TOOLKIT 6: COMMUNICATING WITH MOM-AND-POP LANDLORDS

Mom-and-pop landlords are critical to preventing evictions. Unfortunately, the lines of communication between cities and landlords are often broken, inefficient, and adversarial, resulting in low participation rates in city programs that could otherwise help both landlords and tenants. Poor communication also hinders feedback between the programs designed to help landlords and tenants and the city staff that administer them. Cities want to better serve landlords and their tenants but often struggle to reach out and talk to them directly.

WHY SHOULD CITIES CARE?

Housing stability relies on strong and open lines of communications between cities and mom-and-pop landlords. Developing those channels first involves strengthening internal coordination and communications. Doing so will help the city communicate more effectively externally as well, helping to strengthen relationships with landlords, enhance landlord capacity, and assist landlords in navigating relationships with their tenants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Coordinate across city agencies and departments.
Many city agencies, departments and community organizations have programs that impact/serve landlords, but they may not be coordinated with each other. Bridging these gaps and coordinating across these landlord-serving entities can help program effectiveness.

Reframe existing programs.
Existing programs benefit tenants and landlords, but communications about the program often focus on the benefit to tenants. Reframing existing programs to highlight landlord benefits may help increase participation.

Talk to your local landlord association.
Local landlord associations are powerful groups that hold sway and influence. Build stronger relationships with them to understand key messaging points that resonate with their audiences.

Leverage and test various forms of communication.
Every landlord community is different. Depending on budget, consider testing various forms of communications with the landlord community to see what is most effective.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS TOOLKIT?

This toolkit will provide cities and their partners with suggestions on how to improve communications with landlords.

- **Improving Communications with Mom-and-Pop Landlords**
  - Create a service directory
  - Update the city's website
  - Reframe existing programs
  - Highlight how landlords benefit from programs typically marketed towards tenants
  - Improve and coordinate internal communications
- **Tools for Communications**
  - Communication toolkit
  - Paper outreach
  - Social media
  - Websites
  - Community outreach
- **Conclusion**

Improving Communications with Mom-and-Pop Landlords

Through improving communications with landlords, cities can overcome adversarial relationships, reframe landlords as a critical component of eviction prevention work, and build buy-in from their landlord communities for participation in programs and policy development. Thoughtful communication with landlords will help overcome longstanding challenges that inhibit progress on housing instability.

CREATE A SERVICE DIRECTORY

Landlords often express a common concern regarding the lack of a symbiotic relationship with their cities. While cities understandably require inspections and fees for rental registries, landlords often feel the support they receive in return is limited. This discrepancy may stem from a lack of awareness among landlords regarding the resources available to them or a genuine scarcity of city resources. Regardless of the underlying reasons, cities have an opportunity to improve by coordinating (or even consolidating) and effectively communicating the range of resources available to landlords throughout the city. By streamlining and promoting these resources, cities can bridge the gap between landlords' expectations and the support they receive, fostering a more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship.

Consider consolidating landlord resources across the city onto a single webpage or single one-pager and distribute it to all city departments/agencies, non-profit organizations and service providers that regularly interact with landlords. Useful information to highlight includes:

- Service category (financial, housing, legal, social, educational, other)
- Service name (e.g., program, clinic, fund)
- Jurisdictions served (e.g., neighborhoods, ZIP codes, cities, counties or statewide)
- Service URL for the specific service
- Service phone number
- Service email
- Service description
- Service eligibility notes (e.g., demographic service, income limitations, situations addressed)
- Name of organization providing the service
- Organization URL
- Organization phone number
- Organization texting number
- Main office street address
- Main office city

- Main office state
- Main office zipcode
- Main office email address
- Best internal contact method (e.g., email, phone)
- Best external contact method for referrals (e.g., intake form)

Use the Service Mapping for Eviction Prevention Networks toolkit for detailed step-by-step instructions on how to build a service directory. While the exercise is geared toward emergency rental assistance programs, the framework and steps should remain the same. Once you have consolidated all information, think about how it can be easily and routinely updated and referred to by all partners.

UPDATE THE CITY'S WEBSITE

Adapt abridged versions of internal service directories to share publicly on relevant department pages or on the websites of stakeholders across the landlord-serving network. Wherever this information exists, provide clear guidance on all the services included in the service directory, including key contact information should the landlord want to know more about the program.

