

Chapter 5 BRIEFINGS AND VOUCHER ISSUANCE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains the briefing and voucher issuance process. When a family is determined to be eligible for the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, MHA must ensure that the family fully understands the way the program operates and the family's obligations under the program. This is accomplished through both an oral briefing and provision of a briefing packet containing written documentation of information the family needs to know. Once the family is fully informed of the program's requirements, MHA issues the family a voucher. The voucher includes the unit size the family qualifies for based on MHA's subsidy standards, as well as the dates of issuance and expiration of the voucher. The voucher is the document that permits the family to begin its search for a unit, and limits the amount of time the family has to successfully locate an acceptable unit.

This chapter describes HUD regulations and MHA policies related to these topics in two parts:

Part I: Briefings and Family Obligations. This part details the program's requirements for briefing families orally, and for providing written materials describing the program and its requirements. It includes a particular focus on the family's obligations under the program.

Part II: Subsidy Standards and Voucher Issuance. This part discusses MHA's standards for determining how many bedrooms a family of a given composition qualifies for, which in turn affects the amount of subsidy the family can receive. It also discusses the policies that dictate how vouchers are issued, and how long families have to locate a unit.

PART I: BRIEFINGS AND FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

5-I.A. OVERVIEW

HUD regulations require MHA to conduct mandatory briefings for applicant families. The briefing provides a broad description of owner and family responsibilities, explains MHA's procedures, and includes instructions on how to lease a unit. This part describes how oral briefings will be conducted, specifies what written information will be provided to families, and lists the family's obligations under the program.

5-I.B. BRIEFING [24 CFR 982.301]

MHA must give the family an oral briefing and provide the family with a briefing packet containing written information about the program. Families may be briefed individually or in groups. At the briefing, MHA must ensure effective communication in accordance with Section 504 requirements (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973), and ensure that the briefing site is accessible to individuals with disabilities. For a more thorough discussion of accessibility requirements, refer to Chapter 2.

MHA Policy

Briefings will be conducted in group meetings.

Generally, the head of household is required to attend the briefing. If the head of household is unable to attend, MHA may approve another adult family member to attend the briefing.

Families that attend group briefings and still need individual assistance will be referred to an appropriate MHA staff person.

Briefings will be conducted in English. For limited English proficient (LEP) applicants, MHA will provide translation services in accordance with MHA's LEP plan (See Chapter 2).

Notification and Attendance

MHA Policy

Families will be notified of their eligibility for assistance at the time they are invited to attend a briefing. The notice will identify who is required to attend the briefing, as well as the date and time of the scheduled briefing.

If the notice is returned by the post office with no forwarding address, the applicant will be denied and their name will not be placed back on the waiting list. If the notice is returned by the post office with a forwarding address, the notice will be re-sent to the address indicated.

Applicants who fail to attend a scheduled briefing will automatically be scheduled for another briefing. MHA will notify the family of the date and time of the second scheduled briefing. Applicants who fail to attend two scheduled briefings, without MHA approval, will be denied assistance (see Chapter 3).

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Oral Briefing [24 CFR 982.301(a)]

Each briefing must provide information on the following subjects:

- How the Housing Choice Voucher program works;
 - Family and owner responsibilities;
 - Where the family can lease a unit, including renting a unit inside or outside MHA's jurisdiction;
 - For families eligible under portability, an explanation of portability. MHA cannot discourage eligible families from moving under portability;
 - For families living in high-poverty census tracts, an explanation of the advantages of moving to areas outside of high-poverty concentrations; and
 - For families receiving welfare-to-work vouchers, a description of any local obligations of a welfare-to-work family and an explanation that failure to meet the obligations is grounds for denial of admission or termination of assistance.
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MHA Policy

When MHA-owned units are available for lease, MHA will inform the family during the oral briefing that the family has the right to select any eligible unit available for lease, and is not obligated to choose a MHA-owned unit.

