

How to attract more landlords to the housing choice voucher program: a case study of landlord outreach efforts

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Since 1980, the focus of American housing policy has shifted away from project-based to tenant-based subsidies, i.e. the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP). Yet many HCVP recipients have remained in high-poverty and high-minority areas of central cities. To improve the effectiveness of HCVP in expanding residential choices, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is encouraging local public housing authorities to utilize a variety of techniques to provide more opportunity for voucher recipients to move to low poverty areas including meetings with current or prospective owners, owners' newsletters, owner fairs, program videos and direct contact with owners. Although there has been a considerable body of research on voucher recipients in the Gautreaux and Moving to Opportunity programs, two special housing voucher programs, there has been little research on the effectiveness of landlord outreach efforts as part of the regular HCVP. We therefore conducted a case study of landlord outreach efforts currently being implemented by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority. We combined observation of landlord outreach events with semi-structured interviews to determine reasons why landlords do or do not participate, landlords' perceptions on the extent to which HCVP addresses their concerns, what they take away from these events, and how outreach efforts might be improved. This case study indicates that there is considerable room for improvement in landlord outreach efforts by the housing authority. The policy implications for HUD as well as public housing authorities across the United States are discussed.

Keywords: landlords; housing vouchers; poverty deconcentration

Introduction

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has made significant changes in the way it funds and makes affordable housing available. Since around 1980, the federal government's focus has shifted from subsidizing private new or rehabilitated developments to providing subsidies to low-income renters in the private sector. Section 8 certificates and vouchers evolved into the current Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP, Schwartz 2015). Voucher holders pay 30% of their income on rents and the voucher program covers the difference, and in some cases such as unemployment, the voucher makes up all or nearly all of the individual's rental cost. The HCVP has two goals: to expand access to decent, affordable housing and to provide lower-income renters with the opportunity to move to 'better' low-poverty neighborhoods; in other words, to enable poverty deconcentration (Varady 2011).

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Up to now, the HCVP has achieved limited success in deconcentrating poverty and in dispersing HCVP recipients. When low-income, minority families receive vouchers, they tend to make short distance moves and either remain in poverty concentrations (and in some cases recluster in HCVP ‘hotspots’) or to relocate to nearby changing neighborhoods (Park 2013; Varady and Walker 2007; Varady et al. 2010, 2013). Greater voucher deconcentration will require increasing the supply of rental housing in low-poverty areas, expanding tenant counseling and involving more landlords operating in low-poverty neighborhoods (Lens 2013). This is why it is important that local housing authorities undertake substantial outreach efforts in order to attract more landlords to the voucher program.

HUD’s *Housing Choice Program Guidebook* (HUD, n.d.a) encourages local housing authorities to utilize a variety of techniques to encourage voucher recipients to move to low poverty areas including meetings with current or prospective landlords, owners’ newsletters, owner fairs, program videos, and direct contact with landlords. ‘Each PHA must select the approaches it believes will be effective in its area and then test their effectiveness’ (p. 2.4, see also HUD, n.d.b; Quadel Corporation, n.d., 1.7–1.8). However, in practice many housing authority officials find the constraints of staff resources and demand for housing assistance to be significant barriers to achieving this directive (Greenlee 2011; cited in Greenlee 2014, 504).

To address the absence of research on housing authority recruitment and outreach efforts, we conducted a case study of landlord outreach efforts carried out by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA), the housing authority responsible for administering and implementing HUD programs in Hamilton County, Ohio. There are roughly 11,600 families with vouchers in Hamilton County (CMHA, 2013). The aim of our case study is to improve our understanding of landlord attitudes toward the strengths and weaknesses of landlord outreach efforts as well as their overall attitudes toward the HCVP and the CMHA in general.

Like other upper-Midwest cities, the Cincinnati rental housing market is fairly weak. Most of the landlords interviewed did business either in the city or inner-suburban areas with limited potential for market-rate rentals. Our conclusions are therefore most relevant to other ‘rustbelt’ upper-Midwestern cities with cool housing markets. However, since housing authorities carry out landlord outreach differently (Greenlee 2014), our one city case study results should be used with discretion.

