Tailoring ERA Outreach to Eligible Tenants Who Are Not Accessing Assistance

Traditional outreach and engagement strategies — like creating a website, handing out fliers or issuing a press release — can increase general awareness about a local emergency rental assistance (ERA) program. But these outreach and engagement strategies often fall short. In fact, conventional outreach, while critically important, can easily miss some people who are the most at risk of eviction and housing instability. That is why cities and their partners should also pursue more targeted outreach and engagement strategies focused on populations facing various barriers to learning about and accessing emergency rental assistance.

These populations may include: individuals with limited English proficiency; individuals with limited access to the internet; individuals with a disability; individuals with immigration concerns; individuals with justice system involvement; individuals with work, childcare responsibilities or transportation challenges that impact their ability to apply; individuals who have experienced systemic racism; and individuals who have a fundamental distrust in government.

This worksheet offers guidance on identifying the populations who are not accessing a local ERA program. It also provides recommendations for improving the effectiveness of existing outreach efforts and developing more deliberate, customized engagement strategies specific to these tenant groups.

This resource was developed by the National League of Cities and the Stanford Legal Design Lab based on partnerships with the five city participants of the Emergency Rental Assistance Technical Assistance Program. Additional resources for local governments implementing or refining an ERA program can be found at nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit.

Create a Targeted Outreach and Engagement Strategy

Cities should create a targeted outreach strategy that seeks to reduce the barriers that limit or impede certain groups from applying for and receiving emergency rental assistance.

Determine Who is Not Accessing the Program

Program staff and the broader eviction prevention network should explore what groups of tenants may have difficulty accessing or finding information about the local ERA program.

Examples of People Facing Barriers to Accessing ERA

People facing specific barriers to accessing an ERA program may include, but is not limited to:

- Individuals with limited English proficiency, including those who may not understand ERA outreach in English or who may be intimidated by the idea of engaging with a government or nonprofit agency due to a language barrier

- Individuals in a racial or ethnic group who may have experienced structural racism, and who may therefore distrust government programs

- Individuals wary of the immigration implications of using a government service or a public benefit, and who have concerns for their family's security

- Individuals with limited access to the internet and digital outreach platforms

- Individuals with physical or mental disabilities that may impair their ability to learn about or access a service effectively

- Individuals in rural areas or areas with limited transportation options who may experience added difficulties submitting an application

- Individuals working outside 9-to-5 business hours or those with children, who may struggle to appear in person to receive assistance

- Individuals with justice system involvement

- Individuals 65 years and older who may experience multiple barriers to information and access

The likelihood of any of these groups not having adequate access to the ERA program will vary from community to community based on geography, population size, demographics, history, and more. Consider which factors might pose the greatest challenge for which populations, as well as what barriers might deter the largest number of people in your community from accessing the assistance they need.

REVIEW CURRENT PROGRAM DATA

Program staff should collect and review program data to better understand who is currently applying for services, and who is not.

Disaggregate and evaluate program data to determine who has accessed the program based on race and ethnicity, age group, gender, household size, income (or area median income bracket), and, if known, language spoken and citizenship status.

TIP: Map disaggregated data by census tract or zip code to visualize where applications are coming from geographically — and where they are not. This data can also be compared to census data and relevant statistics on the local population, such as neighborhoods with a high percentage of rent-burdened households.

From this review, program staff can begin to get a picture of the types of tenants who are not accessing the program. This data may confirm that the program staff's initial thoughts on who is not accessing the program were correct, and that those populations should be the focus of more intentional outreach and engagement. Alternatively, this review may reveal additional individuals or households that were not initially considered as requiring a more targeted approach for building awareness and engagement.

Develop a Targeted Outreach Plan

ESTABLISH AN OUTREACH WORKING GROUP

Program staff should assemble a working group of internal and external partners to help identify community organizations, messages, communications media and platforms, events or engagement opportunities, and other strategies to improve outreach to target groups. Beyond general awareness-building campaigns, the working group's efforts should be specifically tailored to reach individuals who face additional barriers to accessing the ERA program. This workgroup could be an informal network with meetings, calls, and check-ins as needed, or it could be a formal group that meets every month to share insights, data, updates, and feedback.

TIP: The outreach working group should include members of city commissions (e.g., Housing Commission or Human Rights Commission), along with community leaders and partners with experience working with diverse populations. Go beyond established relationships to identify community leaders who have unique insights into these populations, such as principals, school counselors or clinicians, faith leaders, librarians, or leaders of neighborhood associations or civic leagues.

CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCES IN STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Work with advocates, navigators, service providers and community organizations to connect directly with individuals who experience the type of barriers the program is looking to overcome. In tenant interviews, focus groups and other conversations, ask these individuals what would help and encourage them to access the ERA program, and use their insights to inform future outreach.

