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## **Violence Against Women Act (“VAWA”) Policy**

### **A. PURPOSE AND APPLICABILITY**

1. The purpose of this policy is to implement the requirements of the Violence Against Women Act (“VAWA”) with respect to the responsibilities of the Houston Housing Authority (the “HHA”) regarding domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking. This policy shall be applicable to all of the federally-subsidized housing programs administered by the HHA and shall be part of the Housing Choice Voucher Administrative Plan and the Public Housing Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy by reference. Protections under this policy are available to all victims regardless of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation and will be applied consistent with all nondiscrimination and fair housing requirements.

### **B. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

1. The goals and objectives of the HHA’s VAWA Policy are as follows:
  - a. Maintaining compliance with all applicable legal requirements imposed by VAWA;
  - b. Ensuring the physical safety of victims of actual or threatened domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking;
  - c. Providing and maintaining housing opportunities for victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking;
  - d. Creating and maintaining collaborative arrangements between the HHA, law enforcement authorities, victim service providers and others to promote the safety and well-being of victims of actual or threatened domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking; and
  - e. Taking appropriate action in response to an incident or incidents of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking affecting individuals assisted by the HHA.

### **C. DEFINITIONS**

1. “Affiliated individual,” with respect to an individual, means:
  - a. A spouse, parent, brother, sister, or child of that individual, or a person to whom that individual stands in the place of a parent or guardian (for example, the affiliated individual is a person in the care, custody, or control of that individual); or
  - b. Any other person living in the household of that individual.
2. “Dating Violence” is violence committed by a person who is or has been in a social relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the victim and where the existence of

such a relationship is determined by the length of the relationship, the type of the relationship, and the frequency of interaction between the persons involved in the relationship.

3. “Domestic Violence” includes felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim, by a person with whom the victim shares a child, by a person who is living with or has lived with the victim as a spouse or intimate partner, by a person similarly situated to a spouse of the victim under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction receiving grant monies, or by any other person against an adult or youth victim who is protected from that person's acts under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction.
4. “Perpetrator” means a person who commits acts of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking against a victim.
5. “Sexual Assault” is any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient, including when the individual lacks capacity to consent.
6. “Spouse or Intimate Partner” includes a person who is or has been in a social relationship of a romantic or intimate nature with the victim, as determined by the length of the relationship, the type of the relationship, and the frequency of interaction between the persons involved in the relationship.
7. “Stalking” engaging in a course of conduct directed at a specific person that would cause a reasonable person to fear for the person's individual safety or the safety of others, or suffer substantial emotional distress
8. “VAWA Self Petitioner” refers to noncitizens who claim to be victims of “battery or extreme cruelty.” Battery or extreme cruelty includes domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. VAWA allows these noncitizens to self-petition for Lawful Permanent Resident (“LPR”) status without the cooperation of or knowledge of their abusive relative

#### **D. NOTIFICATIONS PROVIDED**

1. All applicants and tenants of all HHA Housing Programs will be provided HUD-5380, "Notification of Occupancy Rights Under the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)" and HUD-5382, "Certification of Domestic Violence, Dating violence, Sexual Assault, or Stalking and Alternate Documents" at the following times:
  - a. At time of denial of assistance or admission;
  - b. At time of providing of assistance or admission;
  - c. At any eviction or termination; or
  - d. At recertification or lease renewal.

2. These forms will be provided in the applicable language, if necessary, in accordance with Executive Order 13166 (Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency).

#### **E. ADMISSIONS AND SCREENING**

1. Non-Denial of Assistance. The HHA will not deny assistance or admission to any person because that person is or has been a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, provided that such person is otherwise qualified for admission.
2. Mitigation of Disqualifying Information.
  - a. An applicant for assistance whose history includes incidents in which the applicant was a victim of domestic violence, may request that the HHA take such information into account in mitigation of potentially disqualifying information, such as poor credit history or previous damage to a dwelling.
  - b. If requested by an applicant to take such mitigating information into account, the HHA shall be entitled to conduct such inquiries as are reasonably necessary to verify the claimed history of domestic violence and its probable relevance to the potentially disqualifying information.
  - c. The HHA will not disregard or mitigate potentially disqualifying information if the applicant household includes a perpetrator of a previous incident or incidents of domestic violence.

