

**TOP FY 2000  
Project Narrative**

**City of Portland**

**Grant # 41-60-00012  
Portland, OR**

## **Project Purpose**

“Housing is an immediate need. You have to have housing to stay healthy.”  
– *homeless focus group participant living with HIV*

### **The Problem:**

Housing instability and homelessness rock the foundation upon which families and healthy lives are built: safe, decent reliable shelter. Low-income residents often face innumerable barriers to finding and keeping decent, stable affordable housing and suffer life-damaging consequences as a result of their uncertainty about where they will sleep and eat next month, next week or, even, tomorrow night.

A recent housing study in Portland, Oregon found that housing discrimination, poor credit histories and a lack of accessible housing represent just a few of the many barriers keeping low-income Portland residents from getting into a rented home, even when they can afford to pay the rent. For many who find housing, the monthly rent burden makes up too large a share of the family income, and one day of missed work due to illness means having to choose between buying food, paying a doctor bill or having enough to make the rent next month. Over 80% of low-income Portland residents who responded to a survey conducted as part of the housing study said that they were forced to move in the last year or expected to have to move in the coming year. Respondents cited affordability, discrimination, landlord/tenant disputes and other factors that rendered their housing insecure or inappropriate. (See Appendix pp.21-26 for a complete summary of findings).

The public sector broadly recognizes the negative effects of homelessness and frequent displacement on the health, education and economic security of children, families and adults. The Portland School District recently formed a Mobility Task Force to study and respond to the rising number of low-income families who are forced to move and change schools multiple times during each school year and the disturbing correlation between this increased mobility and low student achievement.

Portland, like most urban communities, provides federal and local funding and support to a wide continuum of housing-related social services. These safety net services provide shelter, transitional housing, rent and deposit assistance, legal aid, dispute resolution services, fair housing services, housing counseling, affordable housing development and other forms of assistance proven to help people remain adequately housed and stable. In fact, Portland boasts an array of innovative programs that work with clients to overcome barriers to stable housing, including programs that work with landlords and tenants to enforce fair housing rights, resolve eviction disputes and help tenants with poor credit or with a criminal history access housing. A complete list of Portland housing agencies can be found in the Appendix, pp. 31-34.

Unfortunately, the mere presence of a variety of stand-alone services that address housing barriers is not enough. Though nearly all respondents to the City-sponsored housing survey faced some sort of housing crisis in the last year, only one in three knew which agency to turn to for help. Almost a third said that some increased assistance in simply finding housing would have helped. Too many families simply move from one unaffordable or inappropriate unit to the next, because they cannot access the help they need to assess what they can afford, to overcome the barriers unique to their situation or to simply find available housing.

A series of focus groups with housing providers and consumers revealed that the housing services system is jammed and not well-coordinated, that most agencies spend critical staff time simply referring callers on to another service provider and that agency staff lack current, accurate information on available housing resources. One receptionist reported that over 80% of calls to her agency are from callers with problems that the agency does not even handle, even though most callers say they were referred to her by another agency and that this is their fourth or fifth call in an effort to get some help. Clearly, the service delivery system exhibits fragmentation:

- There is **no one place to search for affordable housing** in the City of Portland.
- Most clients face multiple barriers to accessing and maintaining housing and therefore require **service coordination** involving more than one agency.
- Because the **system is large and complex**, referrals are often missed, made inappropriately or are made too late for an agency to help avert a crisis.
- Staff turnover, changing programs and the short time-frames in housing cases require an **accessible, easily updated catalogue of resources**, which Portland currently lacks.
- The system does not use any **uniform tracking** of longitudinal client and agency success in avoiding repeated homelessness and multiple moves. It is impossible to tell what's working.

#### **The Solution: A Housing Clearinghouse**

The Portland Area Housing Clearinghouse (PAHC) will create a streamlined system of housing services that can help low-income Portland residents quickly and easily access the help they need. The PAHC will create a truly integrated system, which will link at least 75 member agencies over a broad-band VPN and allow public access to user services via the world wide web. The City, through its Bureau of Housing and Community Development (BHCD) and Bureau of Information Technology (BIT) will partner with the Portland Housing Center (PHC), a community-based nonprofit organization dedicated to helping low-income Portlanders find decent housing, to administer grant funds and lead this initiative. The City and PHC will form a public/private partnership to finance, design, develop and implement the PAHC in cooperation with over 75 PAHC member agencies.

