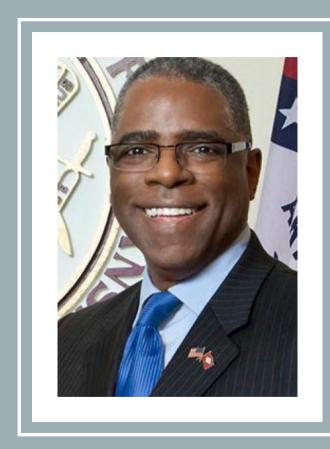# COVID-19 RENTAL ASSISTANCE: A PLAYBOOK FOR PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

JANUARY 2021

HON. JOSEPH WOOD
CHAIR, COMMUNITY, ECONOMIC &
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT STEERING
COMMITTEE
COUNTY JUDGE, WASHINGTON COUNTY,
ARK.

WITT O'BRIEN'S GUEST SPEAKERS

- **Brad Gair,** Principal

- **Matthew Erchull**, Senior Consulting, Government Solutions

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES NACo®

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PART OF THE **SEACOR** FAMILY

COVID-19 RENTAL ASSISTANCE:

A PLAYBOOK FOR IMMEDIATE DEADLINES AND PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

PART 2

VERSION 02   I   JANUARY 2021

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TOPICS FOR TODAY

The Basics
- What is the Emergency Rental Assistance Program?

Building, Launching and Implementing a Successful Program
- 10 Steps to Succeed

WOB Insights: Systems
- Choosing the Right Application / Grant Management System

THE BASICS – WHAT IS THE EMERGENCY RENTAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Program provides flexible funding to local jurisdictions to be utilized for:
+ RENTAL ASSISTANCE   **+** UTILITY ASSISTANCE   **+** OTHER HOUSING NEEDS

Eligibility
- Qualifies for unemployment or has experienced a reduction in household income, incurred significant costs, or experienced a financial hardship due to COVID-19;
- Demonstrates a risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability; and
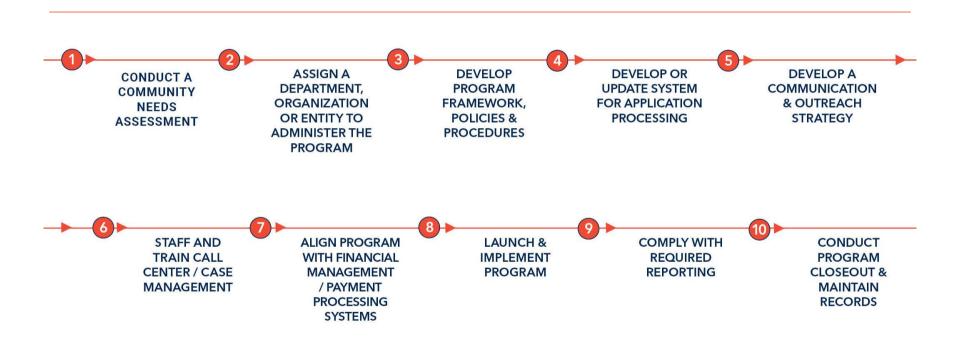- Has a household income at or below 80 percent of the area median.

90% of funding must be utilized for rental, utility assistance or other housing needs
10% may be used for housing stability services and overall grant administration

Priority should be given to applicants whose income less than 50% of AMI - and - has been unemployed for past 90 days

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BUILDING, LAUNCHING AND IMPLEMENTING

10 Steps For Administering a Successful Program

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

1. **CONDUCT A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT**
2. **ASSIGN A DEPARTMENT, ORGANIZATION OR ENTITY TO ADMINISTER THE PROGRAM**
3. **DEVELOP PROGRAM FRAMEWORK, POLICIES & PROCEDURES**
4. **DEVELOP OR UPDATE SYSTEM FOR APPLICATION PROCESSING**
5. **DEVELOP A COMMUNICATION & OUTREACH STRATEGY**
6. **STAFF AND TRAIN CALL CENTER / CASE MANAGEMENT**
7. **ALIGN PROGRAM WITH FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT / PAYMENT PROCESSING SYSTEMS**
8. **LAUNCH & IMPLEMENT PROGRAM**
9. **COMPLY WITH REQUIRED REPORTING**
10. **CONDUCT PROGRAM CLOSEOUT & MAINTAIN RECORDS**

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM
CONDUCT A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Estimate the need
- Rental population and characteristics
- Average rents
- Unemployment data
- Data from existing housing assistance programs
- Engage local stakeholders to add depth and ground-truth your understanding

Determine how much of the need has already been met
- Existing programs
- Support provided, quantity, needs addressed (e.g. caps, rental vs utilities vs other, arrearages, prospective rents, etc.)

Determine the unmet need
- What is the amount of the unmet need and types of need (e.g. rent, utility, transitional housing, etc.)

Identify who has unmet need
- Who are the eligible applicants (what is their income, employment status, etc.)

