Paper Outreach for Emergency Rental Assistance and Eviction Prevention Services

Public outreach is essential in achieving the goals of emergency rental assistance (ERA) programs and eviction prevention services. Despite the ubiquity of digital communications, paper-based promotional and informational materials still play a key role in raising awareness and usage of available assistance. Well-executed paper flyers, posters, handouts, explainers and other communications collateral can spread the word about what assistance is available, how various services can help residents, and how to apply.

This worksheet guides cities and their partners through best practices and examples of paper-based communication materials for outreach related to era and eviction prevention programs. It explains the key collateral types your city should have, including flyers, posters, cards, court packets, and more. It also offers guidance on messaging and explains basic visual design principles for effective communications. Program administrators can use these principles to refine existing outreach or design and issue new materials.

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.

RECOMMENDATION 1: Create a Portfolio of Basic Communication Materials

Non-digital, paper-based materials can help bridge the knowledge gap about emergency rental assistance and eviction prevention services — especially for people with limited Internet access.

Paper-based materials also offer multiple, easily adaptable avenues and formats for outreach. Four paper-based materials every city should have include: community handout flyers; simple posters or cards; service referral sheets; and court summons flyers.

Community Handout Flyers

Community handout flyers can be widely distributed to raise awareness of available services among renters, landlords and community leaders. The goal is to make tenants generally aware of available services in case an eviction filing or other housing stability challenges arise.

Share flyers broadly during crises such as economic shocks related to the pandemic, or after natural disasters — times when many in the community struggle with housing security and making ends meet. Flyers should also be distributed regularly to low-income households and in high-need communities where renters are more likely to experience housing instability. Distribution can rely on on-the- ground city program staff, as well as community partners and neighborhood-based service providers. For example, flyers can be stapled to distribution bags from food banks, handed out at schools, posted on grocery store bulletin boards, and shared at libraries or community centers.

Example of a Flyer for Rental and Utility Assistance

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Greenbelt, MD

Simple Posters and Cards

Develop simple designs for communications materials that work in both large and small formats. For example, large-format materials can include billboards, bus wraps and ads, and yard signs; and small-format materials can include business cards, magnets or postcards.

A poster or card design should make the public aware that a service exists through a short and simple headline. Sample messages might be:

◆ Behind On Rent? Call (555) 555-5555 to get free assistance.

◆ Trouble with your Landlord? Free lawyers can help. Text "help" to (555) 555-5555

◆ Worried About Eviction? Scan this QR code to find free help.

The poster or card design should echo the messaging of the community handout flyer and direct people to the same services and support, but with condensed language. The goal of this collateral format is to build basic awareness of services as broadly as possible. The message should be catchy, highly visible, easy to read quickly, and provide clear direction for the reader's next steps. In many cases, the most straightforward message may follow the basic format of: *"Have This Problem? Here's a Solution and Next Step."*

Example Design for Cards, Signs and Large-Scale Collateral Formats

Small and large-scale communication materials should present an ultra-simple message.
This design could be repurposed for posters, yard signs, business cards or postcard mailers.

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Greenbelt, MD

Service Referral Sheets

Service referral sheets can be distributed to tenants after they have engaged in an initial conversation or a formal intake process with a service provider or a housing or community navigator. For example, tenants might receive a service referral sheet after talking with an expert about their challenges and how rental assistance or eviction prevention services such as mediation might help.

The service referral sheet shares details about how to apply for services or assistance, and about who is eligible. The sheet might also provide step-by-step guidance on how each service will work, helping tenants know what to expect, what documents are required for the application, how long application processing will take, and how complicated the process will be.

Examples of Service Referral Sheets

Service referral sheets can outline the basic process involved in using a local service, such as emergency rental assistance. Sheets can offer a highly simplified step-by-step guide, or they can provide additional detail about specific activities and considerations/cautions at each stage of the process.

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the
City of Milwaukee, WI

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for
California Rent Relief

Court Summons Outreach Flyers

When an individual is notified that they are being sued by their landlord for an eviction, they receive a packet with two official documents from the court: the complaint and the summons. The complaint details what the landlord is claiming to the court, or what they are suing the tenant for. The summons informs the tenant of the next steps in the court process.

