Council Members:
Claire Hall, Chair
Sami Jo Difuntorum
Mary Ferrell
Barbara Higinbotham
Candace Jamison
Mary Li
Javier Mena
Gerard F. Sandoval, PhD
Charles Wilhoite

AGENDA
September 17, 2021 9:00 a.m. – 11:00a.m.
Oregon Housing and Community Services
725 Summer St NE, Salem OR 97301

Webinar Mtg Only
Public **register** in advance for this webinar

OREGON HOUSING & COMMUNITY SERVICES
HOUSING STABILITY COUNCIL

TIME	TOPIC	SWHP Priority	ACTION
9:00	**Meeting Called to Order**		Call Roll

9:05	**ERA & Options for ERA2**
	• **OHCS Landscape of Emergency Rental Assistance:** *Executive Director Margaret Salazar*
	• **Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance 1 Review:** *Andrea Bell, Director Housing Stabilization*
	  o **Program goals and progress to date**
	  o **National landscape and best practices**
	  o **Guest Presentation: Public Partnerships, LLC**
	  o **Fulfilling the promise to Oregon renters: OHCS Actions**
	
	• **OHCS Business Partner perspective:** *Scott Cooper*, *Executive Director, NeighborImpact and Board Chair, Community Action Partnership of Oregon*
	  o **Community Action Partnership of Oregon**
	
	• **ERA 2:** *Andrea Bell, Director Housing Stabilization*
	  o **Decisive, Bold action: Preview of ERA 2 optimizations**
	  o **HSC Discussion**
			Briefing
			
			Discussion

11:00	**Meeting Adjourned**		

All times listed on this agenda are approximate and subject to change. Agenda items may also be taken out of order and addressed at different times than listed. The agenda may be amended by the Council at the time of the meeting.

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**OREGON HOUSING &
COMMUNITY SERVICES**
HOUSING STABILITY
COUNCIL

The Housing Stability Council helps to lead OHCS to meet the housing and services needs of low- and moderate-income Oregonians. The Housing Stability Council works to establish and support OHCS' strategic direction, foster constructive partnerships across the state, set policy and issue funding decisions, and overall lend their unique expertise to the policy and program development of the agency.

The 2019-2023 Statewide Housing Plan outlines six policy priorities that focuses OHCS' investments to ensure all Oregonians have the opportunity to pursue prosperity and live from poverty.

Statewide Housing Plan Policy Priorities

Equity & Racial Justice

Homelessness

Permanent Supportive Housing

Affordable Rental Housing

Homeownership

Rural Communities

For more information about the Housing Stability Council
or the Statewide Housing Plan, please visit Oregon Housing and Community Services online at
https://www.oregon.gov/ohcs/OSHC/Pages/index.aspx

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Date: September 15, 2021

To: Housing Stability Council Members
Margaret Solle Salazar, Executive Director

From: Andrea Bell, Director of Housing Stabilization Division
Mike Savara, Assistant Director of Homeless Services
Sam Kenney, Senior Homeless Services Policy Analyst
Lauren Dressen, Rental Assistance Program Coordinator

Purpose: To provide a briefing on the Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program 1 and preview the program design framework for Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program 2. No HSC decision to be made.

BACKGROUND

At the September 17, 2021 Housing Stability Council, Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) will present a bold plan to expedite the approval and payment of federal rental assistance through Oregon Emergency Rental Assistance Program (OERAP). This includes improvements and urgent action to push forward on administration of the federal Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) 1 grant, and a decisive new approach for ERA 2 rooted in what is working around the nation.

In February, 2021, OHCS received an allocation of $204 million in funds from the U.S. Department of Treasury as part of the $25 billion ERA Program established by the Consolidated Appropriations Act. The primary intention of these resources is to preserve housing stability by facilitating resources to renters and landlords in the most efficient and accountable manner.

LOOKING BACK AT OERAP 1 PLANNING

The Council may recall that OHCS engaged in a public process in which we laid out the core values driving the design of OERAP. During this process we highlighted the constructive feedback and lessons we learned in administering Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) rental assistance.