Another way to center the lived experience of target audiences is to speak with individuals who have successfully accessed the ERA program. Learn more about how they became aware of the program, what prior knowledge or misconceptions they had, what led them to apply, and what challenges they faced during the application process. Ask if they know of friends or neighbors who are also in need of assistance but have not accessed the program, and what they think would help more people apply. Finally, ask for direct feedback on existing outreach materials and the application process as a whole, and make improvements based on their input.

DRAFT AN OUTREACH PLAN

Program staff, with assistance from the working group, should draft an outreach plan to boost awareness of the local ERA program among target groups, improve trust in the system, and increase willingness to participate in the program.

The plan should include a description of each type of tenant that is not accessing the program, information about their current barriers, and promising opportunities or examples of ways to improve outreach to the targeted group. The plan should set measurable goals the team can use to hold itself accountable over time for increasing awareness and engagement.

The outreach plan might also cover some of the following topics:

Geographic Zones

Where do tenants in the target populations live? What service providers or community-based organizations do they interact with? Where are the best locations for targeted fliers, canvassing, events, or out-of-home advertising to reach them?

Trusted Messengers

Who in the community does the target population trust? These trusted messengers may include principals, doctors, faith leaders, small business owners, community organizers, social media influencers, or neighborhood leaders. How can these individuals be included in outreach strategies?

Messaging

Create a style guide with phrases, messages, images, symbols and colors that may engage the target populations. This guide can resemble other branding packages city teams use, but with more specifics about visual, language, and messaging choices that may improve outreach to the target groups.

◆ **Develop targeted messaging:** Ensure that the messaging addresses concerns people in the target group might have — like "worried about rent," "having problems with landlord," or "got an eviction notice" — in plain language that a tenant might use.

◆ **Use appropriate images:** Use imagery, phrases, and symbols that are welcoming and representative of the age, race, gender, gender expression or disability of your target audience. Make sure that the images are reflective of the target population's experience. Consider looking beyond typical stock imagery or clip-art and use the following:

  ◆ Images of individual people showing racial and socio-economic diversity

  ◆ Images of people with facial expressions that show a sense of calm and dignity

  ◆ A diversity of relevant environments, including rural, urban, agricultural and suburban settings

◆ **Address misinformation:** Are there misconceptions about the ERA program that could be inhibiting people's participation? Address these explicitly in the outreach. For example, the style guide can state prominently and redundantly a message such as, "Anyone, regardless of immigration status, is eligible," or, "This program will not affect your immigration status."

◆ **Check for blind spots:** Before publishing outreach materials, request an external stakeholder or stakeholders to review the messaging, images, and other content. Is the outreach in the right language? Are the materials translated professionally and with cultural sensitivity? Ask stakeholders in the working group and translators for assistance in this review.

Refine Tactics for Targeted Outreach

The outreach plan targeting individuals who are not accessing the program should include specific tactics for both in-person and virtual engagement.

On-the-Ground and Paper-Based Outreach

IMPROVE THE EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCESSIBILITY OF EXISTING OUTREACH MATERIALS

Begin by ensuring that existing informational and outreach materials are effective and accessible. Make any necessary improvements, including by using clear, straightforward, jargon-free language to explain the program.

The visual design of materials should also be considered. Ensure that all materials conform to design best practices, such as including sufficient amounts of white space. Text should be broken up into short sentences and paragraphs, making use of distinct header hierarchies to provide clear structure. Fonts should be simple and large enough to be legible, with a limited number of contrasting colors to improve readability. Images or illustrations of people used in design should be inclusive and representative of communities that the program aims to serve.

To further improve accessibility, professionally translated materials in widely spoken non-English languages should be developed based on community needs.

TIP: Engage community organizations and residents throughout the material development and design process and ask for feedback on existing materials. Community members may offer new perspectives on how to better tailor materials based on cultural relevance, language or other accessibility considerations.

DISTRIBUTE OUTREACH MATERIALS IN HIGH-TRAFFIC AREAS

Print letter-size fliers and tabloid-size posters to distribute in locations where target groups are likely to encounter them. Identify key locations for dissemination such as schools, churches, food banks, coffee shops, grocery stores, libraries, bus stations, banks, large employers, and community groups. Distribute fliers and posters at these locations and ask to have them posted in entryways and on bulletin boards.

TIP: Get creative with distribution methods. For example, include fliers in school packets that go out to students' parents, or in food bank distribution bags. Be sure to provide community groups with extra printouts and a digital file to enable digital distribution.

PARTNER AUTHENTICALLY WITH COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Cities and ERA providers should look for guidance from organizations that have deep connections with the communities they are trying to reach. Actively engage these community-based groups in the design of programs and materials, the development and implementation of outreach strategies, and more.