In the next section, we briefly review the existing knowledge on landlord outreach and landlords’ concerns in housing voucher program participants. We show that there is remarkable consistency between the concerns of low-income landlords today (including those who rent to HCVP recipients) and the concerns of low-income landlords during the 1960s and 1970s, as indicated by the ‘classic’ landlord studies carried out during that period. Subsequently, we describe the data collection methods and data analysis. In the ‘Findings’ section, we discuss the results, based on four main themes. The final section presents some conclusions and provides recommendations for HUD, CMHA, and other housing authorities dealing with landlord outreach.

What do we know about low-income landlords and landlord outreach?

Much of what we know about low-income landlords arises from research on inner-city low-income landlords done in the 1960s and 1970s. The challenges remain fundamentally the same today, although many more of the landlords operate in older inner-suburbs. As was the case five decades ago, HCVP landlords strive to overcome negative stereotypes

about their work. Examples of these negative stereotypes are greedy investors who deliberately refrain from proper housing maintenance in order to maximize profits.

Four ‘classic’ inner city landlord studies from the 1960s and early 1970s (Grigsby and Rosenberg 1975; Stegman 1972; Sternlieb 1966; Sternlieb and Burchell 1973) challenged the stereotype of low-income landlords as ‘slumlords’. Most low-income landlords owned few properties and most were rank amateurs in that they knew little about real estate finance, taxation, or governmental programs (e.g. code enforcement, federally funded rehabilitation grants and loans), partly because official housing institutions were not effective in providing relevant information to low-income landlords.

Grigsby and Rosenberg (1975) provided a nuanced perspective on inner city landlords emphasizing neighborhood decay as the primary cause of disinvestment, but that poor management by landlords was a contributing factor as well. Small-scale owners, many of whom were casual investors generally did not know how to implement housing maintenance work efficiently, partly because of a lack of information and a lack of effective assistance from municipal authorities and larger housing institutions.

These four classic studies emphasize that not all landlords are slumlords, but that many are financially vulnerable because of substandard neighborhood conditions, and that different policies are needed to involve and assist different types of landlords. With this background on low income landlords in general, we can now turn to more contemporary research focused more on housing voucher landlords, a subcategory of low income landlords.

Recent research dealing with the role of landlords in HCVP emphasizes the connection between financial viability and neighborhood conditions. Turner (2012) highlights the need to focus housing authorities’ landlord outreach efforts on property owners in well-resourced, safe communities, to increase access to opportunities and improved quality of life for voucher holders. Marr (2005) indicates that efforts in low-poverty areas must address the stigma associated with HCVP impacts (such as fears concerning reduced property values). Kleinmans and Varady (2011; see also Varady & Kleinmans, 2013) highlight the importance of seriously addressing voucher landlords’ concerns including their desire to screen for and evict problem tenants. ‘Nevertheless, existing evidence regarding negative spillover effects [with regard to crime, property values, test scores] is compelling enough to warrant expanded and improved monitoring of both relocation and neighborhood change patterns and to initiate programs to address the concerns of residents [and landlords] in destination areas’ (Kleinmans and Varady 2011, 155).

The present paper builds upon Varady et al.’s (2013) study of housing professionals’ perceptions of the impacts of HCVP on suburban communities in Hamilton County, Ohio. Public officials expressed concern about some forms of negative neighborhood spillovers linked to HCVP, for example, poorly maintained property exteriors, cultural conflicts, and declining school test scores. Whereas the 2013 article focused on the attitudes of housing professionals, it presented no empirical evidence whatsoever on the attitudes of suburban landlords regarding negative neighborhood spillovers and tenant outcomes. We may assume that the aforementioned concerns of public officials are unlikely to persuade landlords operating in low-poverty neighborhoods to join the voucher program whereas research related to the concerns of landlords would do so. However, the extent to which landlord outreach efforts are effective in addressing landlords’ concerns with regard to negative tenant and neighborhood outcomes of vouchers, remains an open question.