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Briefing Packet [24 CFR 982.301(b)]

Documents and information provided in the briefing packet must include the following:

- The term of the voucher, and MHA’s policies on any extensions or suspensions of the term. If MHA allows extensions, the packet must explain how the family can request an extension.
- A description of the method used to calculate the housing assistance payment for a family, including how MHA determines the payment standard for a family, how MHA determines total tenant payment for a family, and information on the payment standard and utility allowance schedule.
- An explanation of how MHA determines the maximum allowable rent for an assisted unit.
- Where the family may lease a unit. For a family that qualifies to lease a unit outside MHA jurisdiction under portability procedures, the information must include an explanation of how portability works.
- The HUD-required tenancy addendum, which must be included in the lease.
- The form the family must use to request approval of tenancy, and a description of the procedure for requesting approval for a tenancy.
- A statement of MHA policy on providing information about families to prospective owners.
- MHA subsidy standards including when and how exceptions are made.
- The HUD brochure on how to select a unit.
- The HUD pamphlet on lead-based paint entitled *Protect Your Family from Lead in Your Home*.
- Information on federal, state and local equal opportunity laws and a copy of the housing discrimination complaint form.
- A list of landlords or other parties willing to lease to assisted families or help families find units, especially outside areas of poverty or minority concentration.
- Notice that if the family includes a person with disabilities, the family may request a list of available accessible units known to MHA.
- The family obligations under the program, including any obligations of a welfare-to-work family.
- The grounds on which MHA may terminate assistance for a participant family because of family action or failure to act.
- MHA informal hearing procedures including when MHA is required to offer a participant family the opportunity for an informal hearing, and how to request the hearing.

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Additional Items to Be Included in the Briefing Packet

The PHA will provide the following additional materials in the briefing packet:

- When PHA-owned units are available for lease, a written statement that the family has the right to select any eligible unit available for lease and is not obligated to choose a PHA-owned unit
- Information on how to fill out and file a housing discrimination complaint form
- Information about the protections afforded by the Violence against Women Act of 2005 (VAWA) to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking (see section 16-IX.C)
- “Is Fraud Worth It?” (form HUD-1141-OIG), which explains the types of actions a family must avoid and the penalties for program abuse
- “What You Should Know about EIV,” a guide to the Enterprise Income Verification (EIV) system published by HUD as an attachment to Notice PIH 2010-19

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If MHA is located in a metropolitan FMR area, the following additional information must be included in the briefing packet in order to receive full points under SEMAP Indicator 7, Expanding Housing Opportunities [24 CFR 985.3(g)].

- Maps showing areas with housing opportunities outside areas of poverty or minority concentration, both within its jurisdiction and its neighboring jurisdiction.
- Information about the characteristics of these areas including job opportunities, schools, transportation and other services.
- An explanation of how portability works, including a list of portability contact persons for neighboring MHAs including names, addresses, and telephone numbers.

5-I.C. FAMILY OBLIGATIONS

Obligations of the family are described in the housing choice voucher (HCV) regulations and on the voucher itself. These obligations include responsibilities the family is required to fulfill, as well as prohibited actions. MHA must inform families of these obligations during the oral briefing, and the same information must be included in the briefing packet. When the family's unit is approved and the HAP contract is executed, the family must meet those obligations in order to continue participating in the program. Violation of any family obligation may result in termination of assistance, as described in Chapter 12.

Time Frames for Reporting Changes Required By Family Obligations

MHA Policy

Unless otherwise noted below, when family obligations require the family to respond to a request or notify MHA of a change, notifying MHA of the request or change within 10 business days is considered prompt notice.

When a family is required to provide notice to MHA, the notice must be in writing.

Family Obligations [24 CFR 982.551]

Following is a listing of a participant family's obligations under the HCV program:

- The family must supply any information that MHA or HUD determines to be necessary, including submission of required evidence of citizenship or eligible immigration status.
- The family must supply any information requested by MHA or HUD for use in a regularly scheduled reexamination or interim reexamination of family income and composition.
- The family must disclose and verify social security numbers and sign and submit consent forms for obtaining information.
- Any information supplied by the family must be true and complete.
- The family is responsible for any Housing Quality Standards (HQS) breach by the family caused by failure to pay tenant-provided utilities or appliances, or damages to the dwelling unit or premises beyond normal wear and tear caused by any member of the household or guest.

MHA Policy

Damages beyond normal wear and tear will be considered to be damages which could be assessed against the security deposit.

