse has occurred by an owner, family, or program staff member and the amount of overpaid subsidy meets or exceeds the threshold for prosecution under local or state law, Commerce may refer the matter to the appropriate entity for prosecution.

When the amount of overpaid assistance meets or exceeds the federal threshold, the case may also be referred to the HUD Office of Inspector General (OIG).

Other criminal violations related to the HCV program will be referred to the appropriate local, state, or federal entity.

14-II.F. Fraud and Program Abuse Recoveries

The PHA may retain a portion of program fraud losses that the PHA recovers from a family or owner through litigation, court order, or a repayment agreement [24 CFR 982.163].

The PHA must be the principal party initiating or sustaining the action to recover amounts due from tenants that are due as a result of fraud and abuse. 24 CFR 792.202 permits the PHA to retain the greater of:

- 50 percent of the amount it actually collects from a judgment, litigation (including settlement of a lawsuit) or an administrative repayment agreement, or
- Reasonable and necessary costs that the PHA incurs related to the collection including costs of investigation, legal fees, and agency collection fees.

The family must be afforded the opportunity for an informal hearing in accordance with requirements in 24 CFR 982.555.

If HUD incurs costs on behalf of the PHA related to the collection, these costs must be deducted from the amount retained by the PHA.