MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET
MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS AND DEVELOPMENT

Workgroup on Expediting Rental Assistance

Meeting summary: September 14, 2023

- Meeting participants listed at the end.
- To review the meeting agenda, presentation slides, and any other relevant documents from the meeting, visit the workgroup webpage and select the "Meetings" tab.

Main meeting topics

The second workgroup meeting began with an overview of process information. This included an update on subgroups and membership, proposed focus areas for upcoming workgroup and subgroup meetings, and responses to a few outstanding policy questions which were raised at the first meeting on August 28.

The meeting then shifted to a set of facilitated conversations and small group work focused on two subject areas: 1) defining interests and 2) challenges and hurdles. Members and consultants used an online whiteboard tool, Mural, for the group work.

The workgroup was asked to do the following ahead of the next meeting: 1) Share strengths, successes on learnings via Mural, and 2) Complete at least on external consultation activity on their own, and document consultation work in Google Drive.

Key agenda items

- Workgroup business
- Define interests
- Challenges and hurdles
- Update on external consultation approach
- Wrap up and next steps

Presentations to the task force

Presentation 1: Kristina Krull, MAD – Overview of Workgroup on Expediting Rental Assistance

Kristina Krull provided additional information related to discussion and information presented at the workgroup's previous meeting. Some of the data shared included:

- Emergency General Assistance (EGA) application processing time: in Fiscal Year 2023, the statewide average time to process EGA applications was 29.7 days. There were a total of 51,052 applications.
- Only 12.36% of EGA applications were approved.

Presentation 2: Kristina Krull, MAD – Update on external consultation approach

Kristina Krull shared updates on the work around external consultation requirements as outlined in the statutory language establishing the work group. Kristina noted that MAD is helping initiate some things, but the bulk of responsibility lies with workgroup members.

At its first meeting, the Operations Subgroup recommended that each workgroup member do one external engagement each month. Some ideas for consultation activities include:

- Having one-on-one or group discussions with relevant people and organizations.
- Asking for discussion time at existing meetings with other people/organizations.
- Emailing WERA work to others and asking for feedback.
- Asking organizations to share the results of their own engagement efforts

The upcoming Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless (MCH) conference would be an option to conduct external consultation.

Kristina suggested that the following types of consultation will be most useful at various stages of workgroup process:

- Immediately: general input and collecting information on existing engagement efforts
- September and October: input on known issues and successes
- October through December: input on draft options and recommendations

Kristina shared information with members about how to document consultations using a Google Doc tracking form for brief information and a notes template for instances where there is a more detailed record of the consultation(s).

Kristina concluded with an overview of what work is underway on external consultation. This includes initiatives led and/or supported by the Family Housing Fund; the Pohlad Foundation in partnership with Research In Action; a roundtable with people with relevant lived experience; and tribal consultation.

A workgroup member appreciated learning information about initiatives underway or in the planning stages. The member asked if there could be a way to generate a shared data chart of various events and groups that members are aware of and would want to consult, to help ensure there is a workgroup presence. MAD will add a spreadsheet in the project Google Drive to track this.

Facilitated discussions and small group work

Topic 1: Defining interests

Question: What are key interests to consider (needs, desires, concerns and fears) as we address timely application determinations and payment of rental assistance?

Workgroup members took a few minutes to jot down initial thoughts, and then went to various breakout rooms in Zoom in pairs for discussion and recorded responses on the Mural online workspace. The full group reconvened following the small groups and worked together to organize the responses into themes as follows:

People first, human-centered

- Reducing barriers for applicants completing applications.
- People who need the help get it when they need it.
- Great opportunity to look at the system and fix the problems.
- Combating bias/assumptions about applicants, recognize barriers applicants face (LEP, disability, etc.).
- Reducing barriers and improving access.
- Improving access and having the programs be human centered.
- FHPAP and EGA/EA partnering to meet client needs.

Broader goals and interests – legal system, tenant/landlord relationship, program integrity, reliability

- Eviction prevention.
- Keep people safely housed.
- Imagine possibilities within existing eviction laws/broader system.
- What current laws create barriers to the changes the charge will make.
- Trust is critical; both tenants and landlords.
- Bridge communication between renters and rental property providers about status of applications to prevent eviction.
- Faster process needed but still needs to be accurate.
- Changing EA/EGA will affect how other programs are processed – how balance that.

