



DIGITAL COMMUNICATION:

Using Social Media to Increase Participation in Emergency Rental Assistance Programs

Social media is a vital tool for local governments seeking to raise awareness about programs and services designed to reduce housing stability and prevent eviction filings, including emergency rental assistance.

However, residents receive an overwhelming number of updates across their social media channels, and users typically spend only a few seconds on any specific post. With these challenges in mind, cities must be strategic to engage residents and get important messages across.

This worksheet is intended to guide emergency rental assistance (ERA) program staff through the process of evaluating and improving social media outreach. It includes a step-by-step guide, building on Stanford Legal Design Lab's [Social Media Outreach Toolkit for Eviction Prevention](#), to assist cities with curating and designing a social media channel that increases awareness of programs and assistance. Special attention has been given to images and other types of visuals that are used across social media channels. By following the steps in the worksheet, cities will amplify awareness and magnify outreach about their ERA program to both tenants and landlords.

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.

The Basics: Establishing a Social Media Presence

The first step to reaching tenants and landlords through social media is to establish a strong, trusted social media presence. This can be achieved by using a few simple strategies and by disseminating consistent and engaging content.

City staff or others administering a local ERA program should defer to guidance from the city communications staff or broader organization regarding use of specific social media accounts. It is likely that the city and its partners will have established accounts across a range of platforms, and department- or program-specific accounts are often discouraged. Craft a social media approach that attains key outreach goals while adhering to city practices and standards.

Identify Priority Social Media Platforms

Given that cities and eviction prevention service providers often lack a robust communications department and dedicated social media team, consider focusing your efforts on one or two social media platforms. Decide which platforms to prioritize based on the type of content to be shared and the platforms that the target audiences use most.



Tip: When selecting a social media platform, follow the rule of thumb of “quality over quantity.” It is better to have fewer channels that are well curated and frequently updated than several inactive accounts on various social media platforms. Even if the city has accounts on many of the major platforms, ERA program staff should focus their efforts on just one or two.

An important metric that you can use to determine which social media platform would be a good fit for your city is age. Age plays an important role in the world of social media platforms as it gives a good indication of the userbase. Content is another metric you can use to determine which platform would be a good fit for your organization.

The chart below provides a summary of these key factors by platform:

Social Media Platforms by Content Type and User Demographic

Platform	Type of Content	Largest User Demographic
Facebook	Written text, images, long and short videos, links to other websites	Even spread of users across most age groups
Instagram	Images, short videos	25-34 year olds
Twitter	Short messages, links to other websites	40 year olds
LinkedIn	Written text	30-49 year olds
YouTube	Videos	Even spread of users across most age groups
Reddit	Text, images, link sharing	18-29 year olds
TikTok	Short videos	16-24 year olds
Pinterest	Images, link sharing	Even spread of users across most age groups
Spotify	Podcasts (audio)	18-44 year olds

Analyze the demographic your city is targeting for eviction prevention information and assistance, and identify the social media platform(s) where those residents are most engaged. Use this metric to focus strategy and content development around one or two platforms. Most communities will be best served by prioritizing Instagram, Facebook and/or Twitter. Examples in this worksheet are focused on these three platforms.

BECOME A VERIFIED ACCOUNT

Seek to have city and program accounts verified by social media platforms as “official” or designated as a business. This will enable social media managers to gain insights into back-end performance data and engagement analytics, while also bringing credibility to the account. Users viewing the content will be more likely to trust and act on information provided by a verified and reliable source.

The process for verifying an account varies by platform. Refer to guidance from the social media company and go through the necessary steps:

For Instagram

Cities can request a business account as a nonprofit. This will give the account a “Verified” badge that is visible to users, provide the option of having a contact button for the account, and allow access to Instagram Insights for viewing engagement data and account analytics.

[Follow the steps outlined by Instagram.](#)

For Facebook

Facebook offers the option for account pages or profiles to receive a verification badge. [Request verification by filling completing this form.](#)

For Twitter

To receive the blue “Verified” badge on Twitter, an account must meet the criteria of being authentic, notable and active. Account administrators can apply for verification by navigating through the account settings.

