

## **22.0 Complaints, Informal Reviews, and Informal Hearings**

This chapter describes the policies, procedures, and standards to be applied when applicants, participants, or owners disagree with a Pensacola Housing decision, or when complaints about the HCV program or its participants are received by Pensacola Housing.

### **22.1 Complaints**

Pensacola Housing will investigate and respond to complaints by applicants, participant families, owners, and the general public.

If the complaint is an allegation of fraud, a Pensacola Housing staff member will take the fraud report, requesting specific information such as the name of the tenant and the address of the unit where the alleged fraud occurred. The privacy of Pensacola Housing's clients will be protected at all times.

When the report is complete, a Pensacola Staff member will:

1. Review the report details to determine whether the tenant and/or the unit are, in fact, actively participating in Pensacola Housing's voucher programs.
2. For program participants, determine whether the reported behavior or activity in fact constitutes a program violation.
3. For alleged program violations, launch a fraud investigation.

For fraud investigations, Pensacola Housing will typically contact the tenant family and the landlord in writing, informing them of the allegations and of the steps needed to either confirm or return to program compliance. The family will have 10 business days to respond to the letter and provide requested documents. Failure to respond, or to provide sufficient third-party verification confirming program compliance, may result in termination of assistance. Participant families who are terminated as a result of a fraud investigation will have the right to request an informal hearing.

If the complaint or allegation of fraud comes from the landlord, and the alleged tenant behavior is a violation of the lease agreement, Pensacola Housing will instruct the landlord to enforce their lease and to provide the Housing office with copies of all notices pertaining to lease enforcement.

### **22.2 Informal Reviews for Applicants [24 CFR 982.554]**

An informal review is a review of an applicant's file and circumstances by a Pensacola Housing staff member who has not had any previous material involvement with the application, to determine whether Pensacola Housing's policies and procedures were applied correctly in denying the application.

### **22.2.1 Notice of Denial**

When Pensacola Housing determines that an applicant is ineligible, the applicant will be notified of the decision in writing. The notification will state:

1. The reason(s) for ineligibility;
2. A statement that the applicant may request an informal review if they disagree with the decision;
3. The procedure for requesting a review if the applicant does not agree with the decision; and
4. The deadline for requesting a review.

When an application is denied because of criminal activity described in a criminal record, Pensacola Housing will, on request, provide the applicant a copy of the criminal record upon which the denial decision was based, in accordance with 24 CFR 5.903 (f).

### **22.2.2 When an Informal Review Isn't Required**

Informal reviews aren't required in the following circumstances:

1. Discretionary administrative determinations such as what constitutes a complete application, how and when applications will be assigned for review, and what resources will be devoted to the review of a particular application or applications in general;
2. General policy issues, such as income eligibility;
3. The determination of the family voucher size under Pensacola Housing subsidy standards;
4. A refusal to extend a voucher;
5. A determination not to approve tenancy for a specific unit;
6. A determination that a unit selected by an applicant is not in compliance with HQS because of characteristics of the unit; or
7. A determination that a unit is not in accordance with HQS due to family size or composition.

### **22.2.3 Informal Review Process**

A request for an informal review must be submitted in writing to Pensacola Housing within 10 business days from the date of Pensacola Housing's notice of denial. An informal review will be scheduled within 10 business days from the date the review request is received.

The review will be conducted by a supervisory level staff person who was not involved in the decision under review, and who is not subordinate to the person who made the decision.

The applicant will be given the opportunity to present oral or written objections to the decision. Both Pensacola Housing and the applicant may present evidence and witnesses.

The applicant may, at the applicant's own expense, be represented by an attorney or other representative.

Upon request, the applicant may be present at the review to provide information, though the applicant's presence is not required. At the discretion of Pensacola Housing, the review may also be conducted as a conference call.

An applicant may request a reasonable accommodation to participate in the informal review process. Pensacola Housing will provide such reasonable accommodation, unless doing so would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of the services Pensacola Housing offers.

The decision of the review officer shall be provided to the applicant in writing within 10 business days after the date of the review, and shall include an explanation of the reasons for the decision.

All review requests, supporting documentation, and a copy of the final decision will be retained in the applicant's file.

### **22.3 Informal Hearings for Participants [24 CFR 982.555]**

Except for participants whose moving or port vouchers have expired, an opportunity for an informal hearing will always be provided when Pensacola Housing has made a determination to terminate assistance. In addition, Pensacola Housing will offer participant families an opportunity for an informal hearing to consider whether the following decisions relating to the participant family were made in accordance with the law, HUD regulations, and Pensacola Housing policies:

1. A determination of the family's annual or adjusted income, and the use of such income to compute the HAP.
2. A determination of the appropriate utility assistance payment, if any, to assist toward tenant-paid utilities from Pensacola Housing's utility estimate schedule.
3. A determination of the family voucher size and payment standard under Pensacola Housing's subsidy standards.
4. A determination to terminate assistance for a participant family because of the family's action or failure to act.
5. A determination to terminate assistance because the participant family has been absent from the assisted unit for longer than the maximum period permitted under Pensacola Housing policy and HUD rules.

