



**RESEARCH  
IN ACTION**

**Creating an Expedited  
Emergency Rental  
Assistance System with  
Community Input**

**Final Report**

February 2024

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Community Contributors

Thank you to all the people who participated in the October 26th and January 18th Community Convening Session. We engaged a total of 21 participants at these convenings. All the participants provided valuable insights and reflections that contributed to the work. Below is a list of the participants that consented to having their names publically shared. This report would not have been possible without you!

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## Project Partner

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- Workgroup on Expediting Rental Assistance (WERA)
- Karen Gaides, Management Analysis and Development (MAD), Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB)
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# INTRODUCTION

The Workgroup on Expediting Rental Assistance (WERA) partnered with Research In Action (RIA) to support its charge with creating an expedited emergency assistance system that does not cause harm to applicants seeking assistance through the following programs:

- the family homelessness prevention and assistance program (FHPAP)
- the emergency assistance program (EA)
- emergency general assistance (EGA)

The project aims to ensure that community input informs the WERA's final legislative recommendations. Research in Action, led by Dr. Brittany Lewis, has been at the center of collecting local and statewide data on Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) programs, processes, and impacts over the last 6+ years utilizing a community-engaged action research approach.

Research in Action recognizes that the legislature has asked the Workgroup on Expediting Rental Assistance to submit a report to the legislature by February 29, 2024. In that report, the workgroup must identify what processes, procedures, and technological or personnel resources would be necessary to enable the state or county agencies responsible for administering government rental assistance to do the following:

- Within two weeks of receiving a completed application for rental assistance, make and issue a determination on the application and
- Within 30 days of receiving a completed application for rental assistance, issue payment to the landlord on an approved rental application.

To support this legislative charge and ensure already collected community insights are included, RIA applied the Equity in Action model to:

- Summarize key learnings from prior reports that center community experience with Emergency Rental Assistance Services
- Co-facilitate a convening of impacted community members to provide additional feedback on those key learnings

- Produce a final key learnings report inclusive of community feedback from the convening
- Conduct a virtual convening (in 2024) where the community can give feedback on WERA's final recommendations to the legislature
- Produce a follow-up key learnings report guided by community's feedback on WERA's recommendations to the legislature

## EQUITY IN ACTION PROCESS: OVERVIEW

Research in Action utilizes the Equity in Action model to approach the successful execution of each project. Equity in Action intentionally rebalances power by creating new tables where impacted community members intentionally outnumber individuals with institutional or organizational rank so that community members are centered as essential experts and project leaders throughout any process. Our process centers community members in defining the issue, making sense of the data and deciding what should be done about it.

Our model is intentionally directed toward actionable outcomes that lead to tangible, real world changes – and cultivate community power and authentic, mutually beneficial relationships with partners after the project has ended.

### Stage one: Landscape Analysis

On September 18, RIA hosted a partner kickoff meeting with Pohlad and Management Analysis and Development (MAD) to align the project timeline, goals, key deliverables, and logistics. The RIA research team then began reading, note-taking, and pulling key learnings from four reports that analyzed community experiences with Minnesota Emergency Rental Assistance Before and during COVID-19. RIA worked to create a set of literature review slides to present at the WERA meeting on October 12 for the purpose of reviewing the findings from the existing data and to gather feedback from the workgroup members on the value and utility of these learnings.

# Equity in Action Process Model

## 6) Identify Solutions & Next Steps

Based on the data and community input, we identify policies, practices and systems changes that will lead to concrete improvements in community members' lives – and shift relationships and power dynamics between the institutional partner and impacted community beyond the project.

## 5) Community Review & Action Planning

We make data understandable and clear so community members who haven't been part of the advisory council can make sense of what it means, identify where we have misunderstood or made mistakes, and surface multiple solutions.

## 4) Collect Data

We train advisory council members in data collection to work with the research team to connect with community members through a shared purpose to solve a common problem.



## 1) Assess the Landscape

We investigate with partners and community members the history and context that has led to the proposed project, honestly identifying institutional harms, pain points, and impacted partnerships. We define shared values, as well as stakeholder goals and interests.

## 2) Create Advisory Council

We create an advisory council made up of individuals who are personally impacted by a specific issue. Because they understand the issue better than anyone else, we elevate community members as project leaders in accurately identifying and solving the problems they experience.

## 3) Co-develop Approach

We support community members to use their expertise to describe the problem, design the process to understand it and develop tools to gather information.

**Shared meaning making** is iterative and ongoing throughout our process. We use our technical skills as researchers to 1) create space for all collaborators to develop a shared understanding of key language to describe the context and define the problem together, 2) ensure all collaborators recognize the specific gaps our research seeks to fill and the specific goals of the project, and 3) at every step in the process, revisit our shared values and reassess our collective knowledge based on what we're learning to ensure our process results in concrete policies and practices most needed by impacted communities.

