

## **Oak Park Regional Housing Center Improving Online Presence**

### **Introduction**

Beginning in January 2018, the Housing Center will increase our ability to serve clients online. Previously, clients have been required to visit our office in order to receive listings of available units. Exceptions have been made this year as we have tested our online delivery model. However, the bulk of our clients still must come into our offices to register and receive services.

This requirement is based on two primary necessities. First, the value added of our model is the conversation our rental advisors have with our clients. It is through this process that the advisors can share both accurate data and personal testimony about the value of living in areas in Oak Park that most prospective renters state they would like to avoid. Second, visual confirmation allows us to verify that clients are providing their race honestly. As racial integration is a core component of our mission and contracted work, this verification is critical.

Advances in online technology and the generosity of in-kind services by technology professionals have allowed us to add capacity to provide our listings online without compromising our ability to have conversations with our clients and verify their race. Thus, beginning in 2018 we will be fully implementing our online services.

### **Technology Upgrades**

We began by replacing a server-based database using Access and Microsoft SQL software with an open sourced software called MySQL. This has allowed us to move our database to the internet. The cloud-based nature of the database allows us to also implement an online registration which will be operational in 2018. This online registration will be accessible via a link on our web page and will also be available via links on our social media and online advertising sites. This will streamline connections to our registration from sites providing leads to the Housing Center.

The online registration will also directly import the client's information into our cloud-based database. We have carefully selected a limited amount of information for the clients to provide that balances the information we need to determine the level of service and their tolerance for providing information before abandoning the site. We will continue to test this throughout 2018 to see if more or less information improves our online registration process.

The direct connection to our database will reduce data input time and should reduce input errors as well. However, it will likely increase the number of clients registering that do not have the qualifications to rent units in Oak Park. We also expect this to significantly increase the number of clients registering for our service. We will continue to monitor the effects of this change and adjust accordingly throughout the year.

We have also tested and will fully implement video advising. This advising is available via the most convenient video chat services that are available for our clients. We can connect via Facebook Messenger, Google Hangout, Skype, What's App, Facetime, and other methods. Clients that register online will be provided a link to request an online advising session. Clients will receive the same counseling as they would by coming into the office. However, we will monitor the different results between in-person and online interactions to determine if there is any significant difference in outcomes between these two methods.

All clients who qualify for any units in Oak Park will receive their listings via email and will be able to engage in follow up requests via email, video chat, or text. A text service is currently available on our website. They will also receive an electronic welcome kit with information about Oak Park included.

Also to be fully implemented in 2018 is a video tour service for those clients who are eligible for guiding to specific units. Using video chat services, we can take clients to specific units show them the unit, building, and surrounding community. This has been tested with good results in 2017.

If a client chooses to apply for a unit, we can send them electronic copies of required documents to apply to units. However, final negotiations and lease terms will still be required to be between the landlord and client.

This set of implementations will allow clients in 2018 to participate in our entire process online. From registration, to advising, to providing listings and touring units, clients will have the ability to do all of this without needing to visit our office. We expect this will increase the demand for our service that will result in benefits and challenges throughout 2018. Overall, we expect that it will increase registrations, moves, and affirmative moves in 2018.