City examples

SEATTLE, WA

Seattle, WA, provides guidance on renting in the city, offering resources for renters and housing providers. For housing providers, the website's tone is notably positive:

"Did you know more than half of Seattle's residents are renters? That makes you an invaluable community partner in providing safe homes for our community. Renting is a complicated business and there is a lot to know from listing your unit to ending a rental agreement. We are here to help!"

The website includes clear, concise and easily navigable guidance for all steps along a landlord's journey through renting, from wanting to rent a unit to moving a tenant out. Each step clearly outlines a landlord's obligations under state and local law, helpful tips such as clarifying appropriate responses in certain rental scenarios, additional contact information for more questions, and an overview dedicated to resources for landlords.

Consolidating all this information online is not only useful for landlords but useful for community partners and city staff that interact with landlords.

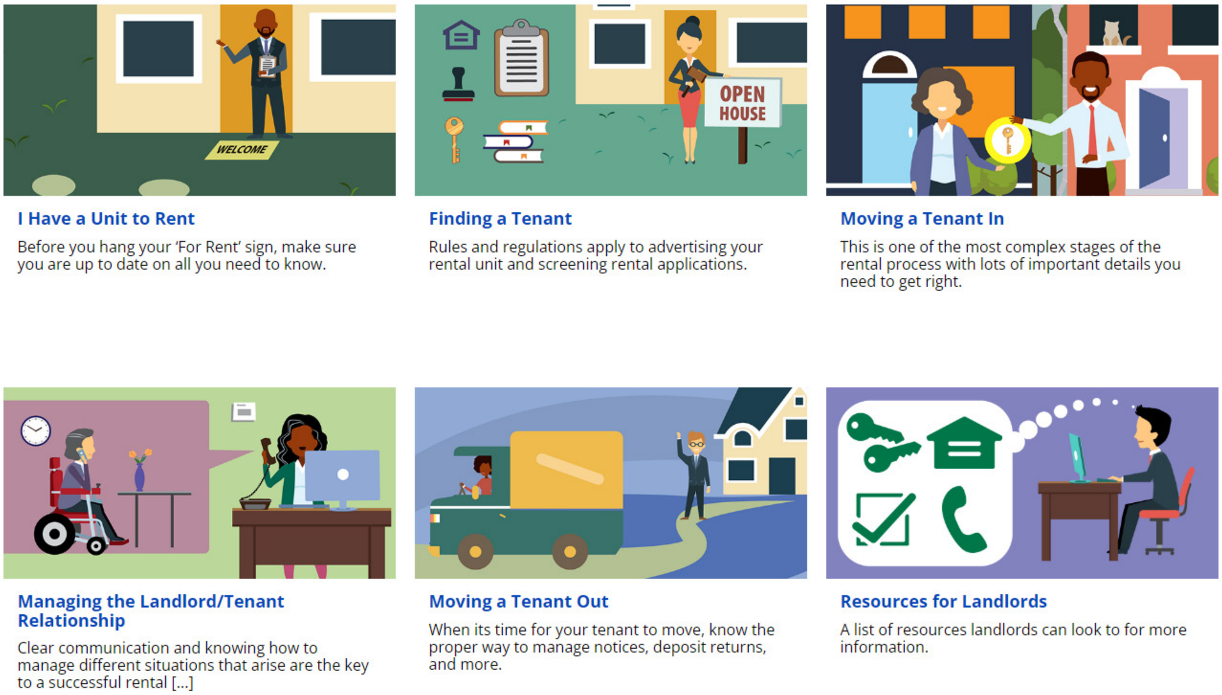

Image from: Renting in Seattle (2023)

REFRAME EXISTING PROGRAMS

Reframe existing programs to highlight the value add for landlords. While many programs are marketed as tenant-serving, landlords also benefit. Some landlords may not participate in programs ultimately beneficial to them if those programs focus their marketing solely on benefits to the tenant. Some examples of ways to reframe include:

PROGRAM	LANGUAGE TO USE
Court self-help staff	Assist landlords without an attorney to understand their rights, fill in forms, respond to lawsuits and deal with legal issues that arise
Landlord training	Helping landlords and tenants build a successful rental relationship and letting landlords know what programs are available from the city to support them and-ways to address challenges if they arise
Neighborhood data	Can help landlords understand the local housing market and opportunities
Model leases	Help landlords ensure the leases they give to new tenants are legally compliant and vetted

Landlord-tenant laws	Outline city and state regulations and landlords' responsibilities under these laws
Rental rehabilitation programs	Provide funding in the form of grants, zero-interest loans, etc. to rehabilitation rental units
Risk mitigation funds	Provide a guaranteed pay-out should something go awry with a tenancy
Housing navigators	Helps landlords and their tenants deal with problems that arise, stay on top of new opportunities for government support, etc., but do not provide legal support
Community and pro bono mediators	Help landlords and tenants resolve problems and come to agreements to ensure their relationships are strong and stable
Rental registries	Help level the playing field between landlords and property managers that strive to keep their units up-to-code and provides safe housing for their renters and the minority of landlords and property managers who are more negligent. Rental registries can also give landlords a better line of communication with the city, providing easier access to information and resources.

HIGHLIGHT HOW LANDLORDS BENEFIT FROM PROGRAMS TYPICALLY MARKETED TOWARD TENANTS

You can also explicitly describe how programs marketed as tenant-oriented can also serve landlords. Some of the programs offering mutual benefits (but often touted as tenant protections) include model leases, mediation programs, diversion initiatives and emergency rental assistance. Can your team work on messaging that will resonate with the values of your landlord community?

You might consider re-messaging or re-branding existing policies and programs to appeal to landlord motivations:

- **Save money and trouble by preventing problems before they start.** Use these local mediation programs to resolve problems that might be developing with your tenants. Mediation can stop conflicts from escalating, save you from having to go to court or deal with attorneys and repair your relationship with tenants.

- **Worried your tenant might miss next month's rent?** Local emergency rental assistance programs (ERAP) can make sure your tenant stays on track. This money can help your tenant get through a period of instability and ensure you can pay your housing costs. Contact the local ERAP agency as soon as possible to see if you can use the rental assistance program to make sure no one falls behind on housing costs.
- **Want to avoid the hassle and conflict of court?** Explore the city's eviction diversion program, which helps landlords and tenants work out mutually agreeable plans to solve problems like unpaid rent or lease violations. Diversion programs can get landlords what they want without the cost and risk of going through a full trial, appeal and set-out process.

Improve and coordinate internal communications

Mapping all landlord resources is a critical first step toward coordinating communications across these landlord serving programs. Once a complete service directory exists, get service providers to communicate on a regular basis. Perhaps this means a bi-monthly call where service providers can provide updates on program statistics, developments on the ground with the landlords they service, tips on navigating relationships with landlords, promising practices and more.

If conducting a full-scale communication coordination exercise is too much, start off strictly within city government. Can all landlord-facing departments and agencies get on the same page? Once various departments within the city are in communication with each other, can you scale to include external stakeholders such as non-profit service providers and more? Philadelphia, PA, provides a good example of coordinated communication through "Landlord Gateway," its centralized landlord network. Launching this program involved getting 16 different city offices and agencies on the same page to provide a one-stop shop for landlords.

THE CITY STARTED BY ASKING EACH OFFICE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- What is your office currently doing specifically for landlords?
- What role do you see your office playing within the landlord network?
- How do your current landlord activities fit into a larger system?
- How do we ensure that our landlord efforts meet the city's diversity, equity and inclusion guidelines?
- What do you need immediately from this cohort vs. what would you like to see accomplished?

The city found its efforts across agencies were disjointed and lacked a centralized means of connecting all programming related to landlords, property owners, and developers. The Landlord Gateway aims to clarify each agency's role with respect to landlords and develop a 'one-stop shop" for city services focusing on education, coalition building and recruitment. While not all cities will have the resources or capacity to launch a similar one-stop shop, they can at least build the internal communication infrastructure and muscle.

Streamline application processes

How user-friendly are the processes offered to mom-and-pop landlords when they want to apply for a government program, deal with a problem, or engage services from your agency? Is it easy for them to find the right application, submit the correct information and get the service they're seeking? Think about their journey through an application process and what might make it better for them.