Identify community-based partners and organizations to support communication and outreach

Identify barriers to successful program implementation (language, literacy, digital access, cultural)

ASSIGN A DEPT, ORGANIZATION OR ENTITY TO ADMINISTER PROGRAM

Carefully evaluate your organization's ability to manage a complex federal grant program. Don't be deterred by material weaknesses identified in this stage, these are areas to address in your program design/development.

Key components to consider when evaluating your organization's capacity and capabilities:

- Existing in-house capacity to build a scalable organization around or ability to outsource while providing management oversight
- Finance systems adequate to expeditiously process payments, track and monitor transactions and support reporting/audit requirements

Utilizing existing County/City agencies or community-based partners may be a good fit for your organization.

Key components to consider when evaluating potential community or external partners capacity and capabilities:

- Existing agency or community-based organization currently managing affordable housing, homelessness or similar programs/initiatives
- Experience in managing grant-funded programs, especially those involving federal funding
- Scalable organization to meet the size of your projected program
- Ability to bridge the gap to groups at highest risk and/or need
- Ability to address language or cultural barriers

Conduct an open and transparent design process

Design should reflect the needs of the community within confines of program boundaries

Work with community stakeholders to mitigate impediments to clear, concise and streamlined program delivery – stakeholder engagement throughout design helps foster vested interested and champions of the program

Get the design right at the outset to mitigate future problems
- Address all federal requirements
- Create specific polices and procedures that address applications, verification, award amounts, assistance types
- Nail data collection requirements
- Streamline where possible – reduces administrative burden

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM
DEVELOP OR UPDATE SYSTEM FOR APPLICATION PROCESSING

One of the first and most critical decisions to be made in running a Rental Assistance program will be selecting the proper system for managing information. While there are a wide range of software solutions to choose from, ideally the system will include many of the following features:

- End-to-end workflow from pre-screening through award determination, including document management and retention that maximizes automation.
- Highly secure, scalable system that protects sensitive data.
- Fraud detection/duplication of benefits avoidance
- Intuitive, adaptable, customer-friendly interface; notifications (email, SMS, chat) for easy communication and expedited processing; progress tracking.
- Data extraction for local use
- Full audit trail and audit capabilities
- Robust KPI tracking, reporting & analytics
- Easy integration with external data sources, legacy systems, and 3rd-party applications for ID validation, payments processing & other services.
- Flexibility to accommodate federal requirements, additional local requirements and any changes as the program evolves (extensions, eligibility criteria adjustments, additional funding, etc.)

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM
DEVELOP COMMUNICATION & OUTREACH STRATEGY

Reduce time spent on applications that will not get funded by developing targeted but concise content that articulates what the program is, who is eligible, how to apply and what is required

- Raise applicant "IQ" on program requirements and documents needed
- Clearly define what documentation must be submitted with an application

Know your target audiences

- Beneficiaries who need rental assistance
- Landlords/utilities whose tenants are behind on bills

Establish collaborative partnerships with community partners trusted by the target audiences

- Who are trusted entities among those communities?
- What organizations have experience with this work?
- How do those with unmet needs get their information?
- What infrastructure exists to reach and communicate with those communities?

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM
STAFF & TRAIN CALL CENTER / CASE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT TEAM

- Help Renters Understand Eligibility Criteria, Assistance Available and Process

- Assist Landlords with Process and Programmatic Requirements when Applying on Behalf of Tenants

- High Level Screening Based on Property Location and Household Incomes

- Provide Continued Support to Renters and Landlords Until Benefit Caps Met

- Review program documentation to ensure eligibility

- Considered enhanced TA for landlords with large number of units – these can be great conduits of sharing information with eligible renters

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM
ALIGN PROGRAM WITH FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT & PAYMENT PROCESSING SYSTEMS

- Policies, Procedures and Internal Controls to Manage Federal Funds in Compliance with Applicable OMB 2 CFR Part 200 Requirements

- Authentication method to verify the recipient prior to payment processing

- Integration with County Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) System and/or External Payment Processor (bank/ACH)

- Built in Validation Steps to Avoid Duplication of Payments for Same Property and/or Household

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM
LAUNCH & IMPLEMENT PROGRAM

- Establish key performance indicators to assess success of program

- Evaluate initial application intake to determine if adjustments are needed and if need is with budget – may require fine tuning on prioritization if undersubscribed

- Transparency and pro-active communication are KEY – regular program briefs will help the community feel engaged and informed, avoiding potential constituent affairs complaints

- Remember – being agile will be instrumental to the success of your program.
  HOWEVER, as you modify policies / procedures ensure that you are documenting the what and why for audit purposes. It's easier to represent deviations from established process in the moment based on point of time factors than revisiting after program completion and/or during audit.

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COMPLY WITH REPORTING REQUIREMENTS & DEVELOP MANAGEMENT DASHBOARDS

- Development of Functional Audience-Specific Dashboards (Senior Level, Housing Specialist, Renter Household, Landlord, etc.)

