



The HousingWorks Affordable Housing Website HousingWorks Corporation

Introduction

While organized, searchable Internet listings have become an integral part of the market-rate home buying process, such tools are typically not used to help homeless or low-income families find suitable housing in Massachusetts. HousingWorks, a Massachusetts corporation, uses these technologies to match those in need with affordable housing units. It provides a central database for those who provide affordable housing, and for those who need it.

The Problem

In the past, homeless or low-income families both were forced to navigate numerous bulletin board-style websites for each housing provider in order to find a match. In Massachusetts alone there are more than 240 housing authorities and 1300 private managers of subsidized public housing.

Quantifying supply of and demand for subsidized public and special needs housing in real time is a difficult exercise. The Housing Act of 1937 grants a subsidy limiting rent to 30 percent of income for qualified households. Despite this program, there are still many barriers for low-income individuals and families looking for someplace to live.

There are over 50,000 applicants on federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), state and local waiting lists for affordable housing, and an additional 45,000 on the Massachusetts chapter of the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials list. In spite of this, a HUD study concluded that 9% of low-cost rental housing units are vacant.

The Roe Better Government Network researches and distributes public policy solutions for the benefit of the New England states. The Roe Papers are selected from among the most intriguing and original submissions to Pioneer Institute's annual Better Government Competition. Pioneer works with each submission's author to develop their ideas into detailed, actionable policy proposals.

We are appreciative of the Roe Foundation's generous support for this initiative. Their sustained funding has enabled Pioneer to vet these ideas with policy makers and experts as well as legislators and executive officials.

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The Solution

The HousingWorks program uses three online modules and a housing inventory tool in an “ecosystem” approach, simultaneously connecting housing seekers, housing advocates, and housing providers. Each module supplies applicable information to different users. The housing advocate, housing provider, and housing reporter modules and the housing inventory tool each contribute to the overall function of HousingWorks.

Once accessed, the HousingWorks website enables users to input their personal information and search all available housing to find the best option. Inventory is consolidated to provide a comprehensive view of the entire subsidized market and a specialized application program is available for blind and non-English speaking applicants.

Housing Advocate Module

This module is designed to streamline the application process for those filing housing applications on behalf of clients. Once the advocate fills out the form detailing their client’s personal information and housing needs, HousingWorks searches the database and generates a list of available housing options for which the applicant is eligible. The list is reevaluated nightly, so users’ housing options are continually updated.

Housing Provider Module

This module helps providers maintain and update searchable housing inventories and prescreen applicants to fill available vacancies. Since individuals in shelters must apply to a specified number of permanent housing openings each week to be allowed to remain in the shelter, housing providers are often flooded with phone calls from unqualified applicants. The HousingWorks ecosystem eliminates unnecessary calls by screening applications and matching applicants with the appropriate housing. HousingWorks updates continually as providers open and close waitlists.

Housing Reporter Module

This module is used to clarify public housing policy issues for shelter and transitional housing oversight agencies such as the federal government, non-profits and permanent subsidized providers like housing authorities. The module relieves oversight agencies of the burden of collecting and entering information about housing occupants. By saving data entry time, agency staff can spend more time providing housing services.

The HousingWorks housing reporter module showed its capabilities when it was used for the Homeless Management Information System in Lawrence, Massachusetts. HousingWorks was the first system to comply fully with U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) guidelines.

Housing Inventory Management Tool

This tool supports the three modules by updating housing availability in real-time. It has saved an estimated \$1 million per year in staff time in Massachusetts by eliminating duplicate housing listings while complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act and Fair Housing accessibility laws.

Advocates who search for housing on behalf of the needy pay a \$150 per year membership fee. There are approximately 2000 housing advocates registered on the website. Housing providers who own or operate housing units pay a \$2 charge per unit listed, with a minimum of \$150 in listings needed. There is no cost to individuals seeking subsidized or special needs housing. HousingWorks’ fully integrated ecosystem approach has yielded improvements in many areas. Advocates now save at least 20 hours and \$3500 a month by filling out just one application. They previously wrote or typed between 50 and 250.

Despite all of the benefits of HousingWorks, there are still initial obstacles for users who lack both computer access and/or skills. But Internet access in public places, such as libraries, enables the system to help more people. Equal and efficient access to public housing, required under the Fair Housing Act, is achieved through the HousingWorks website. The site saves time and money, and puts the affordable housing market on the same level as the retail market.

Relevance to Massachusetts

Recently, the House chair of the Joint Committee on Human Services and Elderly Affairs praised HousingWorks for saving Massachusetts \$1 million by cutting down on duplicate listings. Their website has helped reduce turnover time for units by 80 percent, and improved the process for both housing seekers and providers by enabling qualified applicants to fill available housing units. Housing authorities in Massachusetts have paid HousingWorks to consolidate various housing listings, saving \$3 million thus far.

Conclusion

HousingWorks' success in Massachusetts has thus far been limited to the local level. State agencies have largely shunned "off-the-shelf" housing data management tools, claiming they need a system customized to their needs. The developers of HousingWorks believe its ecosystem could both save the Commonwealth money and provide better service to those needing subsidized and special needs housing, and point to their accomplishments working with municipalities and housing authorities across Massachusetts.

Using the Internet as the prime source of information, agencies are able to cut down on overhead, postage, advertising, and other materials and focus on providing meaningful services. Since housing advocates, providers, and oversight agencies can now work together, housing policy has improved. The fully integrated set of modules helps keep parties updated in real-time about housing supply and demand. These successes are a testament to the important role played by HousingWorks in the Commonwealth's low-income and special needs housing market.