- The family must allow MHA to inspect the unit at reasonable times and after reasonable notice, as described in Chapter 8 of this plan.

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- The family must not commit any serious or repeated violation of the lease.

MHA Policy

MHA will determine if a family has committed serious or repeated violations of the lease based on available evidence, including but not limited to, a court-ordered eviction, or an owner's notice to evict.

Serious and repeated lease violations will include, but not be limited to, nonpayment of rent, disturbance of neighbors, destruction of property, or living or housekeeping habits that cause damage to the unit or premises and criminal activity. Generally, the criteria to be used is whether the reason for the eviction was through no fault of the tenant or guests.

- The family must notify MHA and the owner before moving out of the unit or terminating the lease.

MHA Policy

The family must comply with lease requirements regarding written notice to the owner. The family must provide written notice to MHA at the same time the owner is notified.

- The family must promptly give MHA a copy of any owner eviction notice.
- The family must use the assisted unit for residence by the family. The unit must be the family's only residence.
- The composition of the assisted family residing in the unit must be approved by MHA. The family must promptly notify MHA in writing of the birth, adoption, or court-awarded custody of a child. The family must request MHA approval to add any other family member as an occupant of the unit.

MHA Policy

The request to add a family member must be submitted in writing and approved prior to the person moving into the unit. MHA will determine eligibility of the new member in accordance with the policies in Chapter 3.

- The family must promptly notify MHA in writing if any family member no longer lives in the unit.

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- If MHA has given approval, a foster child or a live-in aide may reside in the unit. MHA has the discretion to adopt reasonable policies concerning residency by a foster child or a live-in aide, and to define when MHA consent may be given or denied. For policies related to the request and approval/disapproval of foster children, foster adults, and live-in aides, see Chapter 3 (Sections I.K and I.M), and Chapter 11 (Section II.B).
- The family must not sublease the unit, assign the lease, or transfer the unit.

MHA Policy

Subleasing includes receiving payment to cover rent and utility costs by a person living in the unit who is not listed as a family member.

- The family must supply any information requested by MHA to verify that the family is living in the unit or information related to family absence from the unit.
- The family must promptly notify MHA when the family is absent from the unit.

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- ~~The family must promptly notify MHA when the family is absent from the unit.~~

MHA Policy

Notice is required under this provision only when all family members will be absent from the unit for an extended period. An extended period is defined as any period greater than 30 calendar days. Written notice must be provided to MHA at the start of the extended absence.

- The family must pay utility bills and provide and maintain any appliances that the owner is not required to provide under the lease [Form HUD-52646, Voucher].
- The family must not own or have any interest in the unit, (other than in a cooperative and owners of a manufactured home leasing a manufactured home space).
- Family members must not commit fraud, bribery, or any other corrupt or criminal act in connection with the program. (See Chapter 14, Program Integrity for additional information).
- Family members must not engage in drug-related criminal activity or violent criminal activity or other criminal activity that threatens the health, safety or right to peaceful enjoyment of other residents and persons residing in the immediate vicinity of the premises. See Chapter 12 for HUD and MHA policies related to drug-related and violent criminal activity.
- Members of the household must not engage in abuse of alcohol in a way that threatens the health, safety or right to peaceful enjoyment of the other residents and persons residing in the immediate vicinity of the premises. See Chapter 12 for a discussion of HUD and MHA policies related to alcohol abuse.
- An assisted family or member of the family must not receive HCV program assistance while receiving another housing subsidy, for the same unit or a different unit under any other federal, state or local housing assistance program.
- A family must not receive HCV program assistance while residing in a unit owned by a parent, child, grandparent, grandchild, sister or brother of any member of the family, unless MHA has determined (and has notified the owner and the family of such determination) that approving rental of the unit, notwithstanding such relationship, would provide reasonable accommodation for a family member who is a person with disabilities. [Form HUD-52646, Voucher]

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PART II: SUBSIDY STANDARDS AND VOUCHER ISSUANCE

5-II.A. OVERVIEW

MHA must establish subsidy standards that determine the number of bedrooms needed for families of different sizes and compositions. This part presents the policies that will be used to determine the family unit size (also known as the voucher size) a particular family should receive, and the policies that govern making exceptions to those standards. MHA also must establish policies related to the issuance of the voucher, to the voucher term, and to any extensions or suspensions of that term.

