



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING &
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Charles D. Baker, Governor ♦ Karyn E. Polito, Lt. Governor ♦ Chrystal Kornegay, Undersecretary

Public Housing Notice: 2016-17

To: Local Housing Authorities
From: Sarah Glassman, Associate Director, Division of Public Housing and Rental Assistance
Subject: **EFFECTIVE MONDAY, JUNE 6, 2016 - IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW ON-LINE VACANCY SYSTEM FOR STATE-AIDED PUBLIC HOUSING UNITS**
Date: June 2, 2016

NOTICE – DHCD HAS DEVELOPED A NEW ON-LINE SYSTEM FOR TRACKING VACANT UNITS. EFFECTIVE MONDAY, JUNE 6, 2016, LHAS WILL NEED TO ENTER ALL VACANT UNIT INFO INTO THE NEW VACANCY TRACKING SYSTEM, AND THE OLD SYSTEM WILL BECOME “READ-ONLY”. YOU WILL HAVE UNTIL JUNE 30, 2016 TO ENTER VACANCY DATA. DETAILS ON HOW TO ACCESS AND USE THE NEW VACANCY TRACKING SYSTEM ARE INCLUDED IN THIS NOTICE.

PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING IMPORTANT POINTS:

- 1. YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ENTER DATA IN THE OLD VACANCY SYSTEM AFTER JUNE 5.**
- 2. EFFECTIVE JUNE 6, ALL VACANCY DATA AND WAIVER REQUESTS MUST BE ENTERED IN THE NEW SYSTEM.**
- 3. LIVE ON-LINE TRAINING (TAKING ABOUT ONE HOUR) WILL BE OFFERED BY DHCD STAFF TO ALL INTERESTED LHA STAFF BEGINNING JUNE 6 (SIGN-UP DETAILS ATTACHED).**
- 4. FOR EACH STATE PUBLIC HOUSING UNIT THAT IS VACANT ON OR AFTER JUNE 6 YOU MUST ENTER THE REQUESTED VACANCY/WAIVER DATA IN THE NEW SYSTEM (you no longer need to enter data for units receiving HUD’s Section 8 New Construction/Substantial Rehab operating subsidy).**
 - a. IF VACANCY/WAIVER DATA WAS ENTERED INTO THE OLD VACANCY SYSTEM, BUT THE UNIT IS STILL VACANT ON JUNE 6, THE DATA MUST BE RE-ENTERED INTO THE NEW SYSTEM.**
 - b. IF YOU HAVE AN ACTIVE WAIVER FOR A CURRENTLY VACANT UNIT, YOU MUST RE-ENTER THE REQUESTED VACANCY DATA FOR THAT UNIT, AND REQUEST A NEW WAIVER IN THE NEW SYSTEM.**
 - c. ALL UNITS VACANT ON OR AFTER JUNE 6 MUST BE ENTERED INTO THE NEW SYSTEM BY JUNE 30, 2016.**
- 5. UNITS THAT ARE VACANT OVER 60 DAYS WITHOUT A WAIVER AFTER JUNE 30 MAY BE SUBJECT TO A DAILY \$11.00 FEE ASSESSMENT.**

Purpose of the New Online Vacancy System:

Rapid turnover of vacant units has three key benefits:

- Maximizes rental income,
- Minimizes the need for the state's limited subsidy dollars, and
- Quickly places applicants in units they greatly need.

To help all LHAs stay focused on these goals, DHCD has created a new internet-based vacancy tracking system that is:

- Easy to maintain,
- Simplifies the waiver process,
- Eliminates the need for paper Quarterly Certifications,
- Provides clear, real-time calculations for fees to be assessed for units vacant over 60 days without a DHCD waiver, and
- Provides useful reporting for LHA staff and Commissioners

The vacancy system that you have used for many years is being retired on June 6, 2016. The historic information it contains will continue to remain available to you for "Read-Only" Access – that is, you will be able to see the information in the old system and run the same reports you previously created, if you choose, but effective June 6 you will no longer be able enter new data into that system, and you will not use it to submit quarterly certifications. All new information about vacancies, unit offers and lease-ups, waiver requests, certifications and other items will need to be entered in the new system.

To Access the New Online Vacancy System:

1. The link to the new system is conveniently located on the same webpage as the old vacancy system and all of your other DHCD computer software programs. When the new system is activated on June 6 you will see both the old vacancy system (labeled "Old Vacancy System – Read-Only Access") and the new system (labeled "New Vacancy System – use after 6/5/16").
2. All usernames and passwords that worked for the old vacancy system will continue to work with the new vacancy system, so anyone that had access to enter data into the old system can log in immediately and work in the new system.