Landlord motivations for participating in HCVP often extend beyond the economic benefit (e.g. a steady revenue stream). For around one third of the 34 landlords interviewed by Andrew Greenlee in his (2014) Illinois study, ‘the motivation to participate in

the voucher program was grounded in a demonstrated social mission or desire to use their property as a means of helping households they perceived as in need of assistance. This assistance took several forms including flexibility and assistance with down payments, timing of rent payments, linkage to social service resources and informal employment opportunities' (pp. 520–521). The preceding implies that recruiting new landlords to participate in the voucher program could contribute to better social support for tenants. Achieving this goal requires better knowledge concerning the success of existing outreach efforts. Therefore, this paper seeks to determine how CMHA landlords evaluate existing housing authority–landlord outreach efforts.

Methods

For this case study, the logical approach to collect the required information was to observe organized landlord outreach events and to interview both landlords and other stakeholders who were involved in these events. Therefore, we used a combination of observations and in-depth interviews. Specifically, we attended seven CMHA public meetings between September and December 2012 and conducted structured observation at these meetings focusing on landlord attendance, landlords' active participation beyond basic attendance, CMHA, and landlord interactions and structure and effectiveness of the events. We observed, but did not participate actively in these events. We recorded our observations by making notes of event attendance, information covered, landlord responses to the information, the nature of CMHA staff and landlord interaction, and questions and responses. At large events, such as workshops and 'Super Saturdays', the observations were anonymous; however, we were introduced as observers at the Landlord Orientation sessions.

We attended three specific types of meetings associated with the HCVP: 'Super Saturdays', Landlord Orientation sessions, and continuing education workshops. First, the 'Super Saturday' event is a housing fair held once a month at the CMHA office in the West End of Cincinnati (a poor area close to the CBD). This housing fair aims to connect landlords (who have already consented to join in the program) with voucher holders to begin the tenancy process. Second, Landlord Orientation is a program run by CMHA aimed at welcoming new landlords into the HCVP program and educating them about the process of getting a unit approved for a voucher holder tenant. This orientation also covers the roles and responsibilities of both landlords and tenants in the program. Landlords are formally required to participate in the landlord orientation and may do so by attending a weekly session held at one of the CMHA offices or by watching a series of videos online; however, participation in the orientation is not monitored. Finally, continuing education workshops are designed to provide free training and education for landlords and are periodically led by experts on property management. These sessions provide adequate question and answer time for experts to respond to landlords' questions raised but not answered by the online instructional videos.

In addition to our observations of a total of seven CMHA–landlord meetings, we conducted semi-structured informant interviews with landlords and CMHA staff. Considering the limited available resources for our study, we attempted to carry out 14 semi-structured informant interviews. Ultimately, we managed to successfully complete nine interviews, mostly a result of limited preparedness of landlords to participate in the interviews. Hence, we interviewed six landlords, two staff members from the CMHA, and the head of Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), a non-profit fair housing agency that assists CMHA in recruiting new landlords for HCVP.¹ Because we wanted to

understand and gain a rich description of the attitudes of landlords engaged in the voucher program, we used a purposive sample. We were not attempting to interview a representative sample; consequently, potential bias was not a major issue.² In terms of respondent recruitment, we employed a snowball sampling methodology. We asked HOME staff members for the names of landlords who might be willing to be interviewed. Subsequently, we asked landlords who consented to be interviewed, to identify other landlords whom we might contact as well. These interviews focused on landlords' attitudes and behavior in relation to HCVP, and suggestions for improving the HCVP program including the outreach component.

Generally, the nine interviews averaged one hour. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim to enable content analysis. Coding of the transcriptions was done manually and four main themes emerged.

Findings

Partly based on the 'classic' literature about landlord outreach, we identified four overriding themes: (1) CMHA–landlord relationships, (2) landlord financial burden and problem tenants, (3) fair housing and poverty deconcentration, and (4) the value of CMHA outreach events.