Receiving these materials can be an intimidating experience for a tenant; people can easily feel isolated, targeted and confused with nowhere to turn for help. That is why it is important to add another document to the packet whenever possible: an outreach flyer sharing information about resources available to help a household facing eviction. The flyer should offer simple, easy-to-understand summaries and contact information for local legal defense, emergency rental assistance, housing navigation, and mediation or diversion services. The goal is to offer the tenant a sense of control and an understanding that help is available when they receive notice of the lawsuit.

TIP: Once the outreach flyer for the summons packet has been developed, it can be used in other situations as well. For example, jurisdictions may seek to make the presentation of an outreach flyer mandatory at an earlier stage in the legal process, such as when a landlord gives a warning notice to a tenant. This can help ensure a tenant has early access to available services, potentially stopping a lawsuit from happening. Note, however, that it is difficult to monitor compliance about whether landlords do in fact provide a flyer along with a warning notice.

Example of a Court Summons Outreach Flyer

Court summons outreach flyers should accompany the court's summons and complaint packet. They should be designed to fit on a letter-sized piece of paper and highlight key services available for a tenant, along with contact information.

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the City of Milwaukee, WI

Courts in many jurisdictions can mandate that an outreach flyer be included in the summons and complaint packet. Ideally, the court itself may mail the flyer directly to the tenant, or require that the plaintiff or their process server include the flyer in the packet served to the tenant. An alternative is that a service provider mails the flyer to tenants who have been sued for eviction, based on the service provider's access to the court's docket information.

RECOMMENDATION 2: Keep It Simple with One User-Centered Message

What is the key action you want your audience to take? Answering this question is central to a successful communication that will achieve your goal of connecting more people to available services and support.

The desired action should be the focus of your visual design and content. Clarifying your desired action also provides a way to measure impact by tracking the number of people taking the recommended step(s).

Identify the Goal

Flyers, posters, signs, and cards promoting an eviction prevention service or program should present a single key message. It might be tempting to serve multiple audiences with a single flyer or poster but providing too much information or competing messages can easily backfire by making the message confusing and dampening engagement.

Goals or actions associated with eviction prevention materials will include the following:

◆ **Increase emergency rental assistance awareness**
The city (or community-based organization) wants the target audience, who is unfamiliar with emergency rental assistance, to know what it is and how to learn more. Based on the content provided, a member of the target audience should be able to tell a peer what emergency rental assistance is, and generally what kind of situations it can help with. This is a common goal for a simple poster or community handout flyer. Success could be measured by a higher number of inquiries such as phone calls, website visits, or hotline texts about the program; and applications to the emergency rental assistance program.

◆ **Increase applications for emergency rental assistance**

The city (or community-based organization) wants the target audience to initiate an application — by calling the phone number on the materials, texting the hotline, signing up on a website, or visiting a local office in person. This might be a central goal for a service referral sheet or community handout flyer. The goal of the communication is to provide the tenant or landlord with a sense of agency and confidence that they can make use of the featured service. Success could be tracked in the number of people initiating contact to start the application process.

◆ **Get people to show up at a court date or file a response**

The court (or community-based organization) wants the tenant to attend their court date. If the tenant is in a jurisdiction that requires a written answer to be filed before obtaining a court date, then the message might aim to get the tenant to call legal aid to file an answer. The goal of the message is to help a tenant overcome stress, inaction, and intimidation related to the judicial process. Success could be measured by tracking tenant participation in the court process so they avoid a default judgment.

◆ **Increase follow-through to access services**

The city (or community-based organization) wants the tenant to stay engaged throughout the process of accessing assistance, despite delays and potentially challenging requirements. The message for these materials should reinforce confidence about the service and provide clarity on next steps in the process. The goal is to show that if the tenant sticks with it, they will reach the end goal and get a benefit. Success could be measured in low drop-off rates and high completion rates for a service.

TIP: Communication and marketing team members should collaborate with the program team to identify the single key message for a communication. If a single main action the target audience should take can not be identified, consider creating a series of communications products aligning with various goals and actions, instead of a single product.

Alternatively, once the team has created communications for emergency rental assistance, consider how those messages and materials might be repurposed for other housing-related services. The same key messages might be useful for eviction diversion services, housing navigators, or other programs.

Put it in the Words of the People You Want to Reach

Test your key message with your target audience. Choose a message that portrays an action or worry from the audience's point of view.