The Clearinghouse will deploy an Internet-based system linking all housing service providers and supporting a searchable, comprehensive listing of affordable housing vacancies. When fully operational, the clearinghouse will permit housing counselors and placement specialists at any member agency to function much like a travel agent sitting in front of a booking screen. Using the system, staff will be able to consult with clients about multiple service options, check on appointment and resource availability, and search and preview various destinations, which, in this case, might well be a family's first stable home. The PAHC will provide the following services:

***High-Speed, Broad Band Member Agency Access To:***

- **Housing Screen:** An interactive client screening and housing intake tool designed to assist staff with problem identification, including live links to services in the system that address client-specific barriers to accessing and maintaining stable, decent housing. The screen will be designed by experienced service providers and will capture the barriers-to-services matrix developed as part of the housing services plan (see Appendix, pp. 27-30) as a key tool to identify useful resources. The Housing Screen will assist staff, especially those new to the delivery system, by providing a “virtual guided tour” to those areas of the services system that can assist their client.
- **Housing Links (Enhanced):** Housing services links will provide real-time information about the availability of limited housing resources at other system agencies such as rental assistance vouchers, shelter beds and transitional housing units and the ability to reserve those resources on-line, in consultation with a waiting client. Housing Links will also enable direct agency-to-agency communication and on-line appointment-setting at partner agencies. Housing Links will speed users access to the resources and coordinate the services located through Housing Screen.
- **Housing Search:** Housing search will provide state-of-the-art assistance in finding the right housing. Housing Search will consist of an on-line, searchable database of affordable rental vacancies with sorting options for publicly subsidized housing, landlords who accept Section 8, specific bedroom size, affordability ranges, geographic areas, and school districts. The application will include a GIS overlay to map available units and their proximity to schools, employment, social services and other community resources. The system will also accommodate video and still picture images for rapid virtual touring of housing units and projects advertised with viewable images.
- **Housing Track:** A network-based client tracking system that uses anonymous client identifiers to track a client’s progress through the system of services. This function will permit user members to conduct case management reviews and to receive centralized client progress reports through a system designed with confidentiality safeguards.
- **Housing Data:** Downloadable data functions that permit the City of Portland and other partnering jurisdictions to track system outcomes and identify strengths, weaknesses and

gaps in the housing services system. For the first time, all member agencies will enter outcome information into a shared system.

#### ***Public Internet Access To:***

- **Housing Search:** A public user version of the system available through the VPN, this feature will provide any user easy Internet access to the database of available, affordable rental housing units.
- **Housing Links:** User-friendly, accessible information on the complete array of services that can help residents access and maintain stable housing.
- **Housing Self-Assessment:** An on-line, interactive tool to help assess how much a user can afford for housing and utilities, with triggered links to services that assist users to maximize income from public benefits, locate employment training, rental subsidies and weatherization programs, and to assess readiness for homeownership.

#### **Innovation**

The PAHC will utilize emerging broad bandwidth technology to equip housing agencies to interact with a linked continuum of housing resources, with information updated regularly by PAHC participants. Departing from traditional Information and Referral systems, the Clearinghouse will speed users into and through the system of services by making needed appointments, searching for appropriate housing, and assisting with problem assessment and solution. The PAHC builds upon the success of past TOP awardees like the Cleveland Housing Network by providing comprehensive information about available housing and services through an interactive system structured around identified barriers to stable housing. Many communities, including Portland, currently use some forms of technology to house basic Information and Referral systems. What's new in this project design is that the technology provides the foundation for the actual problem-solving and case work.

Housing services professionals will utilize the PAHC as a tool to both assess and address client housing issues. For example, a client may contact the intake staff at Legal Aid, complaining that they received an eviction notice. The intake interview may reveal that the client actually wants to move to a more appropriate unit, but cannot get into the apartment they want because of poor credit. When the intake staff enters this information into the **Housing Screen**, the system will prompt the user with a link to Ready to Rent, a program that assists tenants to obtain housing where poor credit is a barrier. With client consent, staff can use PAHC's **Housing Links** to fill an appointment slot listed by the Ready to Rent program, print out an appointment confirmation with directions, and provide a list of available apartments that accept Ready to Rent participants. A client who came seeking a lawyer to fight an eviction, leaves on the path to a more desirable home.

#### **Diffusion Potential**

The Clearinghouse project will ultimately provide a regional system that will assist the four Counties that surround Portland. A regional approach as a long-term goal makes sense, since the housing market and the job market that typically drives it are both regional in nature. Officials

from the City of Portland, Clackamas County, Washington County and Multnomah County in Oregon and from Clark County, Washington have been meeting regularly under the sponsorship of HUD for the last 6 months to target projects that can aid the entire region. The Clearinghouse Project has received unanimous support from the officials, who are looking to Portland, the largest of the entitlement jurisdictions, to develop and test a prototype system in which all regional partners can ultimately participate.