CMHA–landlord relationships

All in all, the interviewed landlords believed that CMHA did not care much about their interests, both in terms of day-to-day communication and management and when policy changes were made. They anticipated little or no change until CMHA believed that landlords, like tenants were its customers. In contrast, the interviewed CMHA staff members did not perceive substantial problems in their dealings with landlords. Similarly, Greenlee (2014) found that many of the Illinois landlords interviewed assumed that the local housing authority played more of a role as a landlord than it actually did.

This finding is partly due to the generally low frequency of formal contacts between landlords and the CMHA. Once a landlord signs a contract to house HCVP families, CMHA's regular (formal) contact with the landlord is limited to once a year. When a voucher holder (renter) finds a suitable unit, CMHA inspects it, and, if it meets HUD standards, the new family can move in and get the rent discount through the voucher. Afterwards, CMHA only interacts with the landlord when CMHA goes back out to do an annual inspection of the unit. From CMHA's perspective, this CMHA/landlord relationship works just fine. As a CMHA staff-member said, 'The less we interact with the landlord [the more] it means things are going well'. However, the landlords had a substantially different view on the value and effects of this limited frequency of interaction.

First of all, landlords (as well as the HOME official interviewed) were critical of CMHA's narrowly defined role, which mostly involves annual inspections of rental units in the program, but appears to fall short in terms of communication and information. Some landlords, especially those with small property holdings, reported that they had no clue about who to contact or how to acquire specific kinds of information. Landlords said that the absence of a clear demarcation between landlord and tenant responsibilities regarding maintenance often led to problems. For example, at an outreach event, one landlord asked: 'Who is responsible for dealing with bug infestation, the landlord or the tenant?' Even though this particular landlord had supplied the tenant with bug bombs, infestation remained.

The HOME official present advised landlords to specify and clarify tenants' responsibilities in the next lease, but the HOME official did not offer specific suggestions related to the demarcation of responsibilities regarding rodent and insect control.

Second, as was the case in Greenlee's (2014) Illinois landlord study, a major concern of landlords regarding CMHA's implementation of the HCVP was the bureaucratic and time consuming process involved with getting a unit approved for a tenant. Specifically, landlords complained about (1) the lack of consistency in applying housing quality standards during the inspection process (one inspector might say one thing and another inspector might say something very different), (2) the costs involved with CMHA's processes (e.g. lost paperwork), (3) CMHA's inability to keep paperwork up to date, and (4) the difficulty of dealing with tenant issues, since each of the landlord's tenants may have a different CMHA counselor. Added to this, landlords claimed that CMHA lacked the funding or capacity or both to carry out its job efficiently. A telling example is that an apartment may sit empty while waiting for approval for 2 months rather than for 2 weeks, because of minor (and 'silly', according to one landlord) issues like a loose doorknob. All in all, this results in landlords having the feeling that they are not taken seriously in the same way as voucher holders. One of the landlords succinctly explained this in terms of supplier–customer relations:

They [CMHA] clearly do not perceive the landlord as a customer. They have a very narrow focus. [CMHA's view is] that it is the resident, the voucher holder is the customer. That's a problem, because they need to understand that the resident is their customer, the community that they're working in is their customer, and the landlord is their customer [too], because without any one of those pieces the program doesn't work.

In other words, if CMHA is to involve more landlords, it needs to address its continuing sources of tension with landlords.

Third, and perhaps the most troubling factor in the relationship between CMHA and landlords is the fact that several landlords complained about CMHA playing a too limited role in enforcing lease agreements with 'problem tenants'.

Landlord financial burden and problem tenants

Our interviews suggest that existing stereotypes of Section 8 (HCVP) landlords as greedy and unconcerned about their tenants are inaccurate. Moreover, our findings provide new support for the classic studies of inner-city landlords cited earlier. Currently, many landlords in the HCVP are themselves experiencing significant financial burdens and risks as they try to deal with the low-income rental market. Tenants exhibiting various forms of problematic behavior, such as drug dealing, substance abuse, and violent crime, exacerbate the problem.