The lessons learned from CRF rental assistance created key goals for OERAP:
- Establish transparency for the people of Oregon on program progress by providing near real time data;
- Use data to make real-time improvements in program administration;
- Standardize the application and intake process statewide to ensure equitable service delivery and best practices across the state.

For these reasons and more, we decide to implement a centralized technology platform resource to help address these core items.

While OHCS is seeking to improve core design components for ORERAP as part of our commitment to continuous improvements, we remain unwavering in in our values for ERA 1 into ERA 2:

- Ensure timely delivery of resources to Oregonians in need
- Ease of application (lower, reduce, and/or eliminate barriers)
- Consistency of program administration across the state
- Clear and consistent information for clients and the public
- Leading with equity and racial justice at the center, including centering tenant voice (particularly communities of color), serving undocumented households, and affirmative and inclusive outreach to BIPOC communities
- Geographic equity—ensuring inclusion of rural communities as well as jurisdictions that received direct allocations from U.S. Treasury outside of OHCS
- Retaining funds in Oregon by meeting strict federal spending deadlines

OERAP 1 ADMINSTRATION STRUCTURE

To understand where we are going with ERA 2 it is important to understand the mechanics of the first iteration of ERA 1. The administration of ERA 1 consists of a centralized portal with a decentralized processing system administered by local program administrators (LPAs).
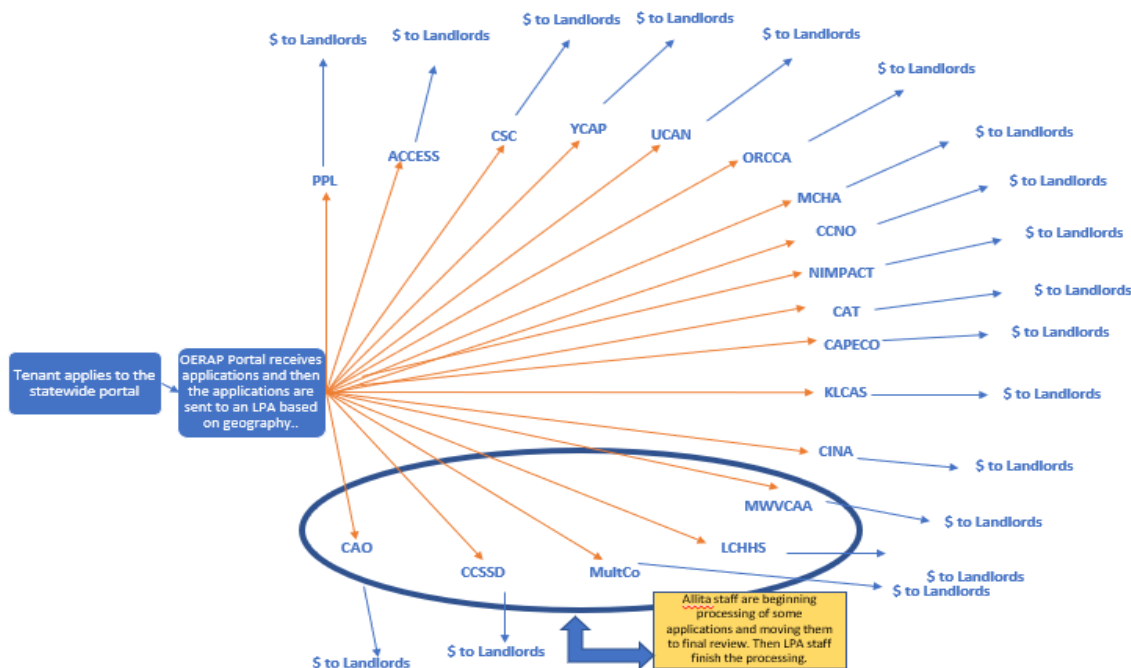
CURRENT STATE OF ERA: THE PLAN

Currently all $204 million in ERA 1 funds are accounted for in terms of demand: when all applications currently received are paid out, the ERA 1 funds will be fully expended. However, much work remains to process and pay out all these applications Based on funds approved for specific households, OERAP is in the middle of the pack, nationally, when compared to spending in other states for ERA 1.