Pensacola Housing will make reasonable accommodations to ensure that persons with disabilities have complete access to participate in the informal hearing process.

### **22.3.1 When an Informal Hearing Isn't Required**

Pensacola Housing will not provide a participant family an opportunity for an informal hearing for any of the following reasons:

1. Discretionary administrative determinations by Pensacola Housing.
2. General policy issues or class grievances.
3. Establishment of the Pensacola Housing utility estimate schedule for families on the program.
4. A determination not to approve an extension of a voucher term.
5. A determination not to approve a unit or lease.
6. A determination that an assisted unit is not in compliance with HQS. (However, Pensacola Housing will provide the opportunity for an informal hearing for a decision to terminate assistance for a breach of HQS caused by the family.)
7. A determination that the unit is not in accordance with HQS because of family size.
8. A determination to exercise or not exercise any right or remedy against an owner under a HAP contract.

### **22.4 Informal Hearing Procedures**

Pensacola Housing will adhere to the following procedures in conducting informal hearings.

#### **22.4.1 Discovery**

Before the hearing, the family will be given the opportunity to examine and photocopy any documents Pensacola Housing intends to present at the hearing. If Pensacola Housing doesn't make a document available for examination prior to the hearing, it may not rely on the document at the hearing.

Prior to the informal hearing, Pensacola Housing must also be given the opportunity to examine any documents the family intends to present that are directly relevant to the hearing. Pensacola Housing will be allowed to copy any such documents at Pensacola Housing's expense. If the family doesn't make a document available for examination prior to the hearing, the family may not rely on the document at the hearing.

For the purpose of an informal hearing, the term document includes records and regulations.

#### **22.4.2 Representation of the Family**

At its own expense, the family may be represented by a lawyer, advocate, or other representative.

#### **22.4.3 Hearing Officer**

The informal hearing shall be conducted by a Hearing Officer appointed by Pensacola Housing who is neither the person who made or approved the decision under review, nor a subordinate of that person.

The person who conducts the hearing will regulate the conduct of the hearing in accordance with the informal hearing procedures described in this section of the Pensacola Housing Administrative Plan.

#### **22.4.4 Evidence**

Pensacola Housing and the family will have the opportunity to present evidence and to question any witnesses. The family may request that Pensacola Housing staff be present at the hearing to answer questions pertinent to the case. Evidence presented at the hearing may be considered without regard to admissibility under the rules of evidence used in judicial proceedings.

#### **22.4.5 Conduct of the Hearing**

Only the issues subject to appeal, and raised by the participant in their notice of appeal, shall be addressed at the hearing. A participant family may present any relevant legal argument arising from any valid source of law, and hearing officers shall consider such arguments to the extent that they are relevant and germane to the case.

Relevance shall be determined by the hearing officer based on the specific facts and circumstances of each particular case. No legal theories or authorities shall be precluded from consideration at informal hearings or otherwise excluded on a categorical or near-categorical basis.

Evidence presented at the hearing may be considered without regard to admissibility under the rules of evidence used in judicial proceedings, except that the hearing officer may exclude evidence that is irrelevant, immaterial, unduly repetitious, or fails to meet the following evidentiary principles:

1. That the information offered presents a danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issues, undue delay, or other delay, or other deleterious effects that substantially outweigh the probative value of the information;
2. That the information is offered in violation of some public policy, such as evidence unlawfully obtained in violation of a family's legal or constitutional rights; or
3. That the information lacks competence or is not based on personal knowledge.

No documents may be presented at the hearing that weren't provided to the other party, if requested, before the hearing. "Documents" include all written records.

The hearing officer may ask the family for additional information and/or may adjourn the hearing as needed.

The hearing officer will not impose arbitrary limits on the length of time that a hearing may last, or the amount of time a specific portion of the hearing may consume, or impose unreasonable limits on the number of witnesses that may be called or the number of exhibits that may be presented. The hearing officer may impose such limits, but only as

warranted for good cause, in which case the hearing officer should state the reasons for imposing the limits on the record and in the written decision.

#### **22.4.6 Failure to Appear**

If the family fails to appear at the informal hearing, or fails to meet a deadline imposed by the hearing officer, Pensacola Housing's decision shall become final and take effect immediately. No new hearing will be granted unless the participant is able to demonstrate to Pensacola Housing, by clear and compelling evidence, that their failure to appear or meet the deadline was caused by circumstances beyond their control.