Because many of the landlords interviewed bought properties at a high price during the boom years of the early 2000s many still have heavy mortgages. Some lost the struggle to pay them off and are being foreclosed upon. Others face the pressures of upkeep on occupied units. As one landlord noted: 'If you're not making \$200–\$300 a month [per unit], you're losing money in your business, because vacancies will cost you \$2000–\$3000 dollars in a heartbeat'. Many landlords who get into the business of low-income rentals do not realize the challenges, because Cincinnati is a 'cool' rental market with relatively low rents. Consequently, landlords can experience cash flow problems if properties remain vacant.

Recent CMHA policy changes regarding rent payment, deposits, and compensation for property damage have made a challenging financial situation even more difficult for landlords. Housing authorities used to pay landlords for any damage to the unit after a tenant left. This is no longer the case. Now landlords are expected to collect a security deposit from tenants. However, many HCVP tenants lack the means to provide such deposits and landlords who take on these tenants become financially vulnerable. One landlord illustrated this noting that when a CMHA inspector requires an owner of 10 units to replace five windows per unit, at \$200 per window, the landlord may lack the capital to cover such repairs and renovations:

So if you go into a building of ten units [and you have to replace the windows], five windows per unit, which is not that many, that's fifty windows, that's what \$10,000? For a landlord that can barely keep the mortgage paid, they can't do it. So just by this one change, [even though] I understand it, it's going to kick a lot of landlords out of being able to do Section 8.

Financial pressures are particularly severe for 'mom and pop' owners (small scale homeowners who have turned their personal home into a rental rather than selling it when they move). They can charge tenants for utilities for those units with separate meters. Small-scale landlords who do not have separate meters can either pay for utilities out-of-pocket or pay to have separate meters installed. However, both of these options may be difficult for landlords with smaller operations due to limited financial resources even when units are being rented (Stegman 1972; Sternlieb and Burchell 1973). The existence of these options further highlights the varying levels of sophistication among landlords found by Grigsby and Rosenberg (1975).

One reason HCVP housing is no longer the profitable business it once was is the increased costs connected to problem tenants. As one landlord noted:

Sometimes our most difficult CMHA [voucher] tenants are our most difficult tenants overall [that is, compared to those tenants not using vouchers]. If Section 8 could play a more active role, educating the tenants about what's expected from them [that would be good]. We don't want them to move in and trash our yards, we don't want them to move in and leave the garbage pails out [after the trucks come by], we don't want them to move in and anger all of the neighbors, and we end up having to teach them how to be responsible members of the community.

Similarly, a second landlord complained that after CMHA recruited a new director in 2012, the agency imposed higher property (maintenance) standards on owners, but not on tenants:

I want to see them raise the standards on the tenants, because when I rent to these tenants, these houses are in beautiful shape and then a year later they look like crap and they can't pass inspection. The doors are broken, the cabinets are broken, the closet doors are off, the mirrors are broken, and the toilets are broken. It's like ... I didn't go over there with my hammer; break the toilet, break the mirror, break the doors, put holes in the wall, ruin the new carpet, [and] break the windows. The tenant did that, and now I have to pay to repair all of that, and if I don't they'll kick the tenant out and I'll get back the vacant beat-up property.

Although the landlord outreach sessions devoted considerable attention to 'problem tenants', CMHA staff often provided overly vague and sketchy answers. A landlord asked, 'What is the tenant's incentive to keep up the property?' The CMHA staff person responded, 'Landlords are supposed to screen potential tenants before leasing the unit. In

the case of a landlord–tenant dispute over property maintenance a hearing officer is brought in’. The landlord followed up by asking whether he could talk to a hearing officer to get their perspective on what goes during a typical hearing, but the CMHA staff person stated that she did not know any hearing officers, because they are not affiliated with CMHA directly. Later, the landlord asked whether any CMHA inspectors were available to enable the landlord to better understand property damage and liability issues. None were available. Finally, when the landlord asked for an example of a lease that works well or one that CMHA endorses, he was directed to CMHA’s website. While the website includes a sample lease and additional information, the orientation could have provided more of an opportunity to inform landlords about best practices and it could have offered more detailed instruction on navigating the website.