[Learn more about the criteria and process of becoming verified on Twitter.](#)

Develop a Language and Style Sheet

Content on a priority social media platform should have consistent, user-friendly language, colors, fonts, and styles. This consistent “look and feel” will give a more professional appearance to the account, leading to greater trust from the audience.

A style sheet should, at a minimum, include guidance on:

- ◆ Color palette (with Hex color codes)
- ◆ Font name(s)
- ◆ Font styles by message type (e.g., styling for headers and body text)
- ◆ Relevant logo

Example Style Sheet

Fonts

HEADINGS ALL CAPS or regular in the font-family SEN Extra Bold.

Body text in Sen Regular either in the Navy 20006B or Black 00000 font.

- Use lists to draw attention.
- Make clear action points.
- Have enough spacing between lines.
- Keep sentences short.

Use the brighter colors to pop out messages.

Use the SC branch Logo. 

Color Palette

				
65E9DE	FFCD00	6031E7	B011FC	20006B
				
C80AA7	0C00B2	F8F804	DDDBFA	000000

Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the NAACP Housing Navigator Program (Columbia, South Carolina)

Posts should also consistently employ key phrases and messages using shared language. Sample text phrases are listed below.

Sample Key Phrases for Outreach

Program Phrases

- ◆ Are you behind on rent?
- ◆ Have you been evicted?
- ◆ Do you need housing?
- ◆ Worried about eviction?
- ◆ Can't pay utility bills?
- ◆ Problems with your landlord?
- ◆ Facing an eviction?
- ◆ Has COVID affected your ability to make rent?

Call-to-Action Phrases

- ◆ Apply for rent assistance now.
- ◆ Apply to get your rent and utilities paid.
- ◆ Let a housing navigator help you for free.
- ◆ We can assist you for free – know your options.
- ◆ Text PAY RENT to (###) ###-#### to get started with your application.
- ◆ Learn more about rental assistance at [URL].

Follow Size Requirements for Content and Images

Size requirements for content and images will vary based on the selected social media platform. If the image size is not correct, it will not display properly on the platform. This can result in the loss of information or visual cues that might be important for tenants or landlords viewing the post. Image size requirements (in pixels) for Instagram, Twitter and Facebook are listed in the table below.

Image Size Requirements by Platform (in pixels)

Content Type	Instagram	Twitter	Facebook
Profile photo	320x320	400x400	400x400
Stories	1080x1920	1080x1920	1080x1920
Grid/Embedded in post or Tweet	1080x1080	1024x512	Portrait: 627x1200 Landscape: 1200x627
Header image/ Cover photo	n/a	1500x1500	851x315

Select Photos and Illustrations

Use authentic photos, videos and illustrations in your social media posts. Ask colleagues or local actors to participate in a photoshoot to create stock images for use (with their permission) on the city's social media channel. Photos of real-world users or residents should only be used with permission from the individual(s); be mindful of privacy issues when using resident and user photos.

In addition to or in place of photos, consider using illustrations to represent people involved in the eviction process. Work with local artists to develop a collection of useable graphics, or leverage [free, open-use illustrations](#) created by the Stanford Legal Design Lab that are included in the [Social Media Outreach Toolkit](#).



TIP: Photographs on the city's social media channel should be inclusive and representative of the city's demographics. Be mindful of the age, race, ethnicity, gender and ability of individuals pictured or highlighted through social media.

Examples of Illustrations Available for Use



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

Employ a Range of Content Styles and Formats

STORIES AND GRID POSTS

Instagram, Facebook and some other social media platforms offer the option to create “stories” posts in addition to “grid” posts. Stories are posts that disappear within a certain time period, often 24 hours. This is in contrast to grid posts that are always visible through a user’s main account page. Story posts can also be repurposed and saved as “highlights” outside of the account’s main content grid.

It is important to make a distinction between “permanent” and “temporary” posts and understand when to use each type.