The project has important application beyond the region because it takes critical steps to counter the effects of consistent turnover in front-line social service staff, a significant trend in many urban areas. Every community relies on typically underpaid, undertrained and undersupported staff at local agencies to find housing, jobs, clothes and services for those most in need. The fragmented housing services system in Portland is typical of the delivery system of public services that serve low-income people in most communities. By linking agencies to a comprehensive electronic screening and service delivery system, the PAHC system will help organizations take a more holistic approach to social service delivery, in which linked agencies address client needs in a more coordinated fashion. Once developed, the system can be easily replicated in many social service environments.

The project has a regional and national diffusion plan. The Project Coordinator at Portland Housing Center and the Program Development Specialist will continue to work with regional community development officials to market the system regionally and to recruit all regional housing agencies to participate. At the national level, HUD, through its Best Practices symposia, professional publications and web-based forum for community development professionals provides an excellent platform for the PAHC to demonstrate its success nationally. Project staff have been working with Community Builders from the Portland HUD Office to develop the concept and will continue these connections to develop national exposure for the project deliverables.

### **Project Feasibility**

#### **Technology Collaboration Partners**

City of Portland BIT will host the PAHC system through the City's Network Operations Center, employing current technology partners: Sun Firewall, DMZ, Cisco Routers, Server Administrators (for Exchange, GIS, SQL and Web Servers), GIS Database Architects, GIS Modular Programmers, TNG Unicenter Network Monitoring System, VPN and Extranet Account Administration, Technology Learning Center. With BIT leadership, these resources will implement the IT system that will enable the PAHC to meet its mission.

The Mount Hood Cable Regulatory Commission (MHCRC) will provide connections to and management of INET, a developing institutional network that will provide the high-speed infrastructure to support the PAHC.

City of Portland ITSP will provide server hardware and system software and set up.

BHCD and PHC Network Specialist will set up and oversee the system design team and will integrate PAHC program functions and member agency needs with the technical design and development of the host network and applications.

### **Technical Approach and Interoperability**

The provider applications will be available to members over a virtual private network (VPN) hosted by the I-NET. Housing Screen, Links and Search will be custom-designed database functions accessible over the VPN by members. The servers will support media applications and the City's corporate GIS function. Public applications will be internet-based, and will rely on provider application design with relaxed security protocols and reduced functionality to increase speed of operation over low bandwidth connections.

This system will be built with open architecture design tools. ODBC and SQL compliant databases will be used, allowing importation of most pre-existing and acquired data sets. TCP/IP network protocol and Cisco Routers will transport and route data throughout the network. ArcInfo is the platform used by the City's Corporate GIS designers, Microsoft IIS will be used as the web servers for this system. Exchange Servers will be used for client and resource tracking. A prototype system diagram is attached in the Appendix at p. 39.

### **Technical Alternatives**

The INET Institutional Network was chosen as the telecommunication platform for this project because of its broad bandwidth capabilities and its geographical reach. The system is capable of delivering 750mhz of bandwidth (aprox. 200mhz upstream and 550mhz downstream). For IP data 3.7 MHz = 10mb upstream or 47mb downstream. As you can see, this network is very suited for bandwidth hungry applications like video or GIS maps. The INET has been designed to blanket the metropolitan area as a matrix. It has been built along the same right of way as the cable television residential network, thus bringing the possibility of network connectivity to virtually every neighborhood in the proposed service area.

The Public access component will be scaled down to deliver those system resources which do not require broadband access, but for agency access the INET is an ideal choice.

### **Scalability**

The open architecture of the system will also support scalability. New servers can be added and clustered as the use of the system grows. New data sets can be accommodated, as they become available.

### **Maintenance**

The City of Portland Bureau of Information Technology Network Operations Center has technicians on staff 24 hours a day seven days a week to monitor operations. Server administrators and network analysts will be available to troubleshoot, add new user accounts and maintain system components.

### **Applicant Qualifications**

The City of Portland is a national leader in the use of Information Technology to meet social service and public needs. BIT and ITSP staff are leaders in their fields. The City has a strong record of federal grants management through its grants office.

### **Budget, Implementation Schedule and Timeline:**

The project will take three years to fully implement. A detailed timeline can be found at Appendix, p.37. The total project budget is \$1.56 million over the three years, with reduced maintenance spending projected after the system is designed and in place. Budget details are set out in the Budget Narrative.