To date:

- OERAP has received approximately 33,200 complete applications.
- LPAs and PPL have approved payments for approximately 6,200 households.
- This leaves about 27,000 applications that need to be approved for payment.
- PPL is contracted to process 8,000 more applications, leaving 21,000 applications to be processed by the LPAs.
- At the highest collective processing rate (about 1,500 approvals per week) it will take the LPAs 14 weeks to clear completed applications in the system.
- OHCS is working with PPL to continue increasing staffing levels and accept additional applications to accelerate processing.
- With additional PPL processing and increased production form LPAs we estimate the current completed applications could be cleared in as few as 6 to 7 weeks.

*Certain data elements are as of 9/14

As reported previously to the Housing Stability Council, OHCS has taken unprecedented, bold action to dramatically increase the capacity in the system to process and pay out applications. This includes bringing on approximately 60 temporary and contracted staff to help tenants complete applications and to push applications through the system; engaging PPL, the outside vendor, to process and pay out a share of applications; working with LPAs to create rigorous staffing plans and production targets; and, importantly, focusing on how to streamline application requirements and fully utilize the flexibilities and policy direction from US Treasury to speed application approvals. OHCS is also providing regular "office hours" and technical assistance to LPAs to use the software and make payments.

We are not letting up on these efforts to expedite ERA 1 processing, and in the Friday Housing Stability Council meeting we will provide more detail on these efforts to ensure that all eligible applicants receive needed assistance through ERA 1.

ERA CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Program Design Feature in ERA 1	Efficiency Gain	Efficiency Challenge	ERA 2 Strategy

Centralized intake	-Real time statewide data -Data on applicant characteristics Ease of marketing to tenants statewide Significant success in quickly reaching tens of thousands of tenant applicants Tenants do not have to navigate up to 18 different systems	-Tenants report the platform is not mobile friendly -Translation was inconsistent - Digital divide -The incredible reach to tenants and significant applications into the system created a large wave of incoming applications that created a challenge for LPAs to keep up with demand	-Bolster statewide investment in community engagement and tenant navigation - Make improvements to the tenant facing component of the application software to ease improvements - Implement centralized application processing to address the issue of application backlogs
Implementing changing state and federal guidance	-Federal government increased program flexibility over time, allowing grantees to relax standards for tenant documentation OHCS was *able* to set consistent standards in how flexibilities should be applied. Where flexibilities are being used, application review and approval is accelerated	-Concern from some LPAs that applying flexibilities will create issues with federal auditing - OHCS has had challenges mandating that LPAs use the federal flexibilities in a consistent fashion	-Instead of tailoring updated US Treasury guidance to 17 programs, having a centralized processor will ensure consistent statewide embrace of the federal guidance
Equity and Racial Justice	-Prioritization schema aids in setting accountability in prioritizing ERA -Real time data to know where awareness and access needs to be bolstered.	-Continuous outreach must persist over lifetime of program linguistically and culturally relevant services specific to OERAP needed	-Using gathered information to adjust program design as we did with ERA 1 -Bolster investments to community-based organizations through the expanded housing stability services

Application and Payment processing	- System provides robust data on each local administrator - Positions OHCS to make precise mid-course corrections based on data	- Glitchy software - OHCS underestimated the mismatch of a centralized program and software + decentralized program administration and application processing	- Centralize the backend application and payment processing through vendor. One vendor processing applications minimizes the software challenges and time needed to troubleshoot with multiple program administrators - Maintain local administrator role in leading community outreach
Data Driven Solutions	- Because of data transparency, OHCS was able to see where interventions were needed and take unprecedented action to bring on additional temporary staff, contract employees and vendor to take on thousands of applications on short notice.	- In hindsight, OHCS should have set additional performance benchmarks for accountability	- ERA 2 rental assistance funding will include pay for performance contracts for application processing. Funding for community outreach will allow OHCS to see in real time whether we are seeing applications come in the door in regions across the state.
Geographic reach	The use of LPAs ensured reach in communities throughout Oregon	Program operations vary significantly from community to community, both in application processing speed, tenant support and documentation requirements	Build a strong program that maximizes efficiencies with centralized application processing while ensuring resources for outreach, intake and eviction prevention in all communities across the state