## Stage 2: Community Analysis and Revision

On the evening of October 26, RIA held a virtual community round table for community members with lived experience with any of the three Emergency Rental Assistance programs. The RIA team presented the key learnings and community-based recommendations from the four reports. Then the team facilitated breakout conversations with participants to determine if the learnings still reflect their lived experiences and to glean new insights. RIA produced a summary of community members feedback and presented it to WERA on November 9.

## Stage 3 and 4: Final Deliverables and Community Feedback on Final WERA Recommendations

RIA outlined, drafted, and finalized the learnings report, and the submittal date to WERA adjusted based on RIA revisions and transmittal to MAD. By the time this report was produced WERA's final recommendations were not yet determined. However, draft recommendations are written and in the review stage ahead of a vote from WERA members on final language on January 11, 2024. At that time RIA will facilitate an additional community engagement event to share those final recommendations for the purpose of transparency. RIA will provide a brief summation of the community's feedback on WERA's recommendations in February of 2024.

# DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

At the start of the Landscape Analysis, RIA reviewed fifteen research reports on Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) in Minnesota for secondary qualitative analysis. These 15 reports were provided by project partners at the Pohlads Foundation.

In alignment with the EIA model and the charge to center lived experiences, RIA researchers focused their attention on those reports where the data included:

- (1) the voices of tenants and renters who had lived experience with ERA programs and/or
- (2) the voices of landlords with ERA program experience or ERA service providers.

If a report did not directly engage with people with direct experience of the programs being studied (EA, EGA, and FHPAP) it was set aside. RIA used this selection process to ensure that the key learnings and recommendations were informed by community members' experiences and reflective of reports that centered their proposed solutions.

Following these criteria, only three of the fifteen reports were determined to be relevant for the analysis. These reports are:

- ***The Illusion of Choice: Evictions and Profit in North Minneapolis*** (Center for Regional Affairs-CURA) which contains interviews with **68 tenants and 32 landlords** in two zip codes in North Minneapolis. This report reviews relevant literature & court documents, and details findings from community member interviews to inform current eviction experiences and create policy recommendations for Hennepin County.
- ***Evaluation of the Hennepin County Emergency Assistance Redesign*** (Rise Research), which analyzes feedback from **178 EA/EGA applicants**, 12 semi-structured interviews with EA/EGA staff, two data walks and one focus group with **30 Hennepin County staff and residents**. This report includes findings and recommendations from the evaluation of a resigned program led by Hennepin county, Pohlads, and community providers.

- ***Hennepin County Redesign Evaluation and Follow-up*** (Research in Action Memo), a summative document that is a product of a collaborative partnership between RIA, Hennepin County, and Pohlads to ensure that efforts to implement the emergency assistance programs redesign plan incorporated lived experience feedback and an equitable evaluation process. The memo includes the feedback of **community participants in panel meetings and five community speakers in panel meetings**.

The remaining 12 reports relied solely on community-based organizations (CBOs) or engagement with county/state provider personnel to inform their research and recommendations. Due to the minimal community engaged research in the group of 15 reports provided by the partners, RIA also included a report that engaged with a substantial number of CBOs and landlords (over 100 participants total) in our analysis. The team determined that in comparison to other reports, the amount of participants—particularly CBOs—that were engaged in this report was substantial enough (over 90 participants representing CBOs) to our analysis.

- ***Feedback about Minnesota's 2020 COVID-19 Housing Assistance Program*** (Culture Brokers), a report in which MHFA and Pohlads gathered feedback from on the 2020 COVID-19 housing assistance (CHAP) program application process and design of rental assistance program (CERA). This report collected feedback from **78 participants in landlord focus groups and from 99 participants in CBO focus groups**.

Alongside these four reports, also RIA reviewed the below two documents that outline best practices and recommendations for the implementation of ERA programs:

- ***Best Practices For State And Local Emergency Rental Assistance Programs***, National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2021
- ***Emerging Best Practices for COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance Programs***, The Aspen Institute, 2020

These materials were helpful to help us determine whether community experiences of ERA programs in Minnesota reflected best practices recommended by national advocates of fairness in emergency housing.

Once the reports were selected, RIA analysts began the coding process, labeling and organizing qualitative data (e.g. quotations from interviews and focus groups) from lived experiences included in each report to identify prevalent patterns and themes. Analysts were particularly focused on: (1) how applicants and service providers described the pain points they experienced while navigating ERA and (2) solutions and recommendations suggested by people based on their lived experiences with ERA programs. After coding the reports, RIA organized the codes into themes.