#### **F. TERMINATION OF TENANCY OR ASSISTANCE**

1. VAWA Protections.
  - a. A tenant may not be denied tenancy or occupancy rights solely on the basis of criminal activity directly relating to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking if:
    - i. The criminal activity is engaged in by a member of the household of the tenant or any guest or other person under the control of the tenant; and
    - ii. The tenant or an affiliated individual of the tenant is the victim or threatened victim of such domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking.
  - b. An incident of actual or threatened domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking shall not be considered as a serious or repeated violation of the lease by the victim or threatened victim or good cause for terminating the assistance, tenancy or occupancy rights of the victim or threatened victim of such incident.
2. Limitations of VAWA Protections.
  - a. Nothing in the above section limits the authority of the HHA to comply with a court order with respect to the rights of access or control of property, including civil protection orders issued to protect a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, or the distribution or possession of property among members of a household.

- b. Nothing in the above section limits any available authority of the HHA to evict or terminate assistance to a tenant for any violation not based on an act of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking. However, the HHA will not hold a tenant or an affiliated individual who is or has been a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking to a higher standard.
- c. Nothing in the above section limits the authority of the HHA to evict or terminate from assistance any tenant or lawful applicant if:
  - i. The HHA can demonstrate an actual and imminent threat to other tenants and/or staff if the tenant is not evicted or terminated from the assistance; and
  - ii. No other actions that could be taken to reduce the threat have been successful, including transferring the victim to a different unit, barring the perpetrator from the property, involving law enforcement, or seeking other legal remedies to prevent the perpetrator from acting on a threat.

**G. VERIFICATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, DATING VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ASSAULT, OR STALKING**

1. Requirement for Verification. Subject only to waiver as provided in paragraph D below, the HHA shall require verification in all cases where an individual requests protection against an action involving domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Verification may be accomplished in one of three ways:
  - a. Completing HUD-5382, "Certification of Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, Sexual Assault, or Stalking";
  - b. Other documentation signed by an employee, agent, or volunteer of a victim service provider, an attorney, or a medical professional, from whom the victim has sought assistance in addressing domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, or the side effects of the abuse, described in such documentation. The professional providing the documentation must sign and attest under penalty of perjury that the incident or incidents in question are bona fide and meet the requirements of the applicable definition set forth in this policy; or
  - c. A police or court record provided to the HHA by federal, state, tribal, or local police or court record describing the incident or incidents in question.
2. Time Allowed. An individual who claims protection against adverse action based on an incident or incidents of actual or threatened domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking, and who is requested by the HHA to provide verification, must provide such verification within 14 business days after receipt of the request for verification. Failure to provide verification, in proper form within such time will result in loss of protection under VAWA and this policy against a proposed adverse action.
3. If the HHA receives conflicting evidence that an incident of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking has been committed (such as certification forms from two or more members of a household each claiming to be a victim and naming one or more of the other petitioning household members as the abuser or perpetrator), the HHA

has the right to request that the tenant provide third-party documentation within thirty 30 calendar days in order to resolve the conflict. Failure to provide third-party documentation where there is conflicting evidence will result in loss of protection under VAWA and this policy against a proposed adverse action.

4. Waiver of verification requirement. With respect to any specific case, the HHA may waive the above-stated requirements for verification and provide the benefits of this policy based on the victim's statement or other corroborating evidence. Such waiver may be granted at the sole discretion of the President & CEO. Any such waiver must be in writing. Waiver in a particular instance or instances shall not operate as precedent for, or create any right to, waiver in any other case or cases, regardless of similarity in circumstances.

#### **H. NON-CITIZEN SELF-PETITIONER VERIFICATION**

1. Financial assistance to ineligible noncitizens will not be denied while verifying immigration status.
2. Self-petitioners can indicate that they are in "satisfactory immigration status" when applying for assistance or continued assistance. "Satisfactory immigration status" means an immigration status which does not make the individual ineligible for financial assistance. After verifying such immigration status in the Department of Homeland Security ("DHS") Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements ("SAVE") System, HHAs will make a final determination as to the self-petitioner's eligibility for assistance.
3. In order to qualify, the noncitizen victim must have been battered or subjected to extreme cruelty by their spouse or parent, who is a U.S. citizen or LPR ("Lawfully Permanent Resident").
4. Once HHA receives a self-petition (INS Form I-360 or I-130) or INS Form 797, HHA will not request any additional information from the self-petitioner, other than what is required using the SAVE system to complete the verification.
5. When HHA receives a self-petition or INS Form 797 Notice of Action, the HHA will initiate verification in the SAVE System
6. Final determination from the SAVE System. HHA will receive one of the following confirmations:
  - a. The VAWA self-petition is verified, in which case the applicant is immediately eligible for housing and no evidence of battery or extreme cruelty shall be requested or collected;
  - b. The I-130 is verified, in which case the petitioner submitting a family-based visa petition must provide to the HHA any evidence of "battery or extreme cruelty."