Streamlining landlord application processes can improve your overall relationship and communications with the mom-and-pop landlord community. An application process that is easy to find, efficient to complete and transparent in its outcomes can make the audience feel capable, appreciative and dignified. A streamlined process can lead to more trust and positive feelings towards an agency.

Streamlining a process generally involves three steps:

STEP 1: REVIEW
Map out your current application process, especially from users' perspectives. Make sure your team and all related stakeholders involved in the process understand it fully, and see where it may be burdensome, costly or confusing to users.

STEP 2: DESIGN THE IDEAL
Create a vision of an ideal user journey that would be as simple, understandable and supportive as possible. This often happens during a brainstorm workshop in which stakeholders annotate the map in step 1, or even remove or add new things to it.

STEP 3: EXECUTE WHAT'S POSSIBLE
The agency team then must determine if, and how, it can make the brainstormed ideal process work in reality. What is possible for the users and staff under current laws, policies and budgets? The team prioritizes what can be feasibly improved to streamline the process and then sets out long-term goals that achievable when budgets, rules or technologies change.

The city of Milwaukee offers an example of how to streamline a process. As part of the Eviction Prevention Learning Lab, their city team was interested in improving the application process for tenants and landlords applying for emergency rental assistance. The city team identified the key stakeholders involved in the current application process: front-line staff who interact with clients, administrators and managers, potential users of the application, and other community groups or service providers who may refer people to this application.

With the help of the EPLL staff, the team then ran through a streamlining process, starting by developing a map detailing how the current rental assistance application works. Using a digital whiteboard, they laid out the main phases a user would go through chronologically, from a problem arising to the tenant/landlord connecting to, filling out and reviewing the application, to the applicant learning of the outcome and undertaking with next steps. In each of these phases, the stakeholders then considered potential actions, needs and preferences of possible users of this application. How does this process work right now for them? What kinds of things do they have to do, what works well, what frustrates them, how long does it take and what costs do they incur? A lead interviewer can ask all the stakeholders these questions to contribute to a thorough map of the process status quo.

After a full brainstorm of the current application process, the central team regroups to dive into specific areas for improvement. What are the key points where time, costs, burdens and frustrations could be reduced? This might be in the program design, by reducing or clarifying duplicate programs (for instance: if two different rental assistance programs serve one jurisdiction). It could be the paper or digital application materials. Are there ways to reduce the amount of information requested, simplify the evidence required, or integrate more tooltips, examples and explanations that help users fill in the application correctly? Groups often find room for improvement in the way application processing updates and outcomes are communicated to applicants. How can the user feel informed and supported while waiting to hear back, and how can cities communicate clear and actionable next steps once a decision comes back?

The team can brainstorm specific action items for each phase that could make the process easier for users. They can then check in with key stakeholders about feasibility. Which of the many brainstormed simplifications might be implemented in the next three months, nine months or two years? Who would make these changes happen and how much would they cost? Some proposed simplifications, new technologies or program designs might require a longer horizon, because they are not feasible without major changes. But ideally teams will discover easily implementable changes to process, papers, technology and communications that can move the application process toward the ideal.

The team may also borrow from established design guidelines to help improve paper and digital application materials, following standards and rubrics like those developed at Stanford Legal Design Lab for court forms or the Simplification Centre.

General Tools for Communicating with Landlords

As a city team considers how to reach landlords with information about services, laws, programs and other important communications, the team should have a strategy that covers multiple formats and channels. For any given thing your team wants to communicate – like a new program that's launching, an important new law that was just passed, a key upcoming deadline, or a common piece of misinformation that needs to be dispelled, you should communicate through multiple paths: communication toolkit, paper outreach, social media, websites and community referrals.

COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

How can you communicate across multiple channels in a clear way that also is not too burdensome for your team? Your team can invest in a communication toolkit. This toolkit can include all kinds of image files, logos, messages, keywords and other collateral that you can use across many different platforms. The toolkit should include collateral that can be repurposed on fliers, handouts, websites, posts and presentations. Having such a toolkit also ensures your programs have a clear, recognizable, trustworthy brand for your audience.