- Tracking of Grant Expenditures for Administration, Direct Assistance and Other Expenditures

- Performance Metrics - % of Grant Expended

- Creation of Compliant Data Pulls for Federally Mandated Quarterly Reporting to Treasury OIG Through Export Files
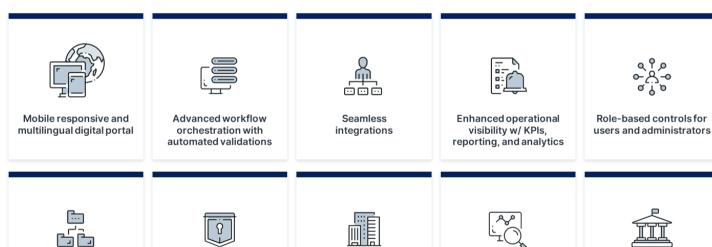
- Ability to "Tell the Story" with More Than Data

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10 STEPS FOR ADMINISTERING A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

CONDUCT PROGRAM CLOSEOUT & MAINTAIN RECORDS

STEP
10

- Ensures Conditions and Terms of Contract Have Been Met

- Verification all Reporting Requirements Have Been Completed

- All Funds Reconciled for Eligible Expenditures and Any Unspent Funds Returned

- Monitorings Conducted; all Concerns and/or Findings Cleared

- Beneficiary Data Compiled

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WOB INSIGHTS: SYSTEMS

Choosing the Right Application / Grant Management System

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WITT O'BRIEN'S INSIGHTS
CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPLICATION / GRANT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

One of the first and most critical decisions to be made in running a Rental Assistance program will be selecting the proper system for managing information. While there are a wide range of software solutions to choose from, ideally the system will include many of the following features:

Mobile responsive and multilingual digital portal	Advanced workflow orchestration with automated validations	Seamless integrations	Enhanced operational visibility w/ KPIs, reporting, and analytics	Role-based controls for users and administrators
Robust document management	Enterprise-grade security	Flexibility to meet local needs and program changes	Full auditability, operational visibility and transparency	Constituent issue resolution

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Unqork Rent Relief
Turnkey software for state and local agencies

Out-of-the-box solution **compatible with ERAP requirements** that empowers local government to effectively determine eligibility, manage and resolve issues, and distribute funds.
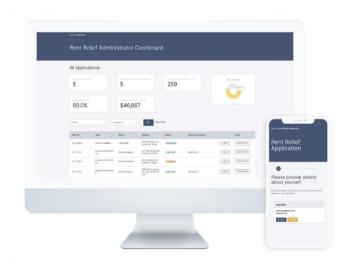
Allows agencies to **orchestrate highly automated end-to-end workflows** from pre-screening through award determination.

Includes the ability to **integrate with local databases** and **configure digital experiences for relevant stakeholders** (renters, landlords, administrators, housing specialists and program auditors).
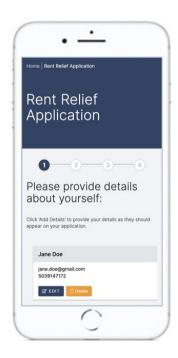
Built with Unqork's enterprise no-code platform, **applications can be rapidly configured to meet local requirements** and easily updated as the program evolves—all without writing a single line of code.
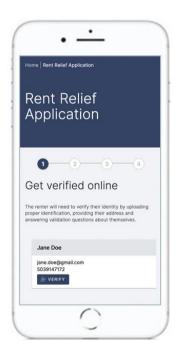

unqork

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CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPLICATION / GRANT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Ease of use is critical
- Consider mobile integration
- Use easy to understand "steps"
- Consider identity/address validation through online verification
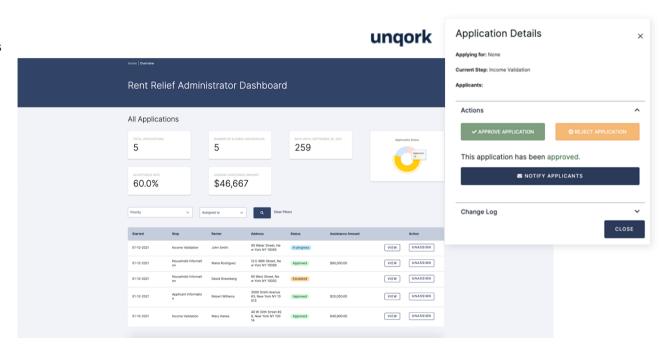- Consider ability for renter/landlord to access their application and track status within app

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WITT O'BRIEN'S INSIGHTS
CHOOSING THE RIGHT APPLICATION / GRANT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Make "back end" intuitive

- Case manager and community partners will need to staff quickly preventing opportunities for rigorous onboarding and training
- Keep your system and easy for staff to use. Integrate controls to prevent simple errors (drop downs vs flat text)
- Connect back end process with simple "10 step" applicant facing so that applicants know where their application is in the verification process.
- Integrate call center/compliant management

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QUESTIONS?

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