For example, the target audience might not respond to terms like "eviction." While lawyers or city officials may think of a household being "at risk of eviction," the target audience might be focused on the more basic financial problem of being behind on rent. So instead of *"Are You Facing Eviction?"* the message might be *"Are You Behind on Rent?"*

Effective messages might vary by location or demographic group. Some groups might be familiar with services like legal aid, and so a message to them might be, *"Legal Aid Is Available to Help."* Meanwhile, others might not know that free civil legal aid lawyers even exist, so a better message might be, *"Free Lawyers Are Here to Help."*

Talk to current and past clients to hear their feedback about which messages are the most understandable and engaging.

RECOMMENDATION 3:
Harness Visual Design Principles

Visual design should amplify the key message. Design the flyer, poster or card to direct the audience to pay attention to the message and the information provided. Work with designers or visual design tools to employ proven techniques that highlight the key messages.

Follow these visual design principles to amplify the message, ensure it is engaging and useable, and "brand" communications in a way that builds awareness and trust in the community.

Ensure Brand Consistency

Before creating a new visual design scheme, check with colleagues to determine if there is already an established style for communications related to a particular service. If an established or informal style guide exists, employ it consistently when creating outreach materials, and work collaboratively to improve and strengthen the default styles and designs.

If no visual brand guidelines have been established for communications related to a particular service or program, the team developing outreach materials should, at a minimum, define and document the following:

◆ Standard color palette

◆ Logo (e.g., city, organization or program-specific)

◆ Set of fonts

◆ Font sizing rules

◆ Image guidelines (e.g., types of imagery, icons and photography to use)

◆ Key messaging phrases

◆ Template materials (e.g., program letterhead, document templates, promotional material templates)

Be Intentional with Hierarchy

Not all information on a flyer, poster or card is equally important. A "visual hierarchy" directs the audience's attention to the key message and content while helping them through important follow-up details in a logical fashion.

To identify the proper hierarchy for visual materials, complete a first draft of the content and information that should be included in a communication. Then mark it up based on hierarchy: *What is the highest-priority information to get across to the reader? Second-highest? And third-highest?*

Once the hierarchy of importance has been established, use visual design techniques to segment the information in the materials.

The hierarchy of information will be designated using:

◆ **Font Sizes**
   The larger the font, the more likely a reader will see and remember that message or content. Present high-priority information in the largest fonts and use smaller fonts for information that is important but not as high of a priority.

◆ **Distinctive Fonts**
   Eye-catching fonts using more distinctive fonts will draw a reader's attention to high-priority information. For example, a script font might be used for the high-priority message, with an aesthetically compatible but more standard font (such as Arial or Helvetica) used for second- or third-tier information. Alternatively, consider using a bolded version of the font throughout for high-priority information.

◆ **Color Pops**

Use a bright, distinctive color to call out the message the reader should pay most attention to. Other text can be presented in black or dark gray.

Tip: If you squint at the communication, what pops out at you? The central message and key action should be the most eye-catching. To test this, briefly show a piece of communications collateral to a colleague who was not involved in the development process and ask them what information they remember.

Use White Space

As content layout and hierarchy decisions move forward, consider whether a communication appears too crowded or busy. One key principle to enforce is the use of white space. White space does not necessarily have to be white — the background of a design might be a color other than white — but there should be ample blank areas on a page or piece of collateral.

Ensure there is white space around the borders of the communication, instead of designing up to the edge of a page. Allow for more white space around the highest-priority information in the hierarchy — the more blank space around a heading or sentence, the more attention people will give to it.

White space is important because it gives the audience a break. Rather than cramming many pieces of information onto a flyer, poster or card, adhering to the white space principle ensures the communication is not hectic, overwhelming or overstuffed. It makes the outreach material feel professional, fresh and approachable.

TIP: A fashion adage states, "Before you leave the house, take off at least one accessory." Visual design operates in the same way. People may want to include many pieces of information in a communication, but more white space and less content will help get the message across more effectively.

Practice Restraint with Fonts and Colors

It is easy to get excited about exploring different fonts and colors to make communications materials feel lively and special, but restraint with fonts and colors is key to useability and impact.

Use a maximum of two font types for any given printed communication: one distinctive, eye catching font for headings or high-priority information; and a second font that is highly legible, if not a little boring. This font will be used for the secondary and tertiary hierarchy items. Think of it as the "body" font.