A second landlord asked, ‘How much discretion do landlords have in selecting [tenants] and in evicting “problem ones”?’ The CMHA staff-member responded, ‘Landlords have the right to deny acceptance to tenants for legitimate reasons, but they must comply with federal regulations forbidding discrimination’. Unfortunately, the CMHA staff-person at that outreach session did not go into the requested detail regarding when landlords could and could not evict tenants. Similarly, Greenlee, in his 2014 Illinois landlord study, found that both housing authority officials and landlords were confused about the extent of the housing authority’s tenant background check.

Landlords do, in fact, have some tools for screening tenants. Landlords can obtain a credit history and a police check. Alternatively, the tenant can provide the results of a police check or an analysis of their credit history. One prospective tenant at a Super Saturday event was so eager to get a voucher, because all tenants in his building were being displaced, that he provided the completed background check even before any landlord requested it.

However, the availability of these tools does not fully address landlords’ concerns about problem tenants, at one Landlord Orientation session, we clearly observed that the HCVP landlords sought but were unable to obtain from CMHA staff specific suggestions on how to handle problem tenants. Landlords seem to have learned more from each other than from CMHA staff.

Fair housing and poverty deconcentration

Although CMHA and HOME devote much time and effort toward educating landlords about fair housing issues, they devote little attention to poverty deconcentration, a key goal of HCVP. For example, CMHA, together with HOME runs a Landlord Workshop that focuses on fair housing issues, in particular on landlord behavior that is considered illegal. Unfortunately, no information was available on the geographical areas served by the landlords who attended outreach events.

It should be noted that HOME, on behalf of CMHA, does operate a mobility program that counsels low-income families and that assists in the recruitment of landlords in areas of low poverty.³ Specifically, HOME (1) acts as an ombudsman in referring pre-screened renters to landlords, (2) helps landlords to ‘keep deals together’ when, for example, an otherwise beautiful suburban house fails to meet a housing quality standard, and (3) advocates for landlord interests in the creation and maintenance of stable, integrated neighborhoods. Nevertheless, not a single landlord interviewed spontaneously mentioned the mobility program. In the interviews, one CMHA staff member did mention the mobility program, but conceded that he did not know much about it. Even though CMHA staff highlighted anti-discrimination laws at outreach events, they rarely, if ever,

talked about poverty deconcentration. Furthermore, CMHA and HOME officials could not tell how many of the landlords present at the various meetings were from low-poverty areas. This is not only a crucial missing piece of information for our study, but it reveals a more fundamental issue. Our findings emphasize the discrepancy between the importance of poverty deconcentration as a key goal of HCVP and the limited attention to this topic at CMHA landlord outreach sessions. This can be considered as a significant shortcoming in the way in which landlord outreach efforts are supposed to contribute to achieving the goals of the HCVP. At the same time, this finding should not be surprising given the results of previous research. ‘Limited time and resources, coupled with landlord bias against the voucher program create significant barriers to opening up new communities to low-income renters. The path of least resistance for housing authority staff involves working with willing landlords who are renting in submarkets that already have a substantial share of low-income and voucher-assisted renters’. (Greenlee 2014, 510)

Strengths and weaknesses of CMHA outreach events

As explained in the ‘Methods’ section, CMHA’s offers three types of outreach to landlords: ‘Super Saturdays’, Landlord Orientations, and continuing education workshops. Each one of these types has its strengths and weaknesses. In order to contextualize our observation and interview findings, we describe a number of characteristics of each outreach type and connect our observation and interview results to the following characteristics.

Super Saturday

The Super Saturday event is designed as an open house in which landlords and voucher holders are given the opportunity to meet with one another and find potential housing matches within the program. Three staff people, one from CMHA, and two from HOME, run the event. In order to effectively match tenants with landlords in the tenants’ desired neighborhoods, HOME prepares a binder, which divides the Cincinnati area by unit bedroom size and alphabetically by jurisdiction and sometimes by neighborhood. We observed that computers are not available for either the input or retrieval of information, or for the presentation of information in a user-friendly, digital form. As voucher holders arrive, they stop at the HOME table and fill out an intake sheet. The HOME official notes where the voucher holder hopes to move and then shows some potential properties. The HOME official notifies the voucher holder that the agency will run a check of their possible criminal record.