Staff and members of these community organizations may have more established connections with individuals who are not accessing programs; they can therefore act as trusted messengers for the ERA program. This is particularly true when the city and its partners are trying to reach individuals who have experienced systemic racism or who distrust government, as may be the case for Black, Indigenous, Latino and Hispanic, and Asian and Pacific Islander communities; individuals with justice system involvement; individuals who have experienced homelessness or foster care; households with mixed immigration status or refugees; and more.

ENGAGE COMMUNITY LEADERS AND PAST CLIENTS AS INFLUENCERS OR NAVIGATORS

Ask community leaders and individuals who have successfully benefited from the program if they would be open to becoming community navigators or informal program advocates. This may mean reaching out to small business owners, neighborhood association leaders, community advocates, faith leaders, or residents with long-term family ties to the community to explore their interest in supporting the outreach effort.

Willing community leaders or former ERA clients can be trained about the inner workings of the ERA program, details on how to apply, and common obstacles that applicants might face. Equipped with this information, they can help refer people the program and integrate program information into their community conversations, while building awareness among their staff, clients and neighbors. Encourage them to post about the program online and provide them with outreach materials to distribute.

Informal advocates or influencers can also be integrated with more formal navigator programs and the broader service provider community. These individuals can be given access to shared referral directories used by service providers in the region, and be trained on how to facilitate the intake process.

EXPAND COURT-BASED OUTREACH AND PARTNERSHIPS

To better reach individuals who are actively facing eviction, foster closer partnerships with local, county or state courts involved in the eviction process. Coordinate to ensure that the appropriate resources are being shared directly with landlords and tenants, such as by including ERA informational fliers in court summons packets. Fliers and other promotional material should be posted throughout the court building, if allowed by the court staff. Program staff or benefits counselors should also aim to be present at court to personally engage with tenants attending hearings.

Social Media Outreach and Analytics

Program staff can also use social media to improve outreach to target groups that are not accessing the ERA program. Outreach on social media can include targeted advertisements and posts for the program in multiple languages. Use social media platform targeting tools to aim outreach at specific geographic regions or demographic groups.

MEET RESIDENTS WHERE THEY ARE ONLINE

While the ERA program may have an ongoing social media strategy for broader outreach efforts, consider whether that strategy is inherently missing particular target groups because it overlooks a specific social media platform or online community (e.g., Reddit, Nextdoor, or particular Facebook groups). For each tenant group not being reached, consider if it includes people who might be accessing an alternative platform or who might engage with social media in ways that are not reflected in the broader strategy. For example, the targeted populations may use more culturally specific platforms, information channels or discussion groups.

TRACK ENGAGEMENT TO IDENTIFY EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

The team should track engagement levels with different social media posts and use this feedback to identify messages, images, or types of content that increase engagement with the program. This can include tracking users' likes, clicks on links, or comments and questions regarding a post. These user actions can provide important feedback about which types of content are best at engaging target groups. If the platform allows, track which demographic groups are engaging with outreach posts or advertisements. This can help clarify what strategies are most effective in increasing engagement with groups not otherwise accessing the program.

ENGAGE TRUSTED PARTNERS AS SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Recruit community leaders, government agencies, community-based organizations and other community influencers who have relationships with the target communities to post and reshare information about the ERA program.

Program staff could develop shareable content (e.g., posts, social media copy or videos) to share with influencers. Additionally, program staff can suggest that influencers create original content (e.g., TikTok videos, Instagram Stories or Live) about the ERA program that would resonate with their followers. The staff can support the creation of original content through stipends that cover the cost of this important work.

TIP: Prior to content being shared on influencers' social media channels, program staff should educate influencers about what the ERA program is and is not. This will help ensure that influencer content is accurate and up-front about the program's value, along with its limitations.

USE GEOGRAPHIC TARGETING

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Nextdoor, allow for certain posts and advertisements to be targeted at specific geographic regions, such as a set of zip codes or a neighborhood. Use this geographic targeting to focus digital advertising and boosted content to priority populations.

Make The Program More Accessible

Of course, improving engagement of populations that are not currently accessing the program is not solely about messaging and outreach strategies. It is also about improving the accessibility of the application process and the ERA program as a whole.

PAPER AND DIGITAL ACCESS

ERA program materials, including the application, should be available in both paper and digital formats. This will better accommodate tenants with different abilities, preferences, and access challenges for applying.

Digital materials should be compatible with mobile devices (e.g., a mobile phone or tablet) and include an easy-to-use, fillable application. Clear instructions on required documentation and how to upload those materials should also be provided.

Similarly, residents should be able to fill out and submit a paper-based application, either by mailing it in, using drop boxes, or applying in-person.