5-II.B. DETERMINING FAMILY UNIT (VOUCHER) SIZE [24 CFR 982.402]

For each family, MHA determines the appropriate number of bedrooms under MHA subsidy standards and enters the family unit size on the voucher that is issued to the family. The family unit size does not dictate the size of unit the family must actually lease, nor does it determine who within a household will share a bedroom/sleeping room.

The following requirements apply when MHA determines family unit size:

- The subsidy standards must provide for the smallest number of bedrooms needed to house a family without overcrowding.
- The subsidy standards must be consistent with space requirements under the housing quality standards.
- The subsidy standards must be applied consistently for all families of like size and composition.
- A child who is temporarily away from the home because of placement in foster care is considered a member of the family in determining the family unit size.
- A family that consists of a pregnant woman (with no other persons) must be treated as a two-person family.
- Any live-in aide (approved by MHA to reside in the unit to care for a family member who is disabled or is at least 50 years of age) must be counted in determining the family unit size;

- Unless a live-in-aide resides with a family, the family unit size for any family consisting of a single person must be either a zero- or one-bedroom unit, as determined under MHA subsidy standards.

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MHA Policy

MHA will assign one bedroom for each two persons within the household, except in the following circumstances:

Single head of household parent shall not be required to share a bedroom with his/her child, although the family may request to do so.

An unborn child will not be counted as a person determining unit size.

Live-in aides will be allocated a separate bedroom.

Single person families will be allocated one bedroom.

MHA will reference the following chart in determining the appropriate voucher size for a family:

Voucher Size	Persons in Household (Minimum – Maximum)
1 Bedroom	1-2
2 Bedrooms	2-4
3 Bedrooms	3-6
4 Bedrooms	4-8
5 Bedrooms	6-10

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5-II.C. EXCEPTIONS TO SUBSIDY STANDARDS

In determining family unit size for a particular family, MHA may grant an exception to its established subsidy standards if MHA determines that the exception is justified by the age, sex, health, handicap, or relationship of family members or other personal circumstances [24 CFR 982.402(b)(8)]. Reasons may include, but are not limited to:

- A need for an additional bedroom for medical equipment
- A need for a separate bedroom for reasons related to a family member's disability, medical or health condition

For a single person who is not elderly, disabled, or a remaining family member, an exception cannot override the regulatory limit of a zero or one bedroom [24 CFR 982.402(b)(8)].

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MHA Policy

MHA will consider granting an exception for any of the reasons specified in the regulation: the age, sex, health, handicap, or relationship of family members or other personal circumstances.

The family must request any exception to the subsidy standards in writing. The request must explain the need or justification for a larger family unit size, and must include appropriate documentation. Requests based on health-related reasons must be verified by a knowledgeable professional source (e.g., doctor or health professional), unless the disability and the disability-related request for accommodation is readily apparent or otherwise known. The family's continued need for an additional bedroom due to special medical equipment must be re-verified at annual reexamination.

MHA will notify the family of its determination within 10 business days of receiving the family's request. If a participant family's request is denied, the notice will inform the family of their right to request an informal hearing.

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5-II.D. VOUCHER ISSUANCE [24 CFR 982.302]

When a family is selected from the waiting list (or as a special admission as described in Chapter 4), or when a participant family wants to move to another unit, MHA issues a Housing Choice Voucher, form HUD-52646. This chapter deals only with voucher issuance for applicants. For voucher issuance associated with moves of program participants, please refer to Chapter 10.

The voucher is the family's authorization to search for housing. It specifies the unit size for which the family qualifies, and includes both the date of voucher issuance and date of expiration. It contains a brief description of how the program works and explains the family obligations under the program. The voucher is evidence that MHA has determined the family to be eligible for the program, and that MHA expects to have money available to subsidize the family if the family finds an approvable unit. However, MHA does not have any liability to any party by the issuance of the voucher, and the voucher does not give the family any right to participate in MHA's housing choice voucher program [Voucher, form HUD-52646]

A voucher can be issued to an applicant family only after MHA has determined that the family is eligible for the program based on information received within the 60 days prior to issuance [24 CFR 982.201(e)] and after the family has attended an oral briefing [HCV 8-1].

