

# Marketing SROs



What's Worked and What Hasn't at HSI



Housing and Services, Inc.

# Introduction - Who We Are

Housing and Services, Inc. (HSI) is a 37-year-old nonprofit developer and manager of permanent supportive and affordable housing. We have added over 2,000 units to NYC's affordable housing stock, catering to both our organization and other groups to house historically underserved populations.

Currently, HSI manages 725 units across our four congregate sites and the Scatter Site I program in Upper Manhattan and the Bronx.

Three of our four congregate projects were originally developed and put into service in the late 80s and 90s as rehabilitated existing hotels. Consequently, they are all classified as Single Room Occupancy (SRO) buildings by the Department of Buildings (DOB), with two of them still featuring shared kitchens and bathrooms.

These three projects are:

- The Cecil, in Harlem, with 89 units came online in 1988 as one of HPD's first SRO Loan Program projects in NYC, serving homeless individuals exiting the emergency shelter system.
- The Narragansett, located on the Upper West Side, which opened in 1994 in response to the AIDS crisis. This 104 unit mixed-use building includes units for 78 people living with HIV/AIDS and 26 low-income households.
- Kenmore Hall, opened in Manhattan's Flatiron District in 1999, accommodating 325 tenants with chronic homeless histories, including seniors, people living with HIV/AIDS, veterans, and individuals facing multiple barriers to their health and housing stability.

# Program Units - Tenancy Turnover Practices

HSI's congregate SROs share commonalities and unique features in their lease-up process and appeal, contributing significantly to both their successes and challenges in filling vacancies for program units. Some key universal practices across all HSI sites that support our "marketing" efforts indirectly but critically upon unit turnover include:

- **Efficient turnover of units:** Effective communication between social services and maintenance departments ensures timely turnover, accelerating unit readiness for new occupants.
- **On-site storage of replacement materials:** Beds, dressers, nightstands, appliances, welcome kits, and other essential items are kept on-site whenever possible. This minimizes wait times for goods and supplies, reducing potential delays.
- **Skilled staff:** Building supers and handymen are well-equipped and proficient in replacing furnishings, appliances, and performing painting tasks, ensuring readiness for unit turnovers and successful HQS inspections on the first attempt.
- **Timely information management:** Maintaining accurate information in CAPS and HASA Web regarding move-outs, referral requests, documentation needs, and admissions contributes significantly to operational efficiency.
- **Regular communication with referring agencies:** Utilizing direct communication channels such as email and phone, when allowed (e.g., HASA), facilitates coordination with referring agencies.
- **CAPS interface:** Consistent interaction with CAPS regarding referral statuses and follow-ups by program managers ensures timely responses from both us and the referring agency, expediting the move-in process.

# Program Units - Guiding Principles

These 3 projects receive referrals from HRA's DHS, DOHMH, and HASA programs and we obtain rental subsidies (project and tenant-based) to offset rent, depending on the site. Regardless of the referring agency we are working with, our aim is to make the process for the potential new residents as easy and seamless as possible.

- **Housing First Philosophy:**

- All of our admissions policies focus on screening-in individuals with housing barriers rather than screening them out.
- No preconditions of sobriety or other treatment requirements for entry - understanding housing as a foundational step toward addressing broader health and social needs.

- **Simplified Process for Potential Program Applicants:**

- Single (not multiple) applicant interviews required.
- We conduct unit viewings on the same day as intakes.
- No credit or background checks conducted.
- Collaboration between social services and onsite property management staff to complete qualifying documents promptly - and on the same initial visit - whenever possible.
- Providing accessible verbal and written communication and linguistically appropriate leasing materials based on native language or limitations.