#### Five themes emerged:

- **Communication:** Problems relating to information communication from service providers to potential and current applicants
- **Eligibility:** Problems related to eligibility and eligibility criteria of the current emergency rental assistance programs
- **Technology:** Problems with technology (accessing or navigating it) as it relates to applying for assistance
- **Time:** Problems with the length of time it takes when applying, processing, and receiving emergency rental assistance
- **Dehumanization:** Applicants' experience of devaluation from the emergency rental assistance system and providers

#### Four community-generated solutions emerged:

- Creating a centralized Emergency Rental Assistance System for all counties
- Revising language in application forms to make them more accessible
- Leaning on CBOs (Community-Based Organizations) and trusted partnerships across the state
- Enhancing experience with service systems and improving unsavory interactions

## DEVELOPING SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND LANGUAGE

### Presenting Key Learnings to the Workgroup

On October 12, RIA presented the key findings and community-based recommendations at the WERA workgroup meeting. During the presentation, RIA walked the workgroup through the five themes and four community-based solutions. At the end of the presentation, the work group members asked questions and provided reflections on the presentation that coalesced around the following topics of concern:

- The importance of aligning the ERA process with the time frames of evictions and other emergencies so housing assistance moves at the pace that matches the needs of the people experiencing the emergency need
- Ensuring service providers engage directly with community to gather and act on consistent feedback regarding EA/EGA/FHPAP programs
- The need to focus on implementation and accessibility of ERA in Greater Minnesota

### A Virtual Community Convening

On October 26, RIA hosted a Virtual Community Convening to present the key learnings and solutions from our analysis of the four reports to determine if they were still reflective of community experiences or needed to be expanded. Brian Paulson from the Pohlad Family Foundation provided RIA with an initial list of potential participants who had experience applying for and/or utilizing one or more ERA programs. He also connected RIA with members of the SHIP Collaborative, Engage Winona, and Life House to invite community members and staff to participate.

Once potential participants confirmed their interest, RIA sent out a registration form that collected demographic information, participant consent to be recorded. The form also included a pre-survey where participants could propose changes to EA/EGA/FHPAP. In total 21 people registered. Each participant was compensated for their time with a \$25 stipend.

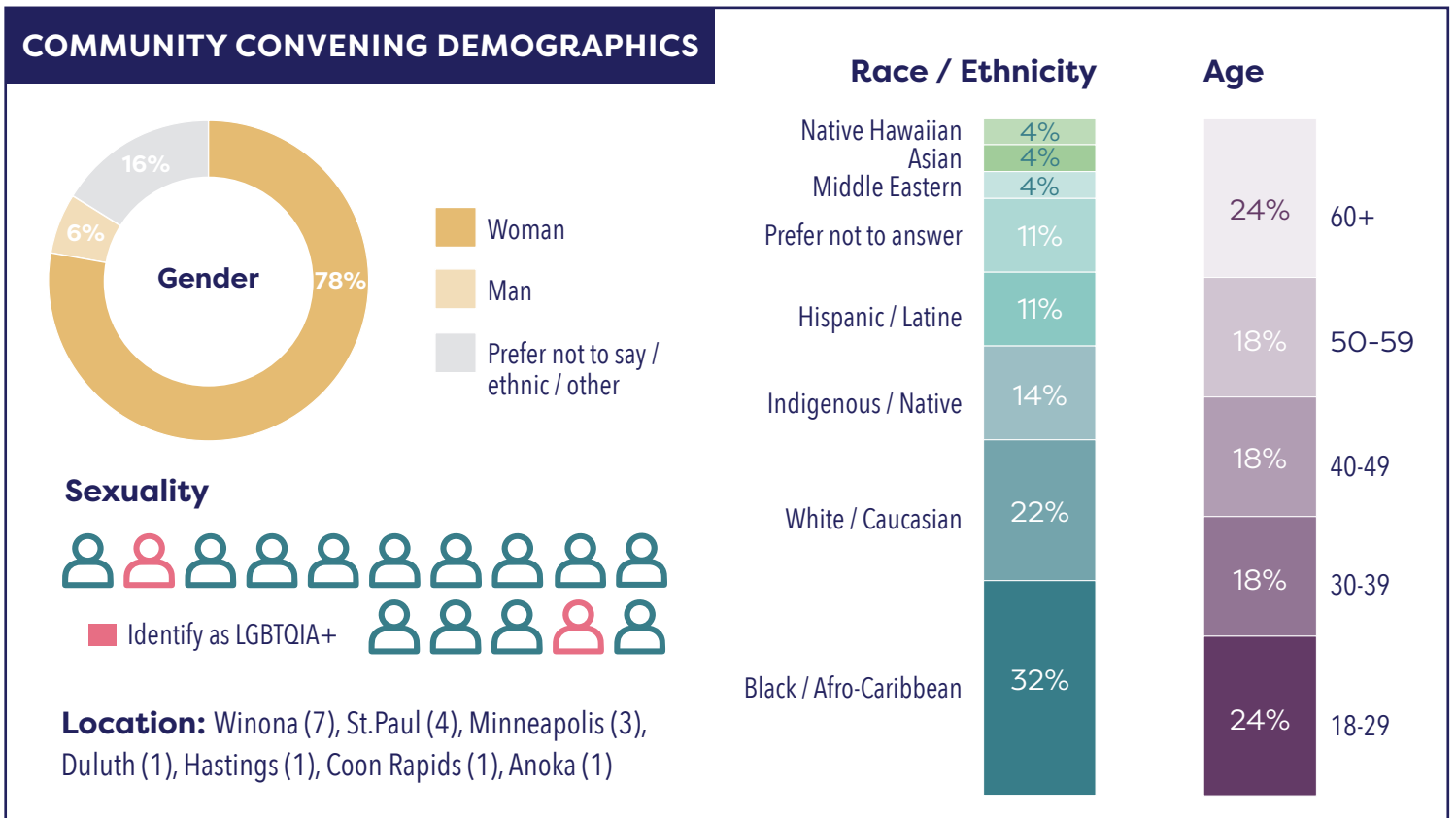
The goal of the convening was to assess the following:

- which key learnings and themes stand out as important to the community
- which key learnings and themes align with communities' lived experiences and perspectives
- what, if anything, was missing from RIA's analysis of the four reports in terms of themes and community-based solutions.

At the start of the meeting, the RIA team reviewed the key findings from the analysis of the report. Then, participants were placed in breakout rooms to give feedback on the findings and share their own insights from their experiences with ERA programs and processes. RIA team members facilitated the discussions and took notes on participants' ideas, reflections, suggestions and criticisms.

In the first breakout session following the presentation of key learnings, all participants provided experiential insights that supplemented our key learnings and thematic areas. While most of the collected feedback reaffirmed themes and solutions presented in the RIA report, one new area of concern emerged. One of the non-English speaking community members shared experiences that illuminated the need to understand the particular barriers faced by immigrants who are trying to navigate ERA programs.

In the second breakout session, all participants brought their experiences to give feedback on the community-based solutions. In these groups, community members provided input that doubled the initial list of recommendations. They pointed out (1) a need for a centralized portal for applications and (2) a centralized portal where required documentation would be placed for ease of access. Participants also suggested (3) ERA programs incorporate peer advocates into the application process, and that (4) providers should hire staff members who reflect the demographics of the communities they are assisting.





# KEY LEARNINGS AND THEMES

Based on the feedback from the participants at the community convening session, we added a sixth theme to the original list derived from the analysis of the reports, resulting in the following revised list: communication, eligibility, technology, time, dehumanization, and experience of specific populations. All of the quotations used in this report come from either one of the four reports or from the written notes RIA team members created from verbal share-outs by participants at the community convening session.

## COMMUNICATION

Community members pointed out multiple problems with the ways ERA service providers relay information and communicate instructions to applicants and clients.

People described how the quality and timing of communication have a direct impact on their ability to successfully and accurately complete required steps in the application process. Both the review of the reports and feedback from people at the community convening highlighted how ERA providers often use confusing language or legal jargon.



*"As one group stated, when people are connected to organizations that don't speak their language, they (clients) fall-off." (Culture Broker)*

Our community convening participants also indicated that the word-choice used when referring to applicants application status assumes a negligent and/or negative narrative of applicants rather than acknowledging their circumstances:



*"They should be careful when saying when clients/residents 'drop off' since life happens to us and it's not that we don't want to finish the application." (Community Convening Participant)*

ERA system workers also called for improvements in communication to better serve people seeking emergency housing:



*"Interview data supports the finding that EA/EGA workers generally want a better way to communicate directly with residents, including a team email address and the ability to text residents when they are on hold." (RISE Research)*

Another recurrent problem was the lack of updates on an applicant's application status. People had no idea when they would learn if they were eligible or not for ERA assistance, which led to some people giving up.



*"This inability to determine the status of an application creates uncertainty and leads to some applicants dropping out. It also amplifies the stress and trauma applicants are already experiencing." (Culture Broker)*

## Key Learnings Summary

Outreach materials that explain ERA programs and instructions that guide people through the application process need to be revised to be clear and accessible. Providers need to change their protocols to reduce the length of time that applicants wait for status updates on their applications.

## ELIGIBILITY

Confusion around who is eligible for ERA programs, what criteria are applied, and what documents are needed to prove eligibility were significant concerns voiced by community members.