You can create a toolkit by developing a PowerPoint presentation that displays each image, logo, message, keyword or other collateral and explains when and how to use each. It might also lay out the colors and fonts the team should use to create a consistent brand. Along with the presentation, there should also be a folder containing all of the assets (like .png, .jpg, or .svg files) that a team-member would need to create a new flier, social media post or website.

As you choose images, ensure you include diverse, relatable photographs, illustrations and icons representing the many different kinds of landlords with whom you are trying to connect. Include a range of demographic groups so that all members of the audience can identify with the communications.

Review the National League of Cities and Stanford Legal Design Lab's Emergency Rental Assistance Toolkit: How-To Resources for Equitable & Effective Programs' worksheet on Customizable Digital and "Offline" Communication Collateral to see examples of housing-related digital and offline communication templates.

PAPER OUTREACH

For any given communication effort, your team should engage in paper outreach. Typically, this means creating a letter-sized flier and possibly a larger tabloid-sized poster or even a larger wall or billboard poster. Fliers create community awareness. Teams can distribute them around the region, leaving them for people to find at various offices, meetings or other events they attend. They also provide an important way for a person to have all the key information on one physical sheet they can put in their files, on their refrigerator or somewhere else prominent.

Paper fliers and posters should follow a few key design guidelines. They should have one clear message communicated through large font, contrasting color or a lot of white space around it. A person glancing at the flier or poster should quickly understand what it is about and what value it might offer them. Following this clear message, the flier or poster can provide actionable details. These might include steps to follow, groups to contact, rules to know or other key information. Typically, fliers/posters should present this information in a list, outline or Q&A format (rather than large blocks of text) so that it is more easily understood.

The paper should always conclude with resources providing additional information. That might be a QR code to scan, a URL to visit, a phone number to call or a number (and keyword) to text. Think of any given flier or poster as a way to grab someone's attention, give them a high-level understanding of a given process or service, and then hand them off to a website, phone or group that can help them obtain more detailed information.

As you make fliers and posters, use the collateral from your toolkit so that it's done in consistent colors, fonts, imagery and messages. You can use a tool like Canva to find well-designed templates for fliers and posters. Make use of these templates' clean, effective layout to create a strong design for your own uploaded images, logos and other visual assets.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Any time your team is designing a paper outreach asset you should adapt it to a social media post or story. This might be for Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) or other platforms where your agency has an established account.

Take some time to adapt the paper design to the social media design. You could simply post the document (or an image of it) to a social media feed, but typically that will not be the most effective way to attract your audience's attention or communicate the details and next steps that you want to. Most often you will have to slice up the content you've laid out on the flier or poster and reduce the amount you include in any given post. For Facebook, that might mean putting a key image or two into your post and then pasting in the text with your key messages, details and follow-ups. For Instagram, it might mean sequencing your title, details and next steps into a series of images that a user can swipe through. People often access social media on their mobile phones. On a small screen, they won't be able to read small fonts or lots of details. You will want to keep text simple, large and direct.

If your team has the ability to produce video content, consider making social media outreach through YouTube, TikTok or Instagram. You might create videos that show off your staff or users to make a given service or program more approachable. They might explain how to apply for a service, what the law is or why it's worth registering a rental. Social media videos can humanize a given program or policy, allowing a potential audience member to understand how it works and why it might fit their needs.

Various apps can help you manage or schedule posts. These include Hootsuite: hootsuite.com, Later: later.com, and Buffer: buffer.com. Your team can schedule posts all at one time and then roll them out gradually or around important deadlines.

To increase the number of people who see your posts, you can pay for advertising, promotion or boosts to your posts on a given platform. You can also use hash-tagged keywords in your post's text to match common keywords your audience might be interested in. You can also track how people engage with your posts to see which ones get more responses, likes or shares. That feedback can help you create more content that will resonate with your audience.

Find more help on social media strategies by reviewing National League of Cities and Stanford Legal Design Lab's Emergency Rental Assistance Toolkit: How-To Resources for Equitable & Effective Programs' worksheet Using Social Media to Increase Participation in Emergency Rental Assistance Programs, and Tech Soup's guide for nonprofits' use of social media.

WEBSITES

You should include communications to landlords about programs, policies and services should on your agency's website. This can serve as a central, reliable place for your audience to find information. It can also provide a way for them to verify information they might have seen in passing on a flier, a poster or a social media post.