Funding

- Without sufficient funding, people won't have access and there won't be enough payments (cliff after one-time funding ends in '25).
- Funding allocations direct what can be done. We run out of money too soon.
- FHPAP real time balance of funding.
- How funding impacts program administration and prioritization.
- Success of the programs is critical to continued funding and capacity support.
- Matching resources to the demand (faster spend results in running out of funds mid-year).

Feasibility

- Are the changes feasible for our administrators.
- Political feasibility.
- Existing stress/bandwidth with program staff – a lot of time applications include other supplements.
- Training for staff turnover to avoid client funding delays.
- Reducing staff negative impact/burnout with implementation.
- Staffing limits what we can do. Time limitations, too.
- Realistic staffing models.
- Getting staff buy-in for systems change.
- Cost and financial considerations to build capacity and fitting the agency's budgeting timeline.

- Can we do this? The system doesn't work too well.

Other/non-categorized

- A lot of people apply in emergencies that don't qualify for these emergency programs.
- What's getting in the way of completed applications.
- Defining what "complete" means for applications, especially with EGA.
- Lots to take in! Multiple programs, different funding sources, procedures.

Some discussed interests were ideas for what to potentially recommend, and will be used at the October meeting for the options discussion.

Initial observations from workgroup members to the results were:

- Many ideas are solutions.
- Looking at this, a lot of the solutions may lead to different reasons for denials (e.g., no funds available) rather than current issue of incomplete applications.
- Feasibility and capacity needed to do what needs to happen is another general theme for several responses.
- Implementation.
- Prioritization/Feasibility.
- Technical solutions – this is a technical problem we're talking about (expediting) – thinking more broadly around streamlining, what are people's experiences while they are trying to navigate systems? This is harder to assess, but thinking about how we tie together technical solutions with reality of people in crisis navigating systems. Blending these well together.
- As we talk technical solutions, don't lose sight of adaptive issues.
- Changing EA and EGA by themselves will impact how other programs are processed – SNAP given as one example. Not coordinating changes could actually lead to delays.
- With a combined application, some people apply for EA who don't have a housing need and are seeking other supports and assistance. Many applicants are people whose needs are outside this workgroup's scope.

Topic 2: Defining challenges and hurdles

Question: What are the known challenges and hurdles to timely application determinations and payment of emergency assistance?

Workgroup members were split into four small groups of three or four people. Using Mural as a workspace, each small group considered the question in the context of five categories. They described the following challenges and hurdles.

Processes/procedures

- Staff turnover – training on policies and procedures in order to stay within timelines.
- County requirements are specific to each County – standardized.

- Inconsistent applications and processes throughout the state (FHPAP and EA).
- We don't track the actual payments.
- What information is needed for applicants? What do they need to gather in order to fully complete the application?
- FHPAP (also EA EGA) people may need to access programs through Coordinated Entry.
- Lack of clarity around what verifications are required and the time required to submit and gather verifications.
- Limitations around who can initiate the process of requesting assistance.
- Linking of EA/EGA processing to other program processing.
- Constraints created by institutional expertise and program history.
- Different processes/procedures by program and service area.
- Lack of uniformity.
- Manual determination – a worker needs to do eligibility analysis.
- Obtaining verification.
- Agency budgeting timelines.
- Resident preference/requests.
- Phone tag.
- Application process burdensome, especially for people in crisis.
- County structures vary. centralized v. decentralized.
- EDMS systems, various standards and processes across counties.
- Unclear for renters as to where to go with questions or appeals (and expectations of timing).

Technology

- Lack of ability to expedite needed client signatures.
- Can we build the technology to cross programs so the user only has to go to one place?
- Checks not being cashed more than one a week.
- Systems not communicating with each other.
- Some ways for providers to be able to see what individuals have been served.
- Barriers resulting from over-reliance on one form of application over another.
- Questions about how EGA/EA are represented in the MNbenefits process.
- Availability of electronic signatures.
- NOTE: tech is not the fundamental issue – program design is most important.
- LL and T ability to access and use technology.
- Challenging systems.
- Systems not the same for different programs.
- Outdated technology.
- Retain partnerships in systems for SNAP and cash (MNbenefits app).
- Remembering to consider possibilities in technology.
- User interface, accessibility, and plain language.