One major point of frustration around eligibility criteria is lack of clarity on application forms. People who filled in forms themselves thought they had satisfied the criteria, and were frustrated to find out it was not the case:



*"... over one-third of Resident Feedback Tool (RFT) respondents who did not receive assistance reported that they did not understand why their application was denied. These respondents mentioned issues related to eligibility guidelines – particularly related to income and rent." (RISE research)*

Community convening session participants agreed that there needs to be more clarity around eligibility criteria. They experienced great difficulty navigating current expectations for proving eligibility:



*"I don't understand why counties have different rules for Emergency Assistance and what you can use it for based off what programs your on." (Community Convening Participant)*

This problem seems to impact a significant percentage of the population in rural areas:



*"It is estimated that only 20% of the residents in Greater Minnesota would be eligible." (Culture Broker)*

Residents in Greater Minnesota are often unable to meet documentation requirements due to technology struggles (explored below) and service availability, such as limited access to postal services:



*"USPS is often the only means for sending paperwork via mail which could engender delays." (Culture Broker)*

Eligibility difficulties are particularly acute for single adult applicants.



*"Residents in our data walk also drew attention to the inability to get help as a single adult, with one resident noting: 'It honestly feels like singles are being forced to do things on their own without really giving them the help they need to live the lives they want to live or giving them resources/networking that could help them.'" (RISE Research)*



*"For us single individuals, it feels like we are at the bottom of the pool. We should be able to do what is needed for us." (Community Convening participant)*

System workers also expressed concern about eligibility criteria. They felt the criteria screen out more applicants than they should.



*"I feel like I don't get to help that many families because of our program rule.... It's just kinda unfair. It would be a breath of fresh air if we could revisit some of those rules. There's a population of people that we're not helping. It's disheartening to be the voice and having to explain that to clients where*

*there are so many people being denied." (EA Human Services Representative, RISE Research)*

## Key Learnings Summary

Current eligibility criteria for EA/EGA programs are too restrictive, particularly for applicants who reside in Greater Minnesota and single adults.

## TECHNOLOGY

Frustrations around technology barriers were prevalent. Many applicants described how lack of access to or familiarity with technology makes it difficult to start the application process or complete it.

The current online application system means that people without internet access, computers or smartphones need intermediaries or additional financial resources to be able to get started in the system.



*"Navigating the process and the technology capability for some clients can be a hurdle. There is the additional burden of some clients who may need to pay for extra internet service in order to access online services." (Culture Broker)*

Community members called for more navigators to be hired by local agencies and for better navigation services and support mechanisms within the online application system.



*"Someone who doesn't understand the documents or the online format needs to be taught or there needs to be an option to meet in person." (RISE Research)*



*"Because Greater Minnesota has spottier internet service and larger distances to travel to provider sites, 'Minnesotans living in Greater Minnesota struggle getting to navigators, accessing the internet and transportation.'" (Culture Broker)*

## Key Learnings Summary:

Technology challenges hinder many applicants from accessing or finishing their applications. Greater technology assistance is needed, especially for applicants without online access and in Greater Minnesota.

## TIME

Participants described a significant misalignment between the application timeline and the timeline of the eviction action process.



*"Due to the rapid nature of the eviction action process, the timeline of EA/EGA application and appeal response needs to be shortened." (Illusion of Choice)*

Community members at the convening emphasized that the ERA process should move in sync with a person's crisis. They felt that calling ERA 'emergency' assistance was a misnomer since the process stretched out long after the emergency event that prompted their need for assistance:



*"Take off 'emergency' because it's not treated as an emergency or else it would be taken care of sooner." (Community Convening Participant)*

Another key pain point community members brought forward was how long it took to get any updates on their application status. People voiced frustration and despair that, after waiting with no word, they were taken by surprise to be denied with no explanation.



*"...And all the hoops you have to jump through, with the county, trying to get assistance. And then find out that you don't get it. Why the hell does that take so long?" (Illusion of Choice)*



*Similarly, a participant from our community convening recalled "it took 3-4 months to let me know I had been denied." (Community Convening)*

These applicants' experiences with wait times is affirmed by the Rise Research report, which found that "the average number of days an application was pending was 28 days for EA and 23 days for EGA."

### Key Learnings Summary

Emergency assistance application timelines do not align with the needs of people experiencing eviction action processes and other emergencies. Lack of updates and long application processing times create barriers and are major pain points for people experiencing rental assistance emergencies.

## DEHUMANIZATION

The final theme centers on how service providers treat applicants. Both assistance seekers and landlords that work with ERA programs described feeling dehumanized and disrespected while navigating ERA processes.

One community member described what happened when they asked a staffer for clarification on the qualifications for receiving assistance:



*"One person, like, pretends...they're paying for the stuff, like they're helping you, like coming from their pocket. That's how they acted and then they don't treat us like, you know, this is the government funding and then they don't tell us the requirement, like you know, you need this to qualify. They just shut you down, like you know, hey you don't qualify." (Hennepin County Redesign Evaluation, RIA)*

Another community member spoke about how difficult it was to maintain their sense of dignity and humanity navigating the current ERA system:



*"I wish that the system was more humane for people to have some kind of dignity, somewhere along the way. It'd be okay with asking for help, and not having so many doors shut in your face." (Illusion of Choice)*

This experience of dehumanization extends to landlords who reported negative experiences with city inspectors:



*"Many [landlords] noted a general lack of professionalism on the part of frontline personnel... almost all landlords described city inspections as a biased system, stating that code enforcement differed based on the inspector assigned. Landlords described feeling like they were being treated as 'slumlords.'" (Illusion of Choice)*

### Key Learnings Summary

Negative interactions with service providers have left applicants and landlords feeling dehumanized and shut down. This decreases their trust in service agencies, deters further help-seeking, and inflicts emotional distress.

## EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRANT APPLICANTS

During our community convening session, problems around immigrant applicants for emergency rental housing programs occurred around this population's unique challenges and struggles.

Participants explained how the documentation requirements for immigrants to apply for the existing emergency rental programs are in a "Catch-22" relationship with the requirements for immigrants' work requirements, which leaves them in an impossible bind:



*"To get work, we need a work permit and to get a work permit we need an apartment and to get an apartment we need money; which requires work."*  
(Community Convening participant)

Additionally, getting the correct records and other application materials ready requires legal assistance in many cases, which creates extra difficulties and extended timeframes for immigrant applicants:



*"In my case we have to make sure that we find a lawyer; but since we are low income we can't find a lawyer; we need help to pay for it. Then even if we could find a lawyer, it would be a whole process of determining if we are eligible through a court process."* (Community Convening participant)

### Key learnings summary:

Immigrant applicants have specific struggles to apply for emergency rental housing programs that have not been adequately considered by providers in the ERA system.

## COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS

Based on the community recommendations gathered from the literature and feedback from our community convening session, RIA created the following four community-based solutions for the current Emergency Rental Housing Assistance System.

COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS	PROPOSED SOLUTION
<p><b>Stop using unlawful detainers as an automatic dis qualifier for housing from all systems</b></p> <p><b>Reduce number of required documents and steps to submit and process applications</b></p> <p><b>Develop a combined application</b></p>	<p><b>Create a centralized Emergency Rental Assistance System for all counties</b></p> <p>We propose that applications for all ERA programs start at a single portal located in a centralized Emergency Rental Assistance System for all counties. In this streamlined process, applicants could fill in all their information and upload all required documents in their profile without having to go through the process again, even if they step away from the application for the current year.</p>

## COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

There must be multiple ways for applications to be completed

Provide greater clarity around eligibility criteria, service instructions, and documentation requirements to further improve experience in seeking assistance

Provide technology assistance to applicants that need support navigating the application process

Eliminate confusing legal language and other jargon so that renters needing assistance can understand application instructions and processes.

Targeted distribution of media through tribal radio stations, social media, etc. to ensure deep communication penetration for BIPOC communities.

Outreach materials should be developed for different languages

Outreach should include schools as a point of contact for communities

Special navigator positions to help elders, immigrants, and vulnerable applicants navigate the system

Earmark resources for trusted local nonprofits and CBOs to do outreach and build stronger relationships in vulnerable communities

## PROPOSED SOLUTION

**Revise language in all program application forms to make them more accessible and easier to complete**

To achieve this, we propose a single page where clear instructions are provided in easy to follow steps. This page should be accompanied by a comprehensive list of contact information to reach navigators or other staff to answer application-related questions. Specifically, there should be phone lines so that people in rural areas without consistent internet access and people without internet and computer can fill out application forms over the phone.

**Build on the strengths of CBOs (Community-Based Organizations) and other trusted partnerships across the state**

By leaning more on CBOs and trusted partnerships across the state, service providers could better leverage resources available for outreach and application submission assistance. It would also help agencies support vulnerable populations better and open up opportunities to provide information and applications in different languages.

COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS	PROPOSED SOLUTION
<p><b>Give applicants more time to gather final documents needed to disperse funds</b></p> <p><b>Improve the attitude of county staff towards people seeking services</b></p>	<p><b>Improve applicant experiences with service systems by eliminating unsavory staff interactions</b></p> <p>Service systems must prioritize improving their relationships with people seeking ERA support and build trust with communities that have been poorly treated by staff. Some potential solutions to accomplish this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold information sessions on ERA program eligibility and application requirements with staff</li> <li>• Better pay for case workers and social workers</li> <li>• Employ more workers with lived experience and workers of color</li> <li>• Hire peer advocates or peer navigators to assist people with applications</li> <li>• Require awareness training for service workers to assist applicants who are fleeing unsafe housing situations and do not have safe ways to access required documents.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSIONS

As we deliver these proposed solutions to WERA, we want to emphasize that it is essential to continue to work collaboratively with community members who have lived experience with emergency rental assistance programs.