Ideally, your website will present a clear overview of what mom-and-pop landlords can do through your agency, addressing the many questions or needs they might have. Be sure to have a central page with clear navigation that outlines the services they can use, the obligations they have, the legal information they should know, the applications they can fill out, and the forms and paperwork they might need. Coordinating this content into one central webpage can ensure that your audience can easily find the key information they need. It can also provide a helpful landing page for users coming from a Google Search or social media post. Imagine that your landlord landing page is the 'front door' to all the services and rules that landlords in your region should know. This landing page can give them a bird's eye view of what they need to know (especially if they are new to being a landlord), and it is a site they might bookmark and return to whenever they have a question or a need.

Good content is not the only thing to think about. A good website will also have good technical performance, user-friendly interface design and strong search engine optimization (SEO). SEO helps people find your website, especially if they are using Google Search to find answers to their questions. An SEO strategy includes using common, plain language keywords in your webpage's titles, headings and content. It also means providing user-friendly formats like FAQs, ordered or bulleted lists, and short blog posts about specific, common issues. SEO often means repackaging the content you have to make sure it's more likely to match what people are searching for online. You can use tools like Moz and Ahrefs to analyze your website's current SEO practices, find where else your audience is going, and determine what keywords you might want to use.

Technical performance is easily reviewed by using Lighthouse, a free Google tool. It can scan your website for speed, bugs, lags, security issues and other problems with the technology running your website. The Lighthouse tool also generates an action list that you can give to your website's developer team to review. By following its technical recommendations, your site should be faster, friendlier and higher-ranking in search results.

Your website's interface design also deserves investment. How is all the content on your website laid out? Is it easy to navigate, easy to use and quick to understand? You can evaluate your site's interface design by trying to use it as if you were a mom-and-pop landlord trying to register a property or find information about a specific law. Come to your website and attempt to find the answer or resource that the landlord might want. Or, even better, invite landlords to use the site and watch over their shoulders to see how they use it. These user testing sessions can help you spot where your navigation might be confusing, the layout might be frustrating, or things that seem clear and sensible to you are actually unclear and bewildering to the public.

By investing in good content, SEO, technical performance and interface design, your city website can become a key asset in building relationships with mom-and-pop landlords. Ideally, it will be a clear, welcoming and empowering place for them to learn what services the city offers, what their obligations are, and how to resolve whatever problems arise.

See more on government website designs at Stanford Legal Design Lab's Legal Help Online Dashboard.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Along with paper fliers and posters, social media posts and websites, your team can build community partnerships to help disseminate information to your audience. For the landlord audience, this might mean developing relationships with:

- professional associations
- chambers of commerce
- home improvement stores
- libraries
- coffee shops
- supermarkets
- places of worship
- cultural centers
- other places that host events or where people gather

Each region will have a different set of gathering places and groups important to residents seeking resources and help. Profile the key community places and groups for your region, possibly by speaking with mom-and-pop landlords about what groups they belong to or places they frequent.

Once you know the community groups for your region, approach them with the fliers, posters, social media handles and website addresses you have to offer. Request to hang posters on community bulletin boards or reception areas. Or ask to leave a stack of fliers for people to pick up in their lobby or at their events.

For community groups that might frequently host mom-and-pop landlords, you might also ask to create more detailed communication partnerships. The city might train staff or leaders at these community groups to communicate talking points or details about the services, programs or laws you're messaging. For example, you could help prepare librarians or home improvement store staff about what your city agency can offer landlords so they're prepared to field questions landlords might ask them. Or a community leader could mention available services and programs during official remarks when groups are convening and sharing updates or information. You can help these group leaders and staff to understand your offerings, to know your website URL and social media handles, and easily hand mom-and-pop landlords off to you if they need help.

Conclusion

Mom-and-pop landlords are important partners in cities'eviction prevention efforts. However, cities often struggle to communicate with them due to limited resources, language barriers and issues with trust. Cities can invest in tailored outreach strategies, strengthen internal communications and prioritize improving landlord relations as a critical component of their eviction prevention efforts. By working together, cities and mom-and-pop landlords can promote housing stability.