MHA Policy

Vouchers will be issued to eligible applicants immediately following the mandatory briefing.

MHA should have sufficient funds to house an applicant before issuing a voucher. If funds are insufficient to house the family at the top of the waiting list, MHA must wait until it has adequate funds before it calls another family from the list [HCV GB p. 8-10].

MHA Policy

Prior to issuing any vouchers, MHA will determine whether it has sufficient funding in accordance with the policies in Part VIII of Chapter 16.

If MHA determines that there is insufficient funding after a voucher has been issued, MHA may rescind the voucher and place the affected family back on the waiting list.

5-II.E. VOUCHER TERM, EXTENSIONS, AND SUSPENSIONS

Voucher Term [24 CFR 982.303]

The initial term of a voucher must be at least 60 calendar days. The initial term must be stated on the voucher [24 CFR 982.303(a)].

MHA Policy

The initial voucher term will be 60 calendar days.

The family must submit a Request for Tenancy Approval and proposed lease within the 60-day period unless MHA grants an extension.

Extensions of Voucher Term [24 CFR 982.303(b)]

MHA has the authority to grant extensions of search time, to specify the length of an extension, and to determine the circumstances under which extensions will be granted. There is no limit on the number of extensions that MHA can approve. Discretionary policies related to extension and expiration of search time must be described in MHA's administrative plan [24 CFR 982.54].

MHAs must approve additional search time if needed as a reasonable accommodation to make the program accessible to and usable by a person with disabilities. The extension period must be reasonable for the purpose.

The family must be notified in writing of MHA's decision to approve or deny an extension. MHA's decision to deny a request for an extension of the voucher term is not subject to informal review [24 CFR 982.554(c)(4)].

MHA Policy

MHA will automatically approve one 30-day extension upon written request from the family.

MHA will approve additional extensions only in the following circumstances:

It is necessary as a reasonable accommodation for a person with disabilities.

It is necessary due to reasons beyond the family's control, as determined by MHA. Following is a list of extenuating circumstances that MHA may consider in making its decision. The presence of these circumstances does not guarantee that an extension will be granted:

Serious illness or death in the family

Other family emergency

Obstacles due to employment

Whether the family has already submitted requests for tenancy approval that were not approved by MHA

Whether family size or other special requirements make finding a unit difficult

Any request for an additional extension must include the reason(s) an additional extension is necessary. MHA may require the family to provide documentation to support the request.

All requests for extensions to the voucher term must be made in writing and submitted to MHA prior to the expiration date of the voucher (or extended term of the voucher).

MHA will decide whether to approve or deny an extension request within 10 business days of the date the request is received, and will immediately provide the family written notice of its decision.

Suspensions of Voucher Term [24 CFR 982.303(c)]

At its discretion, a MHA may adopt a policy to suspend the housing choice voucher term if the family has submitted a Request for Tenancy Approval (RTA) during the voucher term.

“Suspension” means stopping the clock on a family’s voucher term from the time a family submits the RTA until the time MHA approves or denies the request [24 CFR 982.4]. MHA’s determination not to suspend a voucher term is not subject to informal review [24 CFR 982.554(c)(4)].

MHA Policy

When a Request for Tenancy Approval and proposed lease is received by MHA, the term of the voucher will not be suspended while MHA processes the request.

Expiration of Voucher Term

Once a family’s housing choice voucher term (including any extensions) expires, the family is no longer eligible to search for housing under the program. If the family still wishes to receive assistance, MHA may require that the family reapply, or may place the family on the waiting list with a new application date but without requiring reapplication. Such a family does not become ineligible for the program on the grounds that it was unable to locate a unit before the voucher expired [HCV GB p. 8-13].

MHA Policy

If an applicant family’s voucher term or extension expires before the family has submitted a Request for Tenancy Approval (RTA), MHA will require the family to reapply for assistance. If an RTA that was submitted prior to the expiration date of the voucher is subsequently disapproved by MHA (after the voucher term has expired), the family will be required to reapply for assistance.

Within 10 business days after the expiration of the voucher term or any extension, MHA will notify the family in writing that the voucher term has expired and that the family must reapply in order to be placed on the waiting list.

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