Community voices must be heard by system stakeholders and emergency rental assistance program policy writers as they decide on how to make adjustments and improvements to the current emergency rental assistance application system. If community voices are not engaged in the continuing assessment and decision-making processes, it is highly unlikely that reforms to the system will accomplish their intended purpose: to better serve the community's emergency rental assistance needs.

RIA is committed to continuing its part in the work of centering community voices. Our next step in this process is to gather community participants from the first community convening session for a second community convening session. This session will take place in February 2024 after WERA finalizes its recommendations and final report. RIA will facilitate community discussion of the recommendations to get a final round of feedback, which we will summarize and share with WERA.

# COMMUNITY CONVENING SESSION SUMMATION

## Feedback on WERA Final Recommendations

The second Community Convening Session took place on Zoom on January 18, 2024. The RIA team contacted the same pool of participants who participated in the October 23, 2023, session and 17 out of 21 original participants attended the second session. All participants in these convenings are applicants or users of at least one of the three emergency rental assistance programs (EA, EGA, FHPAP) that are discussed in this project.

To make sure community members' are credited for their role in shaping this project, the RIA team created a consent form for the participants to give permission to include their names in the acknowledgment page attached to the final report. The consent form link was provided to all participants at the session, with a designated time for them to complete the form. The consent form link was also provided in a follow-up email to them after the session.

During the session, we facilitated a large group discussion with the goal to collect feedback and reflections on the 12 final recommendations from WERA. We asked participants:

- What stands out as important to you?
- What have you seen/heard that aligns with the perspective/feedback you've shared with us?
- What did you expect to see/hear but did not?

One difficulty the team faced during this virtual convening was ensuring an interpreter was able to live-interpret information to a non-English speaking participant as it was being shared. In the same format as the first session, the RIA team created a separate Zoom breakout room for the non-English speaker and the interpreter along with one of the RIA team members. Together, the interpreter and RIA team member went through all the planned content so the team could capture all of the non-English speaker's contributions.

Unfortunately, during the session when two WERA representatives gave speeches, the broadcast feature on Zoom was confusing to navigate for the WERA representative. Moreover, the natural talking speed of the two speakers made it hard for the interpreter to provide a live interpretation of the speeches. The RIA team member in the Zoom breakout room ended up synthesizing the speeches from the two WERA representatives for the interpreter, who then proceeded to deliver the synthesized message to the non-English speaking participant.

After the convening, the RIA team used the notes collected using Jamboard and cleaned the data. The team then listed participant feedback based on each recommendation and offered a summative general takeaway along with key quotes and questions from participants. This content is provided on the following pages.

## Key Feedback on Recommendations

Recommendation	Takeaway	Questions	Quotes
<b>Increase or start state funding for staff In partnership with County and Tribal human service agencies</b>	Members had questions around the scope and administration of this recommendation and requested the integration of input from folks with lived experience when assessing needs. Participants also asked for the use of easily accessible, plain language in describing the recommendation itself.	Participants wanted clarity on who would administer the funding?  Participants wondered if this recommendation addressed all of EGA/EA or FHPAP ?	<i>"I like the idea that the recommendation is to create a committee, a recommendation for that committee would be to include lived experience, too."</i>  <i>"Who determines what programs are relevant, programs with best writers are the ones usually doing it - will there be room for folks with lived experience?"</i>
<b>Increase funding to match real time assessment of rental assistance needs</b>	No participant expressed any amendment or issue with the goal or sentiment of this recommendation.	N/A	<i>"It's a good recommendation and I appreciate seeing it."</i>
<b>Simple language and timeframe flexibility</b>	Participants liked the flexibility that staff receiving applications will now have on the kinds of documents required to confirm eligibility or complete an application. : They offered insights on how to adjust/define wording to make it more holistic, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining crisis and emergency</li> <li>• Struggling with a renter coming and saying 'emergency' and historically them needing some proof (based on their requirements of what a emergency is)</li> </ul>	Participants wanted to know whether it is determined for what documentation requirements would be considered barriers?  A participant asked if technical assistance be provided for folks filling out paperwork, and will there be a glossary of acronyms to help people understand the documents?	<i>"Develop guidance piece is changed with develop guidelines that are mandatory; guidance is too loose/leaves doors open for counties to still have barriers"</i>  <i>"You have to come to us but on your knees -don't require people to be at their worst so objectivity they can decide what's bad."</i>
<b>Simplify verification processes to remove barriers for applicants</b>	No participant expressed any amendment or issue with the goal or sentiment of this recommendation. However, the main feedback given was on the use of the word 'landlord,' which some felt was an outdated disempowering term. A participant offered the terms 'property manager' or 'housing providers' as an alternative.	N/A	<i>"Start challenging the term 'landlord'; as an indigenous person this feels archaic. What we say matters, words matter and we need alternatives, maybe: 'housing providers' 'property owners/managers'"</i>