Landlord Orientations

Landlord Orientation sessions are aimed at welcoming new landlords into the HCVP. We attended five of these sessions, which were held in Winton Hills, several miles from CMHA’s headquarters in the West End where the Super Saturday event was held. We observed that poor attendance was a serious problem. At no session did more than three landlords show up. The very low turnout was partly due to the fact that landlords can get CMHA’s HCVP information on line from the CMHA website. In addition, the website includes a link to Gosection8.com. For a nominal fee and with little difficulty, the landlord is able to advertise his properties. Apparently, this removes any incentive for the landlords to visit Landlord Orientation sessions. Unfortunately, as previously

noted, if any technical problems arise, landlords calling the CMHA office for help may not receive the needed assistance. One landlord recalled: ‘They have a great website ... [and over time] the system has become mechanically easy to navigate. The problem is, when something goes afoul, there’s you know, this huge divide’. This divide refers to a lack of clear lines of communication between CMHA staff and landlords when issues arise.

Interviewees also provided us with specific suggestions for future CMHA outreach efforts including Landlord Orientation sessions; these suggestions are broadly applicable to local public housing authorities across the United States. Greater attempts at attracting small-scale landlords should be a priority and emphasis should be placed on educating these smaller real estate firms on the HCVP. In addition, more attention should be devoted to match tenants with landlords. To reach a larger audience, landlords suggested that CMHA should go to the Cincinnati Real Estate Investors Association (REIA), which has four educational programs in a month. According to a HOME official: ‘They are always looking for programs’. CMHA should also consider going to large rental complexes to provide staff training to managers and other employees at these complexes. When the landlord provides CMHA with their email addresses, CMHA needs to use them and not simply rely on the US Postal Service and phone messages to contact landlords. Finally, one landlord suggested that:

... CMHA also needs to create a landlord liaison that would be an additional staff-person who would provide personalized attention to the landlords involved in the program Having such a person on board would lead to more streamlined communications between CMHA and the landlord.

This last suggestion is consistent with our earlier discussion of the need for CMHA to view landlords, like tenants, as customers.

The Landlord Workshop

This workshop on fair housing run by HOME takes place at CMHA’s headquarters in the West End where Super Saturday events are held. These workshops are designed to provide free training and education for landlords and are periodically held with sessions by experts on property management. In contrast to the Landlord Orientation sessions, we observed that participation was not a problem. Thirty-one landlords attended the session held in October 2012, which was the session that we attended for the purpose of our study.

We observed that the HOME representative began by describing the fair housing activities carried out by the agency and discrimination covered by the Federal Fair Housing Act focusing on the key issues regarding fair housing policy implementation and the need to achieve consistency in dealing with tenant issues. We observed that in particular the latter issue and more generally, free training by property management experts, create a more effective incentive for landlords to join the workshop, compared to the Landlord Orientation session. For example, one landlord asked, ‘If I bend rules on payment, can I get in trouble with that?’ The HOME representative responded, ‘If the landlord made it a habit of allowing tenants to pay late, this would cause trouble Fair housing law does not require the landlord to give leeway on rental payments’. The workshop’s bottom line was therefore that consistency is a necessary prerequisite for being an effective HCVP landlord.

Conclusion: housing choice vouchers and landlord outreach

This paper addresses a gap in the literature on housing vouchers in the United States: the absence of research on landlord outreach efforts to involve more high quality landlords in the HCVP. To improve our understanding of how landlords perceive the strengths and weaknesses of landlord outreach efforts provided by public housing authorities, we conducted a case study of the CMHA's landlord outreach. For this purpose, we conducted interviews with a small sample of landlords and housing authority officials and observed three different types of landlord outreach programs in action. Four major conclusions may be drawn.

