



## DIGITAL COMMUNICATION:

# Website and Webpage Evaluation for Emergency Rental Assistance Programs

Well-designed websites or webpages can play a crucial role in increasing awareness of and participation in emergency rental assistance (ERA) programs and other eviction prevention services among tenants and landlords. This worksheet offers guidance to cities and their partners on how to evaluate and improve websites and webpages that offer information about these programs and services.

The worksheet includes a step-by-step guide for cities on how to conduct a website or webpage evaluation, along with a sample **Website Evaluation Worksheet** and a **Response Compilation Worksheet**, which provides a framework for prioritizing necessary improvements. Users of this resource are encouraged to engage both internal and external stakeholders in answering — and acting on — the worksheet questions.

By following the guidance in this worksheet, cities and their partners will be better equipped to help residents find the information they need online for accessing critical assistance.

**NOTE:** This worksheet was developed for the evaluation of websites related to local ERA programs, but is also applicable to websites for other eviction prevention services, such as mediation programs.

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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](https://nlc.org/resource/emergency-rental-assistance-toolkit).

# Preparing for a Web Audit

The purpose of an evaluation or web audit is to assess how a website or a single webpage is operating and performing. Cities and ERA providers can follow the steps below to consider whether existing digital resources, such as an ERA program webpage or collection of pages about an ERA program on a city website, are meeting community needs and effectively connecting residents with resources.

Key facets of an effective audit include tapping into fresh perspectives to identify bugs or formatting issues, and working to streamline navigation for an improved user experience.

## 1 Define the Scope of the Evaluation

Begin by determining what website or webpages will be reviewed and evaluated as part of the audit. If an ERA program has a dedicated website with a central landing page and additional pages with resources and information, consider evaluating the entire website. Alternatively, information about an ERA program may be featured on a city or departmental website, with or without subpages. Decide what web resources will fall within the scope of the evaluation, but keep in mind that a larger scope will likely result in less detailed feedback.

Once the relevant website or webpages have been identified, determine who is responsible for maintaining them and what the process is for making edits. Connect with this individual or team before conducting the review to discuss your goals, gain an understanding of what is technically possible to change, and bring them in on the process.

### Key Questions to Answer Prior to a Web Evaluation

- ◆ What website or webpages will be evaluated?
- ◆ What web platform or content management system is used? (E.g., Wordpress or Drupal)
- ◆ Who is the website or webpage administrator?
- ◆ What website performance metrics are available?
  - ◆ Is Google Analytics and Search Console enabled?
- ◆ Are there currently any large website strategic shifts or initiatives to be aware of?
  - ◆ E.g., Is a website redesign planned for the near future, or is the organization engaging a new website contractor?

## 2 Outline Evaluation Objectives

Align internally around the goals for the website review. How you define the objective will impact how the evaluation process proceeds, what evaluators focus on, and the resulting next steps. The evaluation objective(s) should be informed by, but not dictated by, conversations with the relevant website administrator about the status quo and what is technically feasible.

For example, if a website overhaul or redesign has recently taken place, it is unlikely that you will be able to spur significant structural changes or establish a completely new web style. Instead, you might focus on the new website's functionality and on the content itself. Alternatively, web administrators may raise concerns about engagement with certain pages (e.g., users routinely clicking off certain pages, or being misdirected), which can help focus the evaluation on problem areas.

## 3 Identify the Evaluators

Seek to engage a wide range of individuals in the web audit as evaluators. These people will be tasked with clicking through the website, reading the content, and rating it based on a provided rubric.

To achieve a well-rounded evaluation, bring in both colleagues who are familiar with the relevant webpages, along with people from other teams who are not well-versed in the content and can offer a fresh perspective. Volunteers from the city's broader eviction prevention network can bring valuable insights as well.

It is important to engage evaluators with a diverse set of backgrounds. This will help ensure that the evaluation reflects a wide variety of voices and perspectives, including cultural differences.



**TIP:** Consider inviting community advocates, eviction prevention service providers or legal aid providers to participate in the evaluation. Including these partners will bring additional perspectives and can improve the website or webpage for the end user.