Recommendation	Takeaway	Questions	Quotes
<b>Maximize use of uniform electronic signature options</b>	Participants liked the inclusion of this recommendation but questioned whether it would be mandated or required of all online application systems. Suggested changes made by participants: having options available for applicants who don't have access to phone/internet in order to sign documentation.	Are the e-signatures expected of the clients mandatory or is it an option provided to each applicant among others?	<i>"I definitely do like that recommendation but not everyone has access to a phone or Internet."</i>
<b>MAXIS modifications</b>	No participant expressed any amendment or issue with the goal or sentiment of this recommendation.	N/A	<i>"I think they need to come up with a timeframe in issuing assistance payments. [It] Needs to be sooner, more immediate."</i>
<b>Centralized or integrated technology systems</b>	Participants liked the convenience of having a centralized location that is able to store documents for a length of time, and found it important in supporting their application process.	<p>"Do we know how long something like this would take to build, or code before putting in effect?"</p> <p>How will this tie into access for Hennepin County and their reworking of the application system services? Will it be connected to that as a potential collaboration?</p> <p>"Every time we go to the county, the first thing they ask for is a social security card or work document. That's the first document they would ask us to present. How will this centralized system help with situations when not having those documents?"</p>	<i>"If we come from a different state and we go to the county, they do not give us a manual of what to do, so it is not clear how this central system helps."</i>

Recommendation	Takeaway	Questions	Quotes
<p><b>Develop criteria to measure conditions and timeliness of processing applications</b></p>	<p>Participants wondered if people with lived experience are going to be included in developing the criteria and be a part of the evaluation process.</p>	<p>Participants wanted clarity on who is on the 'task force' thereby given the ability to determine if the recommendations were successfully executed or not?</p> <p>Participants wanted to know what the timeline would be for developing the criteria?</p>	<p><i>"I'm wondering if the criteria and data will be available for the public to see how and what is being measured."</i></p> <p><i>"Why would we stop having individuals with lived experience at this point- we need to continue to be a part of the decision making and changes."</i></p>
<p><b>Review of related statutes</b></p>	<p>Participants want more transparency and clarity regarding who will be involved in the development of questions and work plans, and whether there will be updates provided to the public.</p>	<p>If they "include housing advocates," how can we ensure there are folks with lived experiences included?</p> <p>Would reviewing of related statutes be done alongside implementing the changes?</p>	<p><i>"It would be nice to get an update or reports in regards to determining synergy between policies and where alignment is needed and so forth."</i></p>
<p><b>Provide access in multiple languages not currently available</b></p>	<p>Participants liked the recommendation and look forward to this being provided on multiple platforms.</p>	<p>Are there going to be advocates helping folks navigate the application system in multiple languages?</p> <p>"For the person who is trying to help us:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will they even understand what we are trying to get?</li> <li>• What if they do not understand what we are trying to get from the service providers?</li> <li>• What if they do not understand what we are saying, or our situation?</li> <li>• Will they follow through with us?"</li> </ul>	<p><i>"Why does this even need to be a recommendation? [they] should be already doing this, given the diversity of the city."</i></p> <p><i>"As far as the technology side, all of this work needs to be cross platform (user friendly on a desktop, tablet, mobile phone) so the services are accessible."</i></p> <p><i>"This recommendation is assuming someone's readiness to interact on this level- need to help people who need help navigating this (in their level of technology navigation, education background/ literacy)".</i></p>

Recommendation	Takeaway	Questions	Quotes
<p><b>Proactively engage rental property owners and critical partners in housing stability</b></p>	<p>Participants liked this recommendation and found it important to establish 'strong relationships' with property owners. They noted ensuring property owners are more human-centered if possible.</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p><i>"This is robust. We're asking property owners to do some heavy lifting here."</i></p> <p><i>"Use renter friendly property owners- let the not so friendly property owners see the light!"</i></p> <p><i>"Develop strong relationships' is very important for establishing applicants' credibility and integrity."</i></p>
<p><b>Expand outreach and consolidate a list of all programs' eligibility criteria for early intervention</b></p>	<p>Participants wondered if the eligibility criteria across programs interact with each other and how that will impact their chances of success in applying for different programs.</p>	<p>"How does eligibility for one system tie into eligibility for another kind?"</p> <p>"What do they consider as "double dipping" across programs?"</p> <p>"If being accepted by one program's system according to eligibility, can/would it impact applicant's eligibility in another program's system?"</p>	<p><i>"I'm hoping at some point we can be more clear about what preventing homelessness means and also believing clients who advocate for this."</i></p> <p><i>"Outreach to our communities is difficult, because the majority of people I have met here speak English when they try to share things with us, so it would be a barrier."</i></p>

Moving forward, it's important to note that intentional steps must be taken to include the lived experiences of community members who may be non-English speaking and/or non-U.S citizens as they navigate ERA.