# Program Units - Focusing on Sites' Strengths

Factors that help mitigate the older SRO models that we find helpful include:

- **Building location** - highlighting the neighborhoods our projects are situated are often a key selling point - Harlem, Upper West Side, Flatiron District. Communicating what nearby transportation, parks, medical facilities and other community resources are available to residents are often our biggest “selling points” so to speak.
- **Safe and clean** - our 24-hour front desk, extensive CCTV systems, live-in supers, handyman, and porters (all HSI staff - not outsourced) ensure the safety and cleanliness of our sites. Referrals appreciate this commitment during unit viewings and intake sessions, often reporting it a priority and deciding factor in leasing decisions.
- **Amenities and program spaces** - during site tours, we showcase all programmatic spaces - our learning centers, community rooms, food pantries, thrift stores, laundry rooms, etc. Prospective tenants see and understand the additional spaces available beyond their assigned units, which are typically smaller in size.
- **On-site services and activities** - Another big positive for referrals is our on-site services (case management, entitlement support, visiting psychiatrist, harm reduction promotion and supplies, etc.) and especially our socialization programming (workshops, holiday events, movie trips, bowling, summer outings, and more) that are free to them.
  - *Tip: provide them with a copy of the monthly activity calendar to review and take back with them.*
- **Pathway to greater independence** - For some referrals, the rental subsidy itself serves as a motivating factor for moving in. Many realize that these subsidies can be transferred to more independent settings in the community after a length of time, promoting greater independence.

# The Importance of Transparency

While we work hard to highlight the strengths of our buildings, we also believe in transparency with prospective tenants about what our sites offer and what they don't.

For example, the Program Manager contacts prospective HASA tenants directly via phone to arrange unit viewings. Before scheduling the viewing/intake date, they clarify whether the available unit has a shared bathroom and that all tenants use communal kitchens. Shared bathrooms can be a non starter, but better to know sooner than later.

At Kenmore, tenants often express immediate interest upon seeing the apartment. The Program Manager spends ample time in the unit with them, describing the community and services, before conducting the intake downstairs. Kenmore's units, converted into studio units with private bathrooms and kitchenettes, are very compact. This approach allows prospective tenants time to acclimate to the environment and really consider if they would be comfortable living there.

**The only thing worse than a vacancy remaining empty given NYC's housing crisis and HSI's own financial stability is moving in a tenant who is then immediately dissatisfied and desperately wanting a different setting.**

After communicating about the physical realities of the units pre-site visit (when allowed) and/or during the unit viewings, the process goes as follows: if they want to proceed, they sit with the Program Manager and/or Clinical staff. We start with the House Rules and Tenant Bill of Rights. If they still want to proceed only then do we conduct the intake. After which, they meet with the lease office and fill out all necessary paperwork (LIHTC, subsidy-related, Verification of Chronic Homelessness, etc.). A decision is provided to the referring agency within 24 hours and usually the same day.

# Trying to Fast Track & Support the Process

For every one vacant program unit we receive 3 referrals. If all referrals show up and another unit is available, we show them those units as well and complete the intake process so we are able to offer all 3 a housing opportunity. In this scenario, where all want to move in and we have the units ready, we are able to more quickly address our declining occupancy rates without having to request additional referrals and intake dates.

Other Strategies to Expedite the Process:

- **Rent and Security Voucher Process:** We do not wait for the first month's rent and security voucher; applicants only need to provide proof of application to HRA for the funds.
- **Assistance from Specialists:** Our entitlement specialists and leasing staff actively reach out to rental subsidy administrators to resolve issues in obtaining necessary financial and eligibility-related documents.
- **Ongoing Communication:** We maintain regular communication with pending applicants and the housing referral team as they await their move-in dates. This proactive approach allows us to troubleshoot any potential issues and keep applicants engaged throughout the process.
- **Educational Support:** We ensure applicants understand the process for their specific rental assistance, emphasizing the importance of attending rental subsidy briefings, for instance.
- **Building Rapport:** We continue to foster a positive relationship even before move-in - providing referrals reassurance, reducing drop-off rates, and contributing to long-term connection and trust between residents and staff.

# Community Units - Outreach and Tools

Our outreach for our unassigned community units is more site-specific.

At Kenmore Hall, where 100% of units are CoC-funded with homeless chronicity requirements, we have a narrower pool to draw from, but our referring agencies have become more diverse. We have established partnerships with the VA, HPD's Emergency Placement Unit, and directly with shelters.

The Narragansett's community units are only income-restricted. Recently, a great referral source has been restaurant workers from nearby establishments. They appreciate the proximity to work and not having to pay for transportation or double up in distant neighborhoods. Our building Super has also been an excellent referral source for these apartments.