### **Community Involvement**

The PAHC is a community-initiated and community-led project. Beginning in May, 1999, BHCD sponsored a Housing Services Planning Committee to oversee a needs assessment and the development of a five-year strategy to improve the delivery of housing-related social services. The City convened the committee to examine and improve the system of services that the City and surrounding Multnomah County fund with federal Community Development Block Grant funds and local general funds and to explore the possibility of developing a regional delivery system. The planning team was stakeholder-based, and included staff representing local nonprofit agencies that provide housing and homeless services, housing and disability advocates, staff from the housing bureaus of regional jurisdictions, the Housing Authority of Portland, officials from local landlord associations and the owner of a tenant screening company.

The needs assessment included the following: a review of recent audits and studies of Portland's housing delivery system; research into best practices in other jurisdictions across the nation; a far-reaching consumer survey designed to capture the service needs of the homeless and other users of local social services; a series of focus groups that targeted under-represented populations like Portland's Latino community, the elderly, and the disabled; and interviews with key informants who work in and with the housing services system. A committee roster and the adopted Findings and Recommendations of the Housing Services Planning Committee can be found in the Appendix, p. 26.

The Housing Services Planning Committee recommended in January, 2000 that the City develop a Housing Clearinghouse. The PAHC was carefully conceived and developed with many of the community partners that will implement and utilize it. The planning committee continues to meet regularly to update the information that will be uploaded once the PAHC infrastructure is designed and completed. While the City will provide technical services and support, the nonprofit partners will actually complete system design.

The PAHC will also be shaped by an Advisory Committee sponsored by the Housing and Community Development Commission (HCDC), a citizen body with responsibility for oversight of housing and community development policy. The Advisory Committee will include seats for member agencies, HCDC Commissioners, community development staff from local jurisdictions and public users.

## **Reducing Disparities**

The direct beneficiaries of the PAHC will be local residents living at or below 80% of the Area Median Income. The services provided by the Clearinghouse and its member agencies will reduce disparities by increasing access to affordable housing, increasing agency and community access to broadband technology and to applications like the GIS system and by putting low-income renters in much the same position as homebuyers who take advantage of the MLS and Internet-based homebuying services.

## **Evaluation and Documentation**

### **Documentation**

The PAHC Advisory Committee will be charged with the responsibility for evaluating the success of the project. Public accountability is the cornerstone of all initiatives in which the City of Portland partners, and this project is no exception. BHCD and member agency project staff will report regularly to the Advisory Committee, which will provide at least quarterly updates to the Housing and Community Development Commission. At minimum these reports will include:

Qualitative progress reports on the development and implementation of the network system.

Quantitative reports on the number of member agencies, the numbers served by the system, the number of successful referrals made and the number and percentage of successful housing outcomes.

Tracking of all project benchmarks, which will be fully developed by the PAHC Advisory Committee at the inception of the project.

### **Benchmarks**

The PAHC Advisory Committee will ultimately develop and adopt detailed benchmarks against which it can measure the project's success. The City adopts the following initial goals and evaluation strategies for the project:

### ***System Development***

Year 1: All agencies in Portland will be linked to the Clearinghouse system and will employ it regularly in their practice to assist clients with accessing the system of services, to make quality referrals and to help clients complete a basic housing search.

Year 2: Universal access to the housing search database and to the Clearinghouse public information system will be available from any PC with Internet access.

Year 3: Advanced functioning implemented, including resource tracking, appointment setting, housing screening and assessment and GIS-enabled housing search.

Year 3: The system is available to all housing service agencies in the four-county region.

Year 4: Comprehensive system evaluation and recommendations.

### *System Effectiveness*

Much of this data will be obtained by a member agency survey and a consumer survey that replicates the methodology of the survey conducted by the Housing Services Planning Committee.

Year 1: By year end, 75% of member agencies report an increased level of appropriate referrals.

Year 2: System usage data demonstrates that clients are receiving appropriate linkages within the system and that the vacancy rate in City-tracked affordable housing drops from its current level of 5% to 3.5% as a result of universal access to the housing search/locator function.

Year 3: Consumer exit survey conducted to test client satisfaction and knowledge of the system along with housing stability and security. Comparison of system knowledge and housing security data with results of pre-PAHC consumer survey should show at least a 50% increase in percentage of respondents who know how to access services and in percentage of respondents who don't think they will have to move in the next 12 months.