7. Housing assistance and all other VAWA protections will be granted to the self-petitioner throughout the verification process until a final determination of LPR ("Lawful Permanent Resident") status is made. If the final determination is to deny the VAWA self-petition or LPR petition, the HHA must alert the petitioner and take actions to terminate voucher assistance or evict the petitioner from public housing in accordance with the existing public housing requirements.

#### **I. EMERGENCY TRANSFER PLAN**

1. Eligibility for Transfer. In accordance with the Violence Against Women Act ("VAWA") the HHA allows tenants who are victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking to request an emergency transfer from the tenant's current unit to another unit, regardless of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. The ability of the HHA to honor such request for tenants currently receiving assistance may depend upon the following:
  - a. A preliminary determination that the tenant is or has been a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking, and
  - b. Whether the HHA has another dwelling unit available that is safe to offer the tenant for temporary or permanent occupancy.
2. Requesting a transfer.
  - a. To request an emergency transfer the tenant shall notify the HHA office and submit a written request for a transfer (HUD-5383). The tenant may submit the written request by any of the following methods: hand delivery to the HHA's office at 2640 Fountain View Drive, via email to [VAWA@housingforhouston.com](mailto:VAWA@housingforhouston.com), via fax to (713) 260-0376, or via mail: 2640 Fountain View Drive, Attention: Legal Compliance Officer, Houston, TX 77057. The HHA will provide reasonable accommodations to this policy for individuals with disabilities. The tenant's written request for an emergency transfer should include either:
    - i. A statement expressing that the tenant reasonably believes that there is a threat of imminent harm from further violence if the tenant were to remain in the same dwelling unit assisted under the HHA's program; or
    - ii. A statement that the tenant was a victim of sexual assault and that the sexual assault occurred on the premises during the 90-calendar-day period preceding the tenant's request for an emergency transfer.
  - b. The HHA cannot guarantee that a transfer request will be approved or how long it will take to process the request. However, the HHA will act as quickly as possible to move

a tenant who is a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking to another unit, subject to availability and safety of a unit.

3. If a tenant reasonably believes a proposed transfer would not be safe, the tenant may request a transfer to a different unit.
4. If a unit is available, the transferred tenant must agree to abide by the terms and conditions that govern occupancy in the unit to which the tenant has been transferred. The HHA may be unable to transfer a tenant to a particular unit if the tenant cannot establish eligibility for that unit.
5. In cases where the HHA determines that the family's decision to move out of the HHA housing was reasonable under the circumstances, the HHA may wholly or partially waive rent and any rent owed shall be reduced by the amounts of rent collected for the remaining lease term from a tenant subsequently occupying the unit.
6. Portability. A Housing Choice Voucher ("HCV") participant will not be denied portability to a unit located in another jurisdiction so long as the participant has complied with all other requirements of the HCV Program and,
  - a. has moved from the unit in order to protect the health or safety of an individual member of the household who is or has been the victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking and,
  - b. who reasonably believes that the tenant or other household member will be imminently threatened by harm from further violence if the individual remains in the present dwelling unit.
7. If the HHA has no safe and available units for which a tenant who needs an emergency is eligible, the HHA will assist the tenant in identifying other housing providers who may have safe and available units to which the tenant could move.
8. At the tenant's request, the HHA will assist tenants in contacting local organizations offering assistance to victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking that are attached to this plan.
9. Safety and Security of Tenants.
  - a. Confidentiality. The HHA will keep confidential any information that the tenant submits with a request for an emergency transfer, unless:
    - i. the tenant gives the HHA written permission to release the information on a time limited basis or,
    - ii. disclosure of the information is required by law or required for use in an eviction proceeding or hearing regarding termination of assistance from the covered program.This includes keeping confidential the new location of the dwelling unit of the tenant, if one is provided, from the person(s) that committed an act(s) of domestic violence,

dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking against the tenant. Please see the Notice of Occupancy Rights under the Violence Against Women Act for more information about HHA's responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of information related to incidents of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