TIP: Documentation requirements can be a significant hurdle to completing an ERA application successfully. For many applicants, it can be confusing to identify and submit the acceptable forms of documentation to meet various requirements. This is particularly true for individuals without a formal lease agreement to show proof of address, those with informal work arrangements, or those who lack formal bank and tax histories for demonstrating income.

To improve accessibility, minimize and simplify documentation requirements; allow for and facilitate self-attestation by providing templates; and employ proxies for income verification if possible.

HANDS-ON ASSISTANCE IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES

Program staff and trained community navigators should be available to support tenants who need help and guidance completing their applications. Ensure staff and community navigators have received cultural competency training, and have relevant language skills, cultural connections and lived experience that will enable them to connect with and support a diversity of program applicants. Community navigators can provide hands-on support beyond what program staff can, through assistance with filling in form fields, gathering documents, and following up on other required steps. Assistance should be made available online, over the phone and in-person.

LEVERAGE TEXTING AND SMS OUTREACH

Developing text message (or SMS) channels with the public can also improve the accessibility of the ERA program. Program staff should consider establishing an outreach hotline for the program over SMS. This can be done by establishing a phone number and using a keyword included on outreach fliers and posters. A prospective applicant can text the keyword to the provided phone number to sign up for the program, get answers to FAQs, or link to the main website of the program.

In addition to the hotline, program staff can utilize text messages to send ongoing reminders and updates to a prospective applicant who has applied for emergency rental assistance. The text messages can prompt applicants about the program's due dates, missing fields, application progress, or reminders to make applying to the ERA program more transparent and engaging.

TIP: Text messages and SMS can also be used to send surveys or feedback forms that collect information about improving the application process or program. Program staff may also be able to collect additional information about the applicant's outcome or provide the applicant with additional referrals to eviction prevention services, even after their engagement with the ERA program has concluded.

Ongoing Check-Ins, Analysis and Accountability

It is not an easy task to engage people who are not accessing an ERA program. Entrenched, structural barriers may affect people's willingness and ability to apply for assistance. That said, cities and their partners should commit to a process of continuous improvement as they seek out strategies that may work. This means building ongoing feedback and tracking of outreach strategies into the outreach plan.

CONDUCT AN ONGOING EVALUATION OF PROGRAM DATA

Program staff should regularly review application and program data to see who is engaging and who is not engaging with the program. Ongoing tracking will help determine if the intentional outreach is succeeding in reaching individuals who may not otherwise be aware of or accessing the program.

COLLECT QUALITATIVE FEEDBACK

ERA providers should conduct regular check-ins with eviction prevention stakeholders, partner organizations, community leaders and applicants to identify trends and collect feedback. Use these conversations to learn more about the on-the-ground response to outreach, changes to the program design, and general community response:

◆ Is there misinformation about the program?

◆ What reasons are people giving about why they are not using the program?

◆ What challenges are people running into if they try to access the program?

◆ Where are people going or what information sources do they turn to when they need help?

◆ Are any of the messages succeeding in building trust and engagement?

Continue to track and document program data against these types of questions to gradually improve the program. The goal is to make emergency rental assistance accessible to all who need it, so that the benefits of this important assistance are enjoyed equitably among the city's residents.

Suggested Resources

The resources below provide additional guidance on effective communication strategies, improving the accessibility of ERA programs and applications, and targeting strategies.

Lessons from COVID-19 on Executing Communications and Engagement at the Community Level During a Health Crisis
(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)
This paper captures lessons learned and insights by public health and communications practitioners on issues to further explore or consider in strengthening the public health sector's communications and community engagement capacity when anticipating and responding to future crises.

Guidelines for ERA Program Online Applications
(U.S. Department of the Treasury)
These guidelines detail how to create easy-to-use online ERA applications. A sample application flow, example application screens, sample self-attestation documents and guidance on fact-specific application proxies are all provided, along with general best practices for application design.

Eviction Prevention: A Guide for Local Governments
(National League of Cities and Stanford Legal Design Lab)
This publication details how local governments can work with partners to implement laws, policies and services that stabilize housing and prevent evictions — in the near term and for years to come. It includes a step-by-step process and menu of program offerings to develop effective interventions that are responsive to community needs.

Targeted Universalism: Policy & Practice
(The Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley)
This resource is a primer on the targeted universalism framework and describes how to take an outcome-oriented approach to public policy. It challenges the "one-size-fits-all" policy formula and offers an approach to developing targeting strategies for reaching a universal policy goal.

Community Navigators: The Role of Community Navigators to Reduce Poverty and Expand Access to Justice
(Legal Link)
This working paper proposes community navigators as an integral component of addressing barriers to access to justice and discusses how community navigators can modernize the civil legal system.