# Conducting a Web Audit

The goal of the audit or evaluation is to allow cities, ERA program staff and selected partners to critically review how the ERA website or webpages are currently performing. Provide evaluators with guidance on what to look for and how “deep” to go in their analysis (e.g., how many levels of pages to click through). Once the audit is complete, program administrators can identify key themes in the feedback, areas for improvement, and immediate and long-term next steps.

**NOTE:** An interactive **Website Evaluation Worksheet** is included at the end of this resource for use by cities and their partners. Circulate a digital or printed version for completion by evaluators. A **Response Compilation Worksheet** is also provided for internal use by program staff. This offers a framework for aggregating feedback from reviewers, along with prioritizing necessary improvements through the development of an Action Plan.

## 4 Develop the Evaluation Criteria and Rubric

City or program staff coordinating the website review should provide evaluators with specific instructions and clear criteria for assessing or grading the website. Having a shared blueprint will set the team up for success for compiling, reconciling and acting on evaluator feedback.

The evaluation criteria can draw attention to specific aspects of a website or webpage that could benefit from a closer look — for example, functionality, text hierarchy or color scheme.

Cities or program staff should develop the following materials for evaluators to use in their review:

- ◆ General guidance on what is expected of evaluators
- ◆ A recommended process or methodology to follow (e.g., starting from the program landing page, or Google searching key phrases and navigating from the first page users are directed to)
- ◆ Evaluation criteria in a rubric or worksheet format
- ◆ Instructions for how to grade or rate elements against the criteria (e.g., 1 to 5 with 5 being “exceptional”; or a three-tier scale such as “needs improvement,” “average,” or “excellent”)

## Sample Criteria for a Website Evaluation Rubric

Focus Areas for Evaluation	Specific Criteria
<b>General Layout and Visual Design</b>	Visual consistency White space Hierarchy Headings Spacing and line breaks Menus and sidebars Organization of referrals and resources Justification and alignment Color scheme Media types Media quality
<b>Accessibility of Layout and Visual Design</b>	Language accessibility Alt-text Font style Font size Color contrast
<b>Content</b>	Key topic coverage Key jurisdiction coverage Responsiveness to immediate needs Relevance to current events Plain language Action-oriented messaging Range of content types Content format
<b>Technical Performance and Discoverability</b>	Technical errors and bugs Loading speed Responsiveness Mobile compatibility Discoverability

These criteria align with the evaluation worksheet at the end of this resource. In addition to specific criteria, offer space for evaluators to provide open-ended responses and general feedback that might not fit into any one particular bucket of the evaluation.

## 5 Conduct the Evaluation

With evaluation criteria defined, program staff can reach out to evaluators to facilitate their review of the website or webpages. Encourage evaluators to conduct their review independently and submit written feedback. Alternatively, facilitate a call during which evaluators are divided into small groups and navigate the website independently, but compile shared feedback.

Encourage evaluators to explore and engage with the website as if they are a new user who has never visited the site before. They should consider how the content would be perceived by a tenant or landlord who is coming to the site in need of help.



**TIP:** Customize the evaluation worksheet included at the end of this resource to provide additional direction to evaluators based on municipal or ERA program priorities. This might include adjusting the criteria, the instructions for evaluators, or the grading scale to better fit the scope of your review and local needs.

## 6 Synthesize the Results

After completing the audit and collecting feedback forms from evaluators, city and program staff should compile and review responses. This might mean tallying total or average points for specific criteria, or noting the number of evaluators who designated an element as falling into particular category, such as “needs improvement,” “average,” or “excellent.”

After tallying audit responses from each evaluator, the next step is to develop a list of priority actions for improving the ERA program website or webpage.

Program staff should set up an action plan based on the priority list and coordinate with the website administrator on needed improvements. Establish a timeline for expeditiously tackling issues flagged as needing improvement, as well as moving “average” aspects of the website or webpage to “excellent.”



**TIP:** After improvements from the action plan have been made to the website or webpage, invite some of the original evaluators to review the changes and provide additional feedback.