EMERGENCY RENT ASSISTANCE BEST PRACTICES

With each month, COVID-19 and the concurrent economic fallout is making it harder for many Oregonians to afford basic needs. In administering about $204 million in state and federal

rental assistance to date, we continue to learn about the operational nimbleness and expediency needed to get funds out the door to renters and landlords. As a state agency, this challenged everything about our pre-existing program models; contracting methods, being nimble to the iterating and adapting to changing federal guidance and the distinction in operations that is triggered for an *emergency* rental assistance program. The White House has stated its clear understanding that prior to the ERA program, there was no national infrastructure to quickly deploy resources from government coffers to the people we serve to provide rental assistance and prevent evictions. While that is true, we now have the benefit of experience, success and challenges in ERA 1 – in Oregon and nationally – to draw upon as we plan for ERA 2.

OHCS participated in active conversation with our federal partners and ERA grantees to identify key characteristics of programs and explore how certain characteristics correlated with programs' ability to efficiently distribute funds.

State of Illinois: Program entailed a centralized, assembly-line model of processing applications in-house, while case management services and applicant support were provided by nonprofit community partners.

King County, WA: To improve processing times and improve communication for the 2021 iteration of EPRAP, this jurisdiction contracted with a service to write and distribute checks and electronic payments.

State of Connecticut: The Connecticut Department of Housing centralized and contracted out the accounting, auditing and check cutting functions of their program.

In many of these states and local jurisdictions, grantees are providing funds to local community-based organizations to do outreach, community engagement and application intake. These programs are using centralized application portals and software systems. The function of moving applications through the system and cutting checks, which does not typically involve tenant engagement, is centralized through specialized vendors experienced in disaster response. This frees up local community-based organizations and Community Action Agencies to focus on the work that only they can do – and is core to their operations – which is working directly with tenants in need.