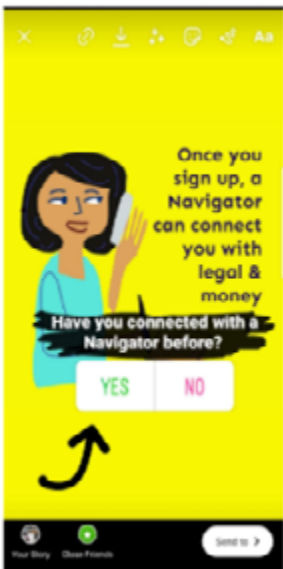
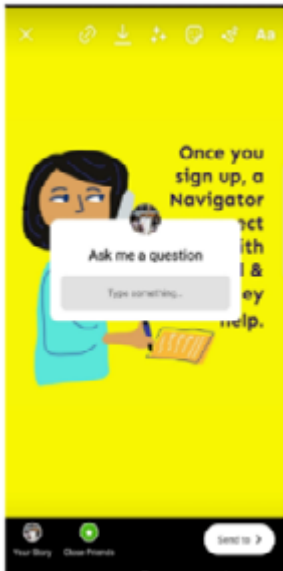
Social Media Post Formats and Recommendations

Stories or Other Temporary Post Formats	Grid Posts
<p>CHARACTERISTICS OF THESE POSTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Displayed for a limited period of time ◆ Presented in chronological order by when it was posted ◆ Offer interactive elements and features (e.g., polls, quizzes) 	<p>CHARACTERISTICS OF THESE POSTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Displayed permanently ◆ Multiple posts are viewable at the same time through the account page ◆ No interactive elements
<p>WHEN TO USE THESE POSTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ During emergencies or developing situations (e.g., new policy, ruling or important news event) ◆ To highlight events or direct links that can not be shared in captions ◆ To engage directly with users through interactive elements ◆ To promote and draw attention to a new grid post 	<p>WHEN TO USE THESE POSTS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ To share information that can be referenced at a later date (e.g., help line phone number, application date) ◆ To share important but long-term updates (e.g., opening the application window for ERA) ◆ To build a consistent visual brand for a program or organization over time ◆ To share a collection of related content (e.g., multiple photos from the same event presented in a carousel)
<p>ADDITIONAL TIPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Limit to 1-5 stories per day ◆ Save stories as highlights with a descriptive name to help users find them later ◆ Repost positive stories from community members if the account is tagged 	<p>ADDITIONAL TIPS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Do not create multiple grid posts in rapid succession — limit to 1-2 posts per day, or leverage carousels to share multiple images or videos ◆ “Cross-post” as a story to alert users that a new post has been added to the account

INTERACTIVE CONTENT

Interactive content can be a helpful tool to keep an audience engaged. By leveraging tools and content elements such as quizzes, polls, location and event tagging, and more, you create an opportunity for users to connect more directly and deeply with your account. This builds trust, credibility and awareness.

Examples of Interactive Posts



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the NAACP Housing Navigator Program (Columbia, South Carolina)

Several platforms offer interactive options, but Instagram offers the most well-known and versatile functionality. Follow the steps outlined below to create interactive content on Instagram:

How to Create Interactive Content in Instagram Stories

1. Create a new “Story” post
2. Upload a photo to the post, or select “Camera” and navigate to the “Create” option to build a post on a colorful background instead of against a photo background
3. Select the “Sticker” icon at the top of the screen
4. Select from the several interactive content element options, including:
 - ◆ **Location:** Tag your location, such as your city, or a more specific location like an in-person resource center
 - ◆ **@Mention:** Tag another account, such as a partner organization or collaborator, to enable that account to repost your story
 - ◆ **#Hashtag:** Insert hashtags to help users find your content
 - ◆ **Questions:** Prompt users to submit questions (e.g., “What documentation do I need in order to submit an ERA application?” or “How long will it take to hear back about my application?”), and then create additional posts responding to those questions publicly
 - ◆ **Music:** Add songs to your post, or join in on viral “TikTok Sound” trends
 - ◆ **Like Slide:** Add a slide animation for users to swipe on to show positive responses to a question you ask
 - ◆ **Poll:** Create polls to collect feedback or input from users
 - ◆ **Quiz:** Create quizzes to test users’ knowledge
 - ◆ **Countdown:** Create a countdown for key events or dates (e.g., for a community event, training, or open ERA application window), which allows users to set reminders for the selected time

Amplify the Reach of Your Content

With a social media presence established, seek to reach and engage as many local users as possible. This includes landlords and tenants who might make use of available services. Awareness throughout the community can also benefit the program in the long term.