# Suggested Resources

For further guidance related to website audits and evaluation, see the resources below:

## [Eviction Help Webpage Guide](#)

(Stanford Legal Design Lab)

The Eviction Help Webpage Guide provides direction on how to conduct a thorough review of a website to ensure that it is a user-friendly, modern web resource. It includes a downloadable review rubric in PowerPoint format that can be adapted for use by city or program teams.

## [U.S. Web Design System](#)

(U.S. General Services Administration)

The U.S. Web Design System is a toolkit of principles, guidance, and code that makes it easier to build accessible, mobile-friendly government websites. It applies human-centered design to the development of user-friendly websites.

## [Lighthouse](#)

(Google Developers)

Lighthouse is an open-source, automated tool for improving the quality of web pages. It can be run against any web page and has audits for performance, accessibility, progressive web apps, SEO and more. After running a Lighthouse audit, the tool will generate a report on how the page performed.

## [Make Your Website or App Accessible and Publish an Accessibility Statement](#)

(UK Government)

This resource provides guidance on how to determine whether websites and applications are accessible and was developed to help public sector websites and applications meet new standards established through legislation in the United Kingdom. While specific to UK regulations, these approaches can also be applied to U.S.-based program websites.

## [Guidelines for Program Web Sites](#)

(U.S. Department of the Treasury and the U.S. Digital Service)

This resource provides guidelines for developing websites and webpages that will effectively inform renters and landlords about an ERA program. It includes guidance on what to include on an ERA webpage, how to improve accessibility, and more.

# Website Evaluation Worksheet

## Instructions for Evaluators

This worksheet will guide you through a thorough evaluation of the relevant website. You will be prompted to focus on specific elements one-by-one, including the general layout and visual design, accessibility considerations, the content itself, and finally the technical performance of the site.



**The full evaluation should take no more than 45 minutes to complete and should be done in one sitting.** To complete the evaluation, imagine that you are a tenant or landlord in need of assistance and you are accessing this website for the first time. Open the website from your computer, mobile device or tablet and begin exploring it as if you are a new user who has never seen it before.



**First, scan the content quickly and note your first impressions about how information is presented. Test out different scenarios.** For example, explore the website as if you are a new user trying to find the answer to a specific question, like whether you are eligible for rental assistance or what your immediate next steps should be if you have received an eviction notice. Click on different links, open the related resources and, as you take a deeper dive, read the webpage content to get a sense of the information being shared.



**Respond to each of the questions that follow.** Space for open-end responses and general comments has also been provided. Your open and honest feedback will help us improve the website and better serve our community — thank you!

### WEBSITE BEING REVIEWED

What website or webpage(s) are being reviewed through this worksheet?

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### EVALUATOR INFORMATION

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

What department or organization do you work with? \_\_\_\_\_

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## General Layout & Visual Design

- 1. Visual Consistency:** Overall, does the website look visually appealing and consistent from page to page, and from section to section?
  - a. No, the pages and sections do not look similar at all
  - b. Mostly, but some pages or sections look out of place
  - c. Yes, it looks very visually consistent
  
- 2. White Space:** Is there sufficient white space between sections and on the pages so the website does not look overwhelming or too busy?
  - a. No, it looks very busy
  - b. There is a small amount of white space
  - c. Yes, there is sufficient white space
  
- 3. Hierarchy:** Does each page have clear distinctions between headings, important messages and body text so you know where to focus your attention? Or is the content presented in large blocks of text with no prioritization, making it difficult to navigate or identify priority information and messages? *Look at the heading and title fonts. Are they clearly “the important messages” because of the relative size, font style or color contrast? Is the page scannable and do you know where to focus?*
  - a. No, the content is largely undifferentiated with headlines and text all competing with each other
  - b. There is some hierarchy, but it is inconsistent or could be more clear
  - c. There is a clear message, strong hierarchy of headings, and signals for the user about where to focus attention