First, the interviewed landlords believed that CMHA did not care much about their interests, both in terms of day-to-day communication and management and when policy changes were made. The reason for this not only lies in the limited frequency of interaction between landlords and the CMHA, but also in the nature of these interactions, which creates a perception of CMHA indifference toward the landlords. A case in point is the bureaucratic and time consuming process involved with getting a unit approved for a tenant. Moreover, the absence of a clear demarcation between landlord and tenant responsibilities regarding maintenance and tenant management often led to problems in communication (see also Greenlee 2014). Hence, those landlords interviewed believed CMHA should treat them as customers just as they do tenants. To achieve this goal CMHA should meet more frequently with landlords (which would make the latter feel more like customers) and strive to achieve greater consistency in unit inspections.

Second, we found that many landlords in the HCVP are themselves experiencing significant financial burdens and risks as they try to deal with the low-income rental market. This is consistent with 'classic' studies of inner-city landlords (Sternlieb 1966; Stegman 1972; Sternlieb and Burchell 1973; Grigsby and Rosenberg 1975). Consequently, this makes it difficult for them to deal with tenants exhibiting various forms of problematic behavior, such as drug dealing, substance abuse, and violent crime. Recent literature (e.g. Kleinhans and Varady 2011; Turner 2012) emphasizes that housing authorities should help in this respect by providing timely and tailored information on dealing with 'problem tenants' and should seriously address concerns and complaints of landlords. According to the landlords whom we interviewed, the CMHA has failed to take up this challenge proactively.

Third, although CMHA and HOME appear to devote much time and effort toward educating landlords about fair housing issues, we found little attention to poverty deconcentration, a key goal of HCVP. The observations and interviews revealed shortcomings in the landlord outreach efforts, which should contribute to achieving the goals of the HCVP. CMHA staff members and other officials appear to lack both the knowledge on the spatial origin of landlords attending the outreach events and a clear strategy to attract landlords from low-poverty areas. Our findings confirm the existing literature showing that housing authority staff members choose a 'path of least resistance', i.e. working with willing landlords who are renting in submarkets with substantial shares of low-income and voucher-assisted renters (Greenlee 2014, 510).

Finally, whereas CMHA's Super Saturday helped to match landlords with tenants and the Landlord Workshop event helped inform landlords about fair housing issues the Landlord Orientation sessions were plagued by disappointingly low attendance levels. Compared to the Landlord Orientation sessions, which provided information that is also available on the CMHA website, the Landlord Workshop created higher attendance levels

because it addressed landlords' need of specialized counseling by property management experts.

While our case study is limited in terms of spatial scope and data collection, it does offer additional avenues for follow-up research. Future studies aimed at evaluating the success of landlord outreach efforts should address the lack of a clear demarcation between landlord and tenant responsibilities regarding maintenance and tenant management, as this very often is the main cause for miscommunication between public housing authorities and landlords who consider participating in the voucher program. Only through addressing these issues, will we acquire the knowledge required to increase involvement of landlords from low-poverty areas.

Furthermore, future studies should deal with four of the methodological limitations of this study by (1) utilizing large samples of voucher landlords across the country, in order to transcend the specific context of single case studies (2) comparing the characteristics of landlords interviewed with the characteristics of the total population of HCVP landlords in that particular housing authority, (3) including information on how many of the HCVP landlords interviewed actually were from low-poverty areas, and finally by (4) focusing on the different needs and experiences of 'mom and pop' as compared to corporate landlords.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. See Connerly (2006) and Silverman (2011) for an overview of the United States' fair housing legislation and the role of local non-profit housing agencies.
2. Had we been concerned about potential bias we would have compared the random sample of CMHA landlords surveyed with the full universe of CMHA voucher landlords with respect to a variety of characteristics including how many units they owned, landlord type ('mom and pop' landlords versus corporate ones), and how long they had worked with the CMHA. Unfortunately, this type of comprehensive list of CMHA landlords does not exist.
3. HOME simply calls it 'the mobility program'; HOME's Regional Opportunity Counseling Program administered under a HUD grant in the 1990s is no longer operative. For more information on ROC including Cincinnati's program see (Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 1998; Fischer 1995).

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