Another feature of programs that are moving applications quickly is the use of U.S. Treasury flexibilities, in particular the use of tenant "self-attestation." Self-attestation is a practice that allows for streamlining the required documentation in tenant applications. This is a best practice in terms of trauma informed care that reduces burdens on tenant applicants. It is also shown to reduce processing times as it frees up program administrators from chasing documents. U.S. Treasury is also allowing the use of categorical eligibility. These are important flexibilities that are challenging to implement with multiple local administrators, but they are
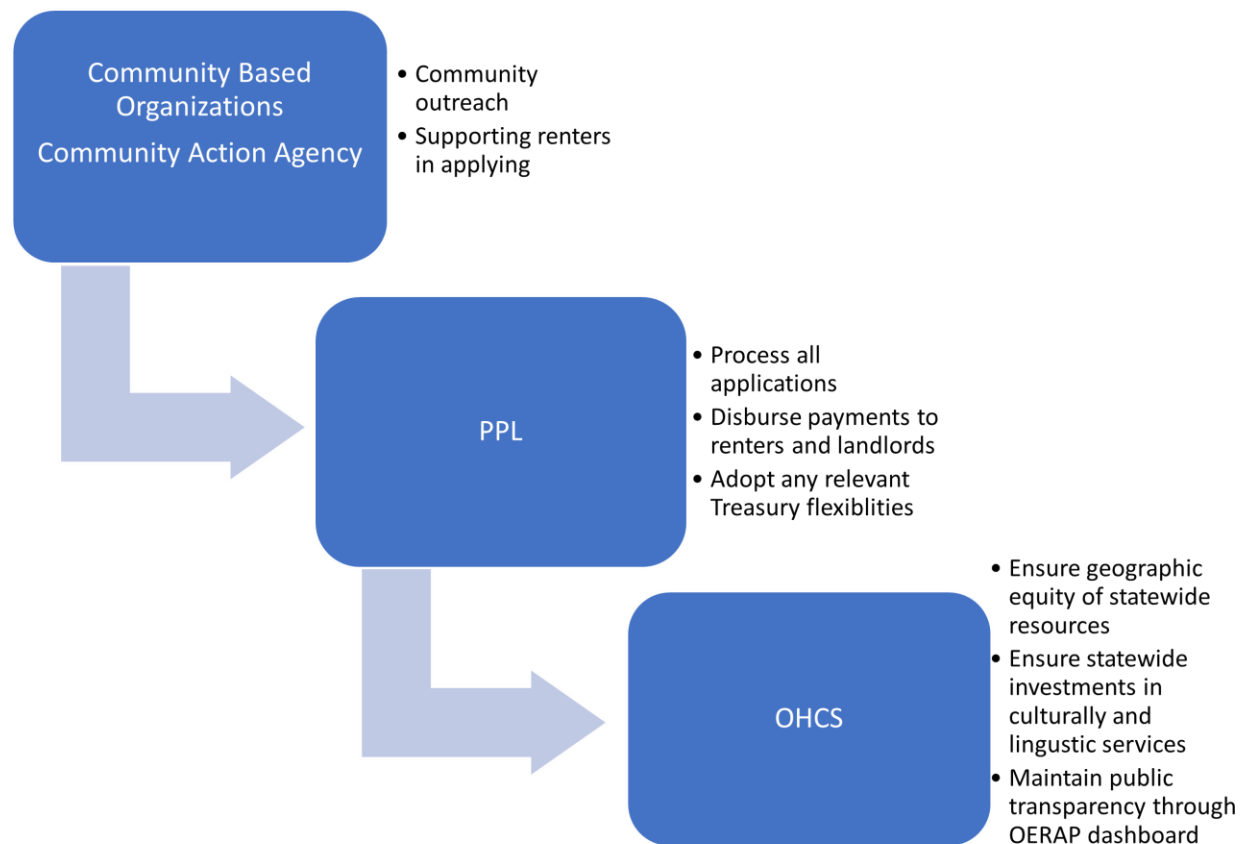
relatively easy to embrace with one centralized application review process. We believe this is going to be a significant need for ERA 2 and U.S. Treasury and the White House are pushing on state grantees to embrace and mandate these practices.

ERA 2: CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

To improve processing times and communication methods for ERA 2, OHCS will adopt the effective optimizations we have observed in other state in centralizing the "back-end" function associated with approving applications and payments. There are also specific enhancements we are exploring based on specific community feedback such as a call center and text updates.

In addition, our intention for ERA 2 is to fully utilize the flexibilities allowed by U.S. Treasury including "self-attestation" and where possible, categorical eligibility.

There are still key decisions that we need to make with feedback from Council and community. It is imperative that ERA 2 does not create breaks in service or destabilize the structure some local administrators have built. We need that capacity for critical community engagement work. Below is a visualization of the proposed ERA 2 structure:

Community Based Organizations

Community Action Agency

- Community outreach
- Supporting renters in applying

PPL

- Process all applications
- Disburse payments to renters and landlords
- Adopt any relevant Treasury flexiblities

OHCS

- Ensure geographic equity of statewide resources
- Ensure statewide investments in culturally and lingustic services
- Maintain public transparency through OERAP dashboard

COUNCIL DISCUSSION

We seek advice from the Housing Stability Council on the best way to administer ERA 2 to ensure geographic equity. We want to make sure that this model will reach tenants and landlords in all corners of the state. We would also appreciate feedback on how to best support the functions of outreach to Oregon's diverse communities, and to ensure stability in staffing and services offered by LPAs currently working with tenants on the ERA 2 program.