- b. Throughout the request and transfer (if approved) process, the tenant is urged to take all reasonable precautions to be safe.
- c. Tenants who are or have been victims of domestic violence are encouraged to contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233, or a local domestic violence shelter for assistance in creating a safety plan. For persons with hearing impairment, please dial 1-800-787-3224 (TTY).
- d. Tenants who have been victims of sexual assault may call the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network's Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673), or visit the online hotline at <https://ohl.rainn.org/online/>.
- e. Tenants who are or have been victims of stalking that are seeking help may visit the National Center for Victims of Crime's Stalking Resource Center at <https://www.victimsofcrime.org/our-programs/stalking-resource-center>.

## **J. OTHER REMEDIES**

### **1. Lease Bifurcation**

- a. The HHA may bifurcate a lease, or remove a household member from a lease in order to evict, remove, terminate occupancy rights, or terminate assistance or occupancy rights to such member who engages in criminal activity directly related to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking. In such a case, it does not matter that the perpetrator was a signatory to the lease and the victim is allowed to stay in the unit or on the program.
- b. In removing the perpetrator from the household, the HHA will follow all federal, state and local eviction procedures.
- c. If the evicted person was the eligible program participant in the household, the remaining tenants will be given 90 days from the date of bifurcation of the lease to:
  - i. Establish eligibility for the current program;
  - ii. Establish eligibility under another program; or
  - iii. Find alternative housing.

### **2. Efforts to promote housing stability**

- a. The HHA will make every effort that is feasible and permissible for victims to remain in their units or other units of the HHA and/or retain assistance. The HHA will bear the cost of any transfer, where permissible.

### **3. Relationships with service providers**



- a. It is the policy of the HHA to cooperate with organizations and entities, both private and governmental, that provide shelter and/or services to victims of domestic violence. If the HHA becomes aware that an individual assisted by the HHA is a victim of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault or stalking, the HHA will refer the victim to such providers of shelter or services as appropriate. Notwithstanding the foregoing, this Policy does not create any legal obligation requiring the HHA either to maintain a relationship with any particular provider of shelter or services to victims of domestic violence or to make a referral in any particular case. The HHA's annual Public Housing Agency Plan shall describe providers of shelter or services to victims of domestic violence with which the HHA has referral or other cooperative relationships.

**K. LOCAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES AND RESOURCES IN HOUSTON**

1. Below is a non-exhaustive list of local domestic violence-related services and resources in the Houston/Harris County, Texas area. This section may be amended and revised periodically, as needed, without the need for approval from the HHA Board of Commissioners so that changes or updates to contact information may be promptly made whenever discovered.

- a. Houston Area Women's Center

Domestic Violence Hotline: 713-528-2121

Toll Free Line: 800-256-0551

Rape Crisis Hotline: 713-528-7273

Toll Free Line: 1-800-256-0661

Office: 713-528-6798

TTY: 713-528-3625

- b. Non-Residential Programs for Victims of Abuse

Legal Assistance – HPD/Family Violence Unit

P: 713-308-1100

Provides services for all domestic violence incidents that take place within the city limits. Will file charges and take statements in cases of domestic violence and provides short-term crisis counseling and referral. Women should be prepared to spend a minimum of 2-3 hours at unit. Witnesses can make statements in person or they can write a statement and have it notarized for the survivor to take with them.

- c. Harris County Constable's Office

P: 281-376-3472

Provides services for all domestic violence incidents that take place within the Constable's jurisdiction. Victim's assistance office will investigate all complaints of domestic violence and assist survivors with filing charges.

- d. Harris County Sheriff's Family Violence Unit

P: 713-967-5743

Provides services for all domestic violence incidents that take place within the Sheriff's jurisdiction. Victim's assistance office will investigate all complaints of domestic violence and assist survivors with filing charges.

e. Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse

P: 713-224-9911

f. Harris County DA's Office – Family Criminal Law Division

P: 713-755-5888

Prosecutes all forms of domestic violence and Title 6 Family Crimes (i.e., bigamy, criminal nonsupport, interference with child custody, etc.), files applications for Protective Orders, and provides crisis intervention counseling for victims of domestic violence.

g. YMCA International Services

P: 713-339-9015

Assists battered immigrant women who are interested in applying for residency. Provides services for victims of human trafficking.