- 4. Headings:** Does each page effectively use headings and subheads that are differentiated from the body text and given clear priority based on font size, color and style?
- a. No, there are no clear headings and subheadings breaking up the text
  - b. There are some headings and subheadings, but they are inconsistent, unclear, or not effective
  - c. Yes, there are effective headings and subheads that support quick scanning for information
- 5. Spacing and Line Breaks:** Is the spacing between lines, paragraphs and sections consistent, and are paragraph breaks frequent?
- a. No, spacing is inconsistent or there are large blocks of text without line breaks
  - b. There is some inconsistent spacing or large blocks of text in some sections
  - c. Spacing is consistent and the content is broken up into short, easily digestible paragraphs by frequent line breaks
- 6. Menus and Sidebars:** Is information hierarchy and navigation supported by effective menus and/or sidebars directing the user to subpages or other areas of the website?
- a. No, the website does not have menus and sidebars, or the menus and sidebars are confusing
  - b. There are menus and/or sidebars, but they are not well organized
  - c. Yes, there are menus and/or sidebars that clearly support the hierarchy and allow for easy navigation

- 7. Organization of Referrals and Resources:** Are referrals to other assistance programs or lists of available resources (e.g., directories to other sources of financial assistance or services, links to helpful materials for completing ERA applications) clean and prioritized?
- a. No, referrals and resource lists are not well organized and are presented in more of a “link dump”
  - b. Referrals and resource lists are somewhat clear and cleanly laid out, but there are some issues or it is not easily navigable
  - c. Referrals and resource lists are cleanly laid out in categories and/or prioritize frequently-used resources and the most relevant referrals
- 8. Justification and Alignment:** Are body paragraphs and large blocks of text justified (aligned) to the left?
- a. No, a lot of body text is centered or right-justified
  - b. Most body text is left-aligned, but there are inconsistencies
  - c. Yes, text is justified to the left
- 9. Color Scheme:** Does the website use a consistent and appealing color palette? *Colors should be pleasant, but not distracting. A good rule of thumb is for any one page to use two to four neutral colors and one bright accent color.*
- a. No, there is either too much color or not enough
  - b. The use of color is not detrimental to the user experience, but it could be improved
  - c. Yes, there is a consistent and appealing color palette
- 10. Media Types:** What kind of media (e.g., photos, clipart or icons, illustrations and videos) are used throughout the website or on the webpage to offer variety and appeal to different users?
- a. There is no or almost no media used, it is all text
  - b. There is limited use of media, such as a few stock photos or clipart
  - c. Mixed media is presented effectively, with a variety of photos, illustrations and/or videos to convey information

**11. Media Quality:** What is the quality of media (e.g., photos, videos, illustrations) used?

- a. Poor quality (e.g., small or grainy photos, amateur clip art)
- b. Medium quality
- c. High quality (e.g., clear and professional-looking images and videos)

**12. Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the general layout or design?** *(Optional)*

## Accessibility of Layout & Visual Design

**13. Language Availability:** Is the content accessible in other languages relevant for community members?

- a. No, it is English-only
- b. Content is available in English and one other language
- c. Content is available in English and two or more other languages

**14. Language Access:** Is how to access content in a different language clear and simple?

- a. No, it is difficult to decipher
- b. Somewhat, but a user might easily miss it
- c. Yes, it is immediately apparent how to access content in another language

**15. Alt-Text:** Do images include alt-text describing the image?

- a. No, images do not include alt-text
- b. Some images contain alt-text
- c. Yes, alt-text is available for all images

**16. Font Style:** Is the font legible and consistent?

- a. No, the font style is not easily readable
- b. The font style is generally readable, but inconsistent
- c. Yes, the font style is both readable and consistent

**17. Font Size:** Is the font size legible and consistent?

- a. No, the font is either too small or too large to be easily readable
- b. The font size is generally readable, but inconsistent
- c. Yes, the font size is both readable and consistent

**18. Color Contrast:** Are contrasting colors used effectively to distinguish between sections and levels of text, without such a high contrast that it is difficult to read?

- a. No, looking at the webpages hurt my eyes, or the content all blends together
- b. The text is readable, but the color contrast could be improved
- c. Yes, the content is readable and pleasing to the eye; contrasting colors are used to distinguish different sections of the page

**19. Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the accessibility of the layout or design? (Optional)**

## Content

**20. Key Topic Coverage:** Does the content address the needs of users who would be coming to the page (e.g., a tenant who is falling behind on rent, or a landlord looking to apply for ERA on behalf of a tenant)?