Learning How to Use the System:

We think you will find the new system intuitive and easy to use, but there are four ways you can get assistance on how to use the system:

1. Sign up for one of DHCD's live on-line trainings. As long as you have access to a computer and phone, you will be able to sit in your own office and watch a live demonstration of how the system works, and ask questions of DHCD staff at any point along the way. The training typically takes about one hour. Information on how to sign up is found in the Excel document attached to this notice.
2. Refer to the User Guide. Once you log into the new system you will see the on-line "User Guide" in the upper right hand corner. Click on it and you can view and, if you wish, print a step-by-step guide on how to enter vacancy data, request a waiver, file your quarterly certification, or access the online reports.

3. Short, recorded video trainings to walk you through how to use different aspects of the vacancy system will be available 24 hours a day. They are in development now and should be available on-line very soon.
4. Call your DHCD Housing Management Specialist. Your HMS can help you work through any specific questions or problems you have with using the system.

Advantages of the New Vacancy System:

1. Easier to use, particularly for waivers and waiver extensions.
2. Quarterly vacancy certifications will now be submitted online, entirely electronically. And instead of certifying to the accuracy of detailed reports for each development, the executive director will only need to certify the accuracy of a single report showing the dates that waivers were requested or units were vacated, made maintenance ready, or occupied during the quarter.
3. Easy, direct access to the Lead-Based Paint Compliance Tracking System. Now when you enter the occupancy data showing that you have leased up a vacant unit, you won't have to log out of the vacancy system and log in to the Lead Paint System to enter that data. Instead, as soon as you save the occupancy data, the system will take you directly to the Lead Paint System, and once you enter that data, you will be automatically returned to the vacancy system.
4. It will provide you with clear and useful reports that will help you and your commissioners track occupancy rates over time, get an early sense of whether the LHA could be exposed to vacancy fee assessments, track the status of your vacant units, your waiver requests, and more.

Action Steps to Minimize Fee Assessments: LHAs are strongly encouraged to take the following steps:

1. Assess the condition of any vacant units as soon as possible to determine the staffing and financial resources necessary to reoccupy the unit. If you anticipate that re-occupancy will take more than 60 days, then you should promptly request a DHCD waiver, using DHCD's web-based vacancy reporting system. The earlier you request a waiver the better, since DHCD will need time to review the request, and if it is not approved you will have more time to plan accordingly.
2. Review your unit turnover process with appropriate staff.
 - a. Make certain your waiting lists are up to date and have at least a year's worth of applicants for each program.
 - b. Review your Marketing Plan for ideas to generate more applicants in locations with low market demand and aggressively implement them.
 - c. Evaluate the time it currently takes your maintenance staff to prepare a unit for re-occupancy, try to identify any common reasons for delay and search for ways to streamline or speed up this process.
 - d. Evaluate how quickly you are able to select and get a new tenant under lease, and look for opportunities to streamline or speed up this process.
3. Some LHAs will need additional funding to accelerate the turnover process. DHCD operates an initiative to reoccupy certain vacant c.705 units and vacant congregate units that need between \$25,000 and \$65,000 to be made habitable. In addition, if you lack available Formula Funding or operating reserves, you may be eligible in some cases for emergency capital grants. Please contact your Housing Management Specialist to discuss your eligibility to apply for these funds.

4. If you need technical assistance for difficult or long-term vacancy issues, we encourage you to request it from DHCD. Our Facilities Management Unit can inspect your vacant units, review with you the units' needs and your staff's capacity, and help you craft the most efficient plan to reoccupy them using the resources available to you. Our Housing Management staff can work with you on the process for updating a stale waiting list, or developing a marketing plan for units that are difficult to lease. And soon the Regional Capital Assistance Teams (RCAT) will also be available to work with you on these issues.

If you are not already familiar with the details of DHCD's vacancy policy, a copy (PHN 2013-07) is attached for your reference, and like all PHNs it is available on our website. **Since DHCD previously suspended the assessment of fees for units vacant more than 60 days without a waiver pending the creation and implementation of the new vacancy system, and since those fees will be assessed again starting July 1, 2016 we strongly urge you to re-read the vacancy policy and understand its potential impact on your LHAs finances.**

This new system will play an important role in ensuring the state public housing portfolio is utilized to the fullest extent possible. DHCD's goal is to work with you to minimize or eliminate the assessment of vacancy fees. This will take a concerted effort, but will result in more seniors and families with a place to live, and a fairer, more effective distribution of the limited state operating funds that so many of you share. Thanks for your help in this transition.

If you have any questions about the new system, please contact your Housing Management Specialist, or Paul McPartland, Asset Management Coordinator, at 617-573-1219.