- Ability to text.
- Unequal access to technology. Need offline options too.
- MNbenefits not efficient on backend for counties.
- Has to be scalable for large and small counties.
- Easiest if renters can directly upload their own documents as able (i.e., RentHelpMN/Allita).
- Interagency communication tools. EA/EGA working with FHPAP etc.
- A lot of time is spent tracking down people.
- Track and share quality data for decision making.
- Allow for easier document uploads via cell phone/text photo.
- Need good data.

Personnel

- Ability to cut checks same day.
- Staff turnover which increases training time which decreases ability to process applications.
- Competing priorities.
- Increased oversight responsibilities.
- Change fatigue.
- Staff determining eligibility frequently have "tunnel-vision" for the single program.
- Programs expected to expand rapidly – sustainable staffing plans are challenging.
- Historical challenge – programs bult on implicit bias.
- County size and staffing impact both processing time and equitable program availability.
- Little administrative capacity to move faster or prioritize (more admin funding?).
- Turnover, attrition, onboarding, training.
- Having enough funding to adequately staff.
- Balancing burden on resident v. burden on staff.
- Long hold times due to staffing limitations.
- Often multiple workers on app.
- Staff wellness and burnout
- Compensation.
- Turnover.
- Burnout.
- 6 months – 12 months to fully onboard.
- May not see the value in investing in admin staff.

Program rules

- Board and Lodge individuals aren't able to access certain FHPAP funds.
- People are forced to be on the edge of crisis in order for the funds to be available.
- Where are the rules coming from? Is it statewide? Is it administrators making those decisions? Scarcity of funds?

- More system flexibility.
- Timelines associated with different funding sources.
- Inconsistency between local agency program rules.
- The fact that we have often set the line for "help is available" too high – don't wait for eviction notices.
- FHPAP – assessment required that dictates who can be served.
- Reactive versus proactive rules.
- Rules over-focus on sustainability of assistance.
- Cross-program duplication of efforts – warm handoffs are limited.
- State or other statutory limitations.
- Funding allocation limitations.
- Funding needs to last the year.
- The extent to which rules are maintained or created due to resource limitation.
- County-applied verification requirements/admin rules added on.
- Counties introduce rules to slow funds out the door. May be better to just run out of funding.
- Rules are based on funding available, not needs, or other priorities.
- Funding available may not align to the need across jurisdictions.

Other

- Allowing the program to ensure payments in a timely manner to encourage positive relationships with partners.
- Lack of consistent funding and flexible funding.
- Multiple application points for different programs.
- No place to collaboratively document and share gaps in program coverage.
- Landlord unwilling to participate.
- Building trust with landlords.
- Accuracy.
- Implicit bias and systemic racism
- Discrepancies about amounts owed.

Workgroup updates

The next workgroup meeting is Thursday, October 12, from 9:00 am – 12:00 pm.

The next subgroup meetings are:

- Operations subgroup: September 29, 1:00 – 2:00 pm
- FHPAP subgroup: October 3, 1:00 – 3:00 pm
- EA/EGA subgroup: October 4, 1:00 – 3:00 pm

Meeting participants

Workgroup members

- Andrea Palumbo, HOME line
- Annie Shapiro, Minnesota Community Action Partnership
- Rinal Ray, Minnesota Housing
- Cynthia Fahland, Hennepin County
- Kirstin Burch, Family Housing Fund
- Jennifer Frisbie, Community Mediation Minnesota
- Jeremy Galley, Minnesota Department of Human Services
- Julie Ogunleye, Twin Cities United Way
- Kristyn Stephens, Washington County
- Mary Kaczorek, Legal Aid
- Rebekah Grimm, Salvation Army
- Rep. Mike Howard, Minnesota House of Representatives
- Sen. Lindsey Port, Minnesota Senate
- Theresa Dahlheimer, St. Louis County

Members Absent

- Cassandra Barden, Minnesota Multifamily Housing Association
- Nicole Worlds, Human Services of Martin and Faribault Counties

Others Present

- Karen Gaides, MAD
- Kristina Krull, MAD
- Katie Hatt, MAD
- Davin Sokup, Committee Administrator, Minnesota Senate
- Courtney Schaff, Committee Legislative Assistant, Minnesota Senate