Using distinctive fonts for long sentences or passages can undermine legibility. The two font types should be almost opposite: one serif and one sans serif, for example. Using two fonts can help the audience distinguish between different messages and levels of information while improving readability.

Follow a similar principle for font colors: use one distinctive, bright color for high-priority hierarchy content such as titles, headings or short slogans. A more stable font color should be used for sentences and body text, such as black or dark gray. The colors should contrast, so it is easy to differentiate between them.

Align Text and Design in a Grid

The placement of text, images and other content in a communication can make the difference in whether people read it. Content should be aligned to a grid, meaning text and images are lined up along the same left or right grid guideline. Alignment to a grid is an easy way to ensure that the communication appears crisp and professional.

Design and text editing software often have in-built alignment tools. These alignment tools may "snap" pieces of content to each other so that they are lined up. However, keep in mind that automatic tools can easily align things in a way that make sense visually, but not contextually, and that less advanced tools may lay out text without ensuring alignment at all.

Review all content before it is published to ensure it is aligned. Correcting alignment can be an easy way to avoid big mistakes that make a piece of communication collateral look sloppy or untrustworthy.

Example of Alignment to a Grid

Use a grid
to ensure
content is
clean
aligned
balanced
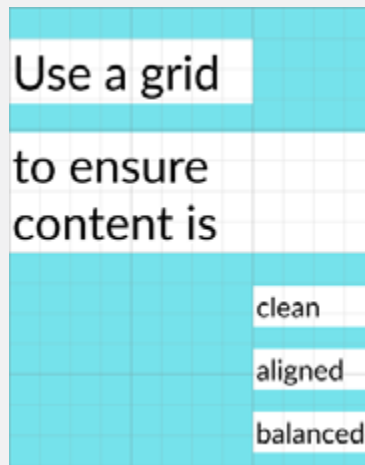
Source: Margaret Hagan, Stanford Legal Design Lab

Review and Refinement

FINAL REVIEW BEFORE PUBLICATION

Share communication materials across internal and external teams, and with colleagues who can offer fresh eyes before printing and distribution. Marketing and communications colleagues can provide insight into design and messaging, while the program team should ensure that the information is correct, up to date and directs the reader to the goal or action they need to take. A colleague who has not seen the materials before can serve as a barometer for whether a communication gets the message across to a first-time reader.

Final review of communications material should include:

◆ Spell check and grammar

◆ Content correctness (e.g., application due dates, program or service description)

◆ Directional information and action steps (e.g., correct phone numbers and website URLs, functioning QR codes or links)

◆ Adherence to design principles

   ◆ Hierarchy of information and layout

   ◆ White space

   ◆ Use of color

   ◆ Consistent use of limited font styles

   ◆ Alignment to a grid

Essential Communications and Design Principles to Follow

Review communications collateral to ensure they follow these essential visual design principles to make materials more effective and impactful.

Source: Margaret Hagan, Stanford Legal Design Lab

Evaluation and feedback strategy

Following dissemination of materials, track the success of a message and a given communication. Note when a flyer, poster or card is distributed or posted, and monitor key metrics such as the number of website visits, calls, applications and court attendance rates in order to identify changes in the trends. Is the strategic goal of the communication material being met?

Establish a feedback strategy as well. This could be through periodic check-ins with service providers and clients before another batch of materials are produced. Explore if there is anything people seem to be misunderstanding or getting wrong that could be tied to the message and materials. Ask if front-line service workers have heard of other ways tenants are phrasing their problems, which could point to a stronger message to use in new materials. Make sure tenants and landlords know they can provide feedback, so that every new round of materials is more effective in delivering reliable, actionable and engaging information.

Suggested Resources

Cities should reference the following resources when developing paper-based resources to communicate about the availability of emergency rental assistance or other eviction prevention services.

Canva

Canva is an online design platform that enables users to borrow from existing, well-designed templates. It has alignment, color palette, and other features that can encourage good designs.

The Visual Law Library

The Visual Law Library is an online repository of how laws and policies have been visualized in different situations that can serve as inspiration for legal visuals.

The Noun Project

The Noun Project has consistent, black-and-white icons that can help avoid outdated or clumsy clip-art. Icons from the Noun Project are all scalable vectors, and are screened for quality depictions. Subscribe to use an unlimited number of royalty-free icons.

Legal Design Toolbox

The Legal Design Toolbox is an open-source resource with links to tools, instructions, and examples to help develop effective legal communications.