#### **22.4.7 Issuance of Decision**

The hearing officer will issue a written decision within 10 business days from the date of the hearing. The decision will include:

1. The names of all persons present at the hearing, and identification of their roles (whether as the hearing officer, a representative for Pensacola Housing, a member of the family, a witness, interpreter, or other);
2. The date and location of the hearing;
3. A summary of the factual allegations and the Pensacola Housing action or decision under review;
4. A summary of any evidence and arguments presented by the parties;
5. A statement of the facts upon which the decision is based;
6. A clear statement of the Hearing Officer's findings, conclusion, and decision;
7. A clear summary of the decision and explanation for the decision;
8. If the decision involves money owed, a clear statement of the amount owed, and documentation of how the amount owed was calculated;
9. The date the decision is effective; and
10. If the decision is to uphold termination of assistance, notice of the availability of judicial review. Such notice shall also indicate that time limitations for seeking judicial review may apply; that participants who seek judicial review must do so at their own expense; that neither the hearing officer nor Pensacola Housing can offer legal advice; and that participants who cannot afford an attorney may seek referral to a legal services provider such as Legal Services of North Florida, Inc.

#### **22.4.8 Decisions Not Binding on Pensacola Housing**

Pensacola Housing shall not be bound by any decision that:

1. Concerns matters for which no opportunity for a hearing is required to be provided;
2. Conflicts with or contradicts HUD regulations or requirements;
3. Conflicts with or contradicts federal, state, or local laws;
4. Exceeds the authority of the hearing officer; or
5. Involves issues not raised in the participant's appeal notice.

If Pensacola Housing determines that it is not bound by a hearing decision, it will notify the family within 10 business days of the hearing officer's determination, and provide a summary of the reasons for Pensacola Housing's determination, and the results of it.

#### **22.4.9 Recordkeeping**

Pensacola Housing will record all informal hearings by electronic means.

If a party seeks to record any informal hearing by means other than audio/video recording, such as by stenographic transcription, the hearing officer will permit such alternative recording at the requesting party's expense, unless good cause exists to disallow the method of recording, in which case the hearing officer should state the reasons for denial on the record and in the written decision.

Pensacola Housing will provide a copy of a hearing recording to the family or its representative on request, provided that the family or its representative shall pay reasonable reproduction costs prior to receiving the recordings.

All hearing requests, supporting documentation, and a copy of the final decision shall be retained in the participant's file.

Pensacola Housing will safely keep and maintain the electronic recordings of all informal hearings involving voucher terminations as a public record on file for no fewer than 5 years after the decision date. If a family's HCV program participation is terminated pursuant to the informal hearing decision, Pensacola Housing will keep the hearing recording for at least 5 years from the date of the last HAP payment made on the family's behalf. Pensacola Housing will also keep, for the same duration as the hearing recording, copies of all exhibits and all other tangible materials presented to the Hearing Officer, whether or not admitted into evidence.

#### **22.5 Informal Hearing Procedures for Denial of Assistance on the Basis of Ineligible Immigrant Status [24 CFR 5.514 (e, f)]**

If a family member claims to be an eligible immigrant and the INS SAVE system and manual search do not verify the claim, the participant or applicant will be notified within 10 business days of the right to appeal to the INS. Such an appeal must be filed with INS within 30 days of receipt of Pensacola Housing's decision. The applicant or participant may also request an informal hearing with Pensacola Housing. The request for a hearing must be made within 10 business days of receipt of Pensacola Housing's initial decision.

If the applicant or participant appeals to the INS, he or she must provide a copy of the appeal and proof of mailing to Pensacola Housing, or Pensacola Housing may proceed to deny the application or terminate assistance.

After receipt of a request for an informal hearing, Pensacola Housing shall schedule and conduct the hearing in accordance with the procedures described in Section 22.4 above.

### **22.5.1 Ineligibility Determinations**

If the hearing officer determines that the applicant or participant is not eligible, and there are no other eligible family members, Pensacola Housing will terminate assistance.

If there are eligible members in the household, Pensacola Housing will offer to pro-rate assistance, or give the family the option to remove the ineligible members.

Participants whose assistance is pro-rated (either because some members are ineligible, or because of the failure to verify eligible immigrant status for some members after exercising their appeal and hearing rights described above) are entitled to an informal hearing regarding TTP and tenant rent determinations.

Families denied or terminated for fraud in connection with the non-citizens rule are entitled to an informal review or informal hearing in the same manner as terminations for any other fraud.

### **22.6 Hearing Officer Selection**

Persons having no other affiliation with Pensacola Housing (that is, other than as hearing officers) shall serve as hearing officers for all informal hearings.

Pensacola Housing will make outreach to persons from the community with knowledge of contract law; Fair Housing law; landlord/tenant law; and/or regulations and processes governing federal and state benefit or assistance programs to serve as hearing officers for its voucher programs.