No-Cost Strategies for Expanding Reach and Targeting

The following techniques can attract more tenants and landlords to view content, access resources and hopefully file an ERA program application:

- ◆ **Tags:** Use keywords, categories and relevant hashtags (e.g., #evictionhelp, #rentalassistance) to draw additional users who might be searching for those terms
- ◆ **Location tag:** Tag where the program is administered so tenants and landlords in the area can easily find and explore the account
- ◆ **Include direct links in posts or account pages:** Include links to relevant pages or resources (e.g., an ERA program page or FAQ) directly in posts, captions and account bios. *Note: URLs included in Instagram post captions are not clickable, so include links in the account's stories or bio and direct users there*
- ◆ **Collaborate:** Work with other eviction prevention service provider accounts to cross-post content, or ask to be featured in their stories or on their page
- ◆ **Direct outreach:** Use the location or hashtag function to see what residents are talking about and engage with users as appropriate, without spamming



TIP: Collaborative posts or content series can be a powerful way to tap into a new audience and to expand your followers. Reach out to local service providers and landlord groups, tag them in content, and ask them to repost or share your posts with their followers. Alternatively, identify community members with a strong social media following by monitoring posts tagged to the city's geographic location, and approach them about creating PSA-style content for ERA through their platform.

Paid Advertising, Promotion and Boosting Posts

Cities and ERA providers can also pay to further amplify reach on social media with promoted posts, advertisements, and other paid ways of attracting more of an audience. The most common and impactful way to do this through Facebook and Instagram requires setting up a Facebook Business page and [Facebook Ads Manager account](#) to develop “sponsored,” “promoted,” or “boosted” posts. Facebook Ads Manager is used for paid promotion across both platforms.

Paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram might suit ERA providers’ objectives well because it comes with the added functionality of a built-in “call-to-action” feature. This “call-to-action” button or link is included at the bottom of a post and prompts users to navigate directly to outside webpages, such as an ERA program or city website. Alternatively, the “call-to-action” button can be tailored to cultivate additional followers for an account by navigating users back to the account’s profile page. Facebook Ad Manager will guide account managers through the process of developing an ad with a “call-to-action” that best fits their goals.

Instagram also provides the option of paying to “boost” an existing grid post to expand its reach to a targeted audience, though with less specificity than a direct ad. Ads and boosted posts appear in similar ways as typical grid posts (e.g., as a photo, video or carousel with multiple visuals), but will be flagged as “Sponsored.” Given that Instagram does not otherwise allow hyperlinks on a grid post or in a caption, having the “call-to-action” feature on boosted posts can be very impactful.

Ads or promoted content should feature strong images and concise messaging. Any headline should be five or fewer words, and descriptive captions should be limited to one sentence. Accompanying messaging or text should be tailored to meet the goal of the ad and the action that it prompts users to take:

- ◆ *Is the ad intended to drive general awareness of ERA?* Consider driving users to the account page to gain more followers.
- ◆ *Is the goal specifically to encourage community members to apply?* Choose to have the “Call to Action” button to direct users to the ERA program website.
- ◆ *Does it aim to reach tenants or landlords?* Navigate to relevant program resources accordingly.

Be selective, and use text and images that support your goal.

Paying for ads or to boost posts allows social media account managers to target their content based on location, gender, age, language, interests, behaviors and connections. Refine your targeting strategy once you see how the content performs with the intended audience. Coordinate with communications or marketing specialists, along with others who work on diversity, equity, and inclusion, to refine the ad strategy to more effectively reach target groups.



TIP: If you are trying paid content strategies for the first time, start small — but do not be intimidated. Advertising on these platforms is often charged on a “cost per click” basis in which the account manager sets a defined budget, so you will not be charged unexpected amounts.

Deploy a small ad budget for initial targeting to help refine your audience and to see how the content performs. An appropriate budget will vary significantly based on city size, region and level of targeting, but consider starting with a budget of roughly \$30 with promotion running for about a week. Explore the data insights available through the Facebook Business and Ad Manager tools to more narrowly define the target audience or to identify trends in what content performs well, both of which can help lower the “cost per click.” Lowering the “cost per click” will help future ad spending go further.