The Cecil is very well known in the community, and vacancies do not occur as frequently. However, we actively connect with local community boards and other partners when vacancies arise, quickly identifying eligible and in-need candidates.

Helpful community outreach tips:

- **Expand Your Local Network:** Continuously grow and nurture your local network for community units to widen the net of potential referrals.
- **Use Checklists:** Create an electronic checklist outlining building or rental subsidy requirements for easy sharing with partners and potential tenants via email.
- **Host Open Houses:** Organize open houses to showcase the building to large groups of potential referrals simultaneously, creating more opportunities for engagement.
- **Create a Marketing Presentation:** Develop a PowerPoint presentation highlighting the building, units, programmatic spaces, community resources, and neighborhood highlights. This presentation can be used for marketing purposes to attract and inform potential tenants effectively – see [sample](#)



# Biggest Challenges To Placements

## Shared Spaces

Shared bathrooms remain our biggest challenge.

Our site with two individuals sharing a bathroom via a common hallway often experience more complaints post-move-in (Narragansett) compared to our site with numerous unassigned bathrooms available per floor (Cecil).

While shared kitchens can also impact desirability, they are secondary to the issue of shared bathrooms.

## Unit Sizes

Apartment size is a significant concern for both program and community tenants.

At Cecil and Kenmore projects, limited space with essential furniture leaves little room for personal belongings or guest accommodations.

Minimal storage and space for guests can contribute to an institutional feel, affecting tenant satisfaction.

## The Competition

Occasionally referrals prefer traditional buildings without on-site services such as case management, home and office visits, front desk staff, and house rules.

However, we also face competition from newer supportive housing options in NYC. Referrals increasingly prioritize larger, more private, and updated apartments, which impacts immediate placement decisions.

***The same factors that can attract one referral can disinterest others - location, building amenities, activities***

# Other Issues

system-wide impediments

**Sealed units**, averaging a year or more, are a significant challenge affecting occupancy rates and turnover.

**No-show rates** for unit viewings and intake dates are alarmingly high, impacting efficient placement processes and resources.

**Long lag times** between issuance of acceptance letters and actual move-ins due to a slow rental subsidy process, leading to delays and frustrations for accepted referrals.

**Drop-offs** occur after acceptance due to prolonged wait times for move-in, highlighting the need for streamlined processes and quicker transitions for new tenants.

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# Minimizing Barriers & Maximizing Revenue

HSI has been addressing our occupancy rates by expanding project-based vouchers in our housing portfolio, reducing reliance on finding community referrals with tenant-based rental assistance in the emergency shelter system.

- At the Cecil, we successfully converted from Tenant-Based Vouchers (TBVs) to Project-Based Vouchers (PBVs) after completing a \$9 million HPD-funded rehab with tenants in place.
- Kenmore Hall secured an initial 8-unit PBV contract with the VA and recently added 20 more units to that HAP contract. Also, the project obtained a new project-based rental assistance grant through an expansion proposal to NYC's CoC for 24 community units.

To increase revenues, HSI leadership has worked hard to diversify funding streams at all of our SROs by securing additional service contracts and reinvesting in aging infrastructure through major rehabs and more minor repair initiatives. **While we always wish we could do more, modernized life safety systems, improved program spaces with new furniture, and even big art and fresh paint can make a big difference in appeal.** We are always looking at new opportunities to strengthen these first generation supportive housing projects. For example, we are using [Section 610 of the Public Housing Finance Law](#) where applicable, significantly increasing revenues from lease renewals and new move-ins, helping offset higher vacancy rates.

One final best practice is developing a real, authentic rapport from the beginning. Allowing prospective tenants to see your team's care and commitment throughout the process makes a huge impact. Communication, care, and respect are key.

Recent vibrant art installations have breathed new life into the hallways at the Cecil, infusing them with creativity and energy.



Attention to programmatic spaces and furniture has transformed Kenmore's Hall, especially evident in the lobby and learning center. The introduction of new chairs and tables not only modernized the spaces but also enhanced comfort and functionality. These improvements create a welcoming environment for visitors, leaving a lasting positive impression on potential applicants and ensuring a better overall experience.