- a. No, there are significant gaps in content and missing information that users likely need
- b. The content addresses the bulk of questions or user needs, but falls short in important areas
- c. Yes, all of the key information and resources users might need are provided

**21. Key Jurisdiction Coverage:** Is there location-specific content for users about city, county or state eligibility requirements or regionally-specific services and policies?

- a. No, it is not clear whom the content is relevant for based on jurisdiction or locality
- b. The jurisdiction is mentioned (e.g., in the context of benefit eligibility), but someone could easily miss it or there is no other regionally-specific content
- c. Yes, it is immediately clear what jurisdiction this content is relevant to, and there is regionally specific content such as explanations of relevant city, county or state policies

**22. Responsiveness to Immediate Needs:** Is there clear direction and content for users looking for immediate assistance (e.g., if a household has received an eviction notice, or a tenant has been removed from their home)?

- a. No, there is general information but nothing clearly responsive to immediate needs
- b. There is limited guidance on steps to take in specific situations
- c. Yes, there is clear information about next steps that users should take if they are facing urgent challenges

**23. Relevance to Current Events:** Is the content up-to-date and relevant to any recent events (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, changes to regional eviction moratorium policies, natural disasters)?

- a. No, there is content that is out of date and no longer correct or relevant
- b. Most of the content is up-to-date and relevant with respect to current events
- c. Yes, all of the content is up-to-date and relevant with respect to current events

**24. Plain Language:** Is the content written in plain, easily comprehensible language (e.g., with no “legalese” and in a way that an 8th grader could understand it)?

- a. No, there is a lot of jargon and the content is overly complicated
- b. The content is generally understandable, but there is still some jargon or “insider baseball” language used
- c. Yes, the content is written in a clear, straightforward way and would be easily understood

**25. Action-Oriented Messaging:** Does each page have a clear action that users should take, or a task that it helps users to complete?

- a. No, there are no headers or lead messages that indicate what a user can achieve or gain from each page
- b. There is some indication of what users should do or take away from each page, but it is somewhat unclear or inconsistent
- c. Yes, it is immediately clear what actions users should take or what the goal of the page is

**26. Range of Content Types:** Is information and resources available in a range of useful styles or types of content? *This might include having information available through FAQs, step-by-step guides, ordered lists, chatbots, interactive surveys, or message boards.*

- a. No, the information and resources are presently purely as “text on the page”
- b. Information is available in a few different formats, but it is mostly plain text
- c. Yes, a good mix of content formats are used

**27. Content Format:** Is key content presented directly on the webpage, or is important information only accessible through PDFs, .Docs, or other file formats?

- a. A lot of critical information is only viewable in PDF, .Doc or other file formats
- b. Most of the critical information is included directly on the webpage, but users will often need to access other file formats
- c. The important content is always available in a native web format on the page, though it may be supplemented with optional files

**28. Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the content?** *(Optional)*

## Technical Performance & Discoverability

**29. Technical Errors and Bugs:** Is the website free of any technical errors and bugs? Did you run into broken links, pages that misdirect or do not load properly, or other technical issues?

- a. There are significant technical issues or a lot of bugs
- b. There are a few minor technical issues or bugs
- c. There do not seem to be any technical issues

**30. Loading Speed:** Do pages appear and load quickly?

- a. No, pages are noticeably slow to load or are laggy
- b. Pages load somewhat quickly, but are a little slow or laggy
- c. Yes, pages load very quickly



**31. Responsiveness and Mobile Compatibility:** Does the website adjust to display correctly on different screen sizes (e.g., a mobile phone or tablet) or when the browser window is resized? *Change the size of your browser window to test how the website reacts and displays, and view the website on a phone or tablet.*

- a. No, the website is not responsive to different screen sizes and does not display well on mobile
- b. The website is somewhat responsive, but there are some issues with how text and images display in different formats
- c. Yes, the website is fully responsive and displays correctly in a range of formats, screen sizes and on a mobile device

**32. Discoverability and Page Rank:** Does the website show up high on search engine result pages when you search using likely search terms and phrases? *Using Google or another search platform, experiment with a range of terms and phrases that community members might use if they are in need of emergency rental assistance, and see how the relevant website ranks in the search results. Examples include: "help with eviction in [city name]"; "behind on rent in [city name]"; "eviction filing help in [city name]."*