Example of Turning on Notifications for Twitter



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab

Ask Users to Turn on Notifications

The algorithms deployed by social media platforms do not always highlight the most recent posts for users, and policies are frequently updated to change how or why certain posts are prioritized on a feed. This means posts can “get lost” without many users seeing or engaging with them — even for users who follow your account or page.

To prevent a post from getting lost, ask your channel followers to turn on notifications for the relevant social media account. The notification button is usually displayed as a bell at the top of the profile page. Once followers have selected to be notified, they will receive a push message on their phone every time the account uploads new content.

Keep Refining and Streamlining Your Approach to Social Media

Maximize your use of social media by employing a range of tools — such as technology add-ons that automatize posting or improve user services and strategies — in addition to regularly evaluating and refining your social media strategy.

Employ a Social Media Management Tool

Social media management platforms enable account administrators to schedule and manage content and posts across multiple platforms. As your city’s social media presence grows, or if an account is shared across multiple departments, these tools can streamline coordination.

By scheduling posts, you will be able to see what other content is scheduled to go out on a given day, making it possible to spread out posts and avoid overwhelming or spamming followers with multiple posts in a short period of time. Posts can also be scheduled in advance for important days, such as when an ERA application window opens or closes. Many of these tools can also track when someone responds to a post, comments or sends a direct message.

Popular social media management tools include:

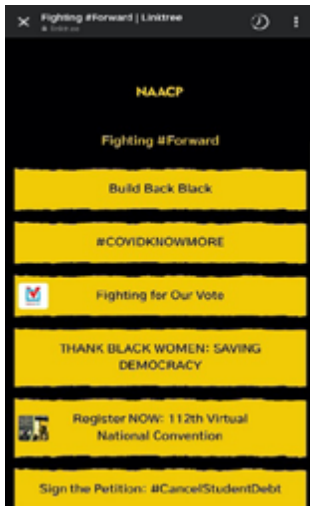
- ◆ **Hootsuite:** hootsuite.com
- ◆ **Later:** later.com
- ◆ **Buffer:** buffer.com

Create a Centralized Social Media Landing Page

Most social media platforms only allow one permanent link in an account profile. A social media landing page can house multiple links that direct tenants and landlords to relevant webpages, such as an ERA program landing page, application materials, FAQs, contact pages or the city website.

Posts or captions can direct followers to the “link in bio” for additional information related to a post, and the link can often be embedded directly in stories. By highlighting a single link to an established social media landing page in an account bio or profile, cities can direct users to one central directory for additional resources.

Example of Using Linktree



Source: Stanford Legal Design Lab for the NAACP

Popular social media landing page tools include:

- ◆ **Linktree:** linktr.ee
- ◆ **Lnk.bio:** lnk.bio
- ◆ **MilkShake:** milkshake.app
- ◆ **Campsite:** campsite.bio

Track Engagement and Demographics

To begin tracking engagement and demographic information, the account needs to be verified or designated as a business. Once that step has been taken, program staff or account managers will be able to:

- ◆ Analyze the type of posts that are the most popular with users — this can be a signal to create similar types of content
- ◆ Analyze the timestamps of when followers most often view the account's posts — this can inform the best time to schedule future posts
- ◆ Analyze user locations — this will help guide the creation of more location-oriented content or target users in underserved areas
- ◆ Analyze how often users click on posted links — this can help you create more content that is likely to drive users to outside resources and webpages
- ◆ Analyze the demographics of users engaging with your content — this can help determine whether your content and strategies are resonating with your target audience

After analyzing the metrics above, you will be able to craft and design social media output that targets your intended audience.

Suggested Resources

Cities and ERA providers looking to expand or refine their use of social media to promote available assistance can consult the resources below for additional information.

[Social Media Outreach Toolkit for Eviction Prevention](#)

(Legal Design Lab)

This toolkit offers tools, links and resources to support cities and other organizations to design and manage social media channels.

[Social Media for Nonprofits](#)

(Techsoup)

This guide introduces basic principles for how to use social media effectively and offers several tips and tricks for improving user engagement.

Though it is written with nonprofits in mind, many of the lessons also apply to municipal social media accounts.