- a. No, the website does not appear anywhere on the first page of search results
- b. The website generally appears toward the bottom of the first page of search results
- c. Yes, the website is often one of the first five search results returned

**33. Do you have any additional feedback or notes regarding the technical performance or discoverability of the website? (Optional)**

**34. Do you have any additional feedback on the website as a whole? (Optional)**

# Website Evaluation Response Compilation Worksheet

## How to Use this Worksheet

After evaluators have completed their review of the relevant website or webpage, collect their evaluation worksheets and tally their responses in the **Summary of Evaluation Results and Responses** table included here. Note the following:

- ◆ Every (a.) response corresponds to “Needs Improvement”
- ◆ Every (b.) response corresponds to “Average”
- ◆ Every (c.) response corresponds to “Excellent”

Additional feedback from evaluators can also be compiled or summarized in the **Open-Ended Responses and Additional Responses** space provided.

Review the tallied responses and identify the areas or criteria that have the most “needs improvement” votes. Addressing these issues should be prioritized for website redesign efforts. Criteria with high numbers of “average” votes should also be considered for improvements after basic functionality and design challenges have been addressed.

Use the **Action Plan Overview** portion of this resource to identify top priorities and next steps based on the feedback received.

# Summary of Evaluation Results and Responses

Use the table below to compile responses from the evaluation worksheet. Tally the answers to each question: Every (a.) response corresponds to “Needs Improvement”; every (b.) response corresponds to “Average”; and every (c.) response corresponds to “Excellent.”

FOCUS AREA	SPECIFIC CRITERIA	RESPONSES FROM EVALUATORS		
		<i>A. Needs Improvement</i>	<i>B. Average</i>	<i>C. Excellent</i>
<b>General Layout &amp; Visual Design</b>	1. Visual consistency			
	2. White space			
	3. Hierarchy			
	4. Headings			
	5. Spacing and line breaks			
	6. Menus and sidebars			
	7. Organization of referrals and resources			
	8. Justification and alignment			
	9. Color scheme			
	10. Media types			
	11. Media quality			

FOCUS AREA	SPECIFIC CRITERIA	RESPONSES FROM EVALUATORS		
		<i>A. Needs Improvement</i>	<i>B. Average</i>	<i>C. Excellent</i>
<b>Accessibility of Layout &amp; Visual Design</b>	13. Language availability			
	14. Language access			
	15. Alt-text			
	16. Font style			
	17. Font size			
	18. Color contrast			
<b>Content</b>	20. Key topic coverage			
	21. Key jurisdiction coverage			
	22. Responsiveness to immediate needs			
	23. Relevance to current events			
	24. Plain language			
	25. Action-oriented messaging			
	26. Range of content types			
27. Content format				
<b>Technical Performance &amp; Discoverability</b>	29. Technical errors and bugs			
	30. Loading speed			
	31. Responsiveness and mobile compatibility			
	32. Discoverability and page rank			

# Summary of Open-Ended Responses and Additional Feedback

Compile open-ended responses and additional feedback from evaluators in the space below.

# Action Plan Overview

Use the space provided below to identify and prioritize website changes based on feedback received through the evaluation process. Consider what are the most critical and timely changes, as well as what adjustments might be straightforward or easier to implement. Identify a point person who will take the lead on implementing the change or following through on any next steps that are indicated.

## Top Priority Changes

- 1.** **Name of Point Person:**

**Notes and immediate next steps**
  
- 2.** **Name of Point Person:**

**Notes and immediate next steps**
  
- 3.** **Name of Point Person:**

**Notes and immediate next steps**

## Secondary Priority Changes

1. **Name of Point Person:**  
**Notes and immediate next steps**
2. **Name of Point Person:**  
**Notes and immediate next steps**
3. **Name of Point Person:**  
**Notes and immediate next steps**

## Long-Term Changes

1. **Name of Point Person:**  
**Notes and immediate next steps**
2. **Name of Point Person:**  
**Notes and immediate next steps**
3. **Name of Point Person:**  
**Notes and immediate next steps**