

## **San Francisco VA HCS – Housing Quality Standards Pre-Check Toolbox**

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

**White Paper**

**VA**



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Developed by  
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## INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The San Francisco VA Health Care System (HCS) has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for their practical methods of improving Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection pass rates.

## PRACTICE OVERVIEW

**Toolboxes, stocked with supplies and equipment to address the most frequent reasons for HQS inspection failures, are effective at reducing housing process delays for Veterans in the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program.**

In June of 2016, with over 100 Veterans holding HUD-VASH vouchers and limited housing stock available, staff at the San Francisco VA HCS joined community partners in a HUD-VASH Housing Accelerator boot camp. Intended to help the community develop and implement innovative ideas towards housing homeless Veterans, it was attended by representatives from VA, HUD, the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA), Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grantees, and the Homes for Heroes workgroup, which included representatives from the City and County of San Francisco and affiliated stakeholders. Like other boot-camp-style initiatives, the community set a time-limited goal to measure progress – house 114 Veterans by September 30, 2016. While many of the usual improvement ideas were proposed, one idea stood out for its unique nature – an actual, physical toolbox stocked with items necessary to ensure that apartments pass HQS inspections.

During this period, apartments undergoing HQS inspections in the SFHA's catchment area had a first-time pass rate of around 20%. Failed inspections delayed homeless Veterans from moving into housing and negatively impacted landlord engagement. This impact was exacerbated in the Bay Area due to a booming technology industry and housing shortages. When the 20% failure rate became known to the Accelerator attendees, they also learned that SFHA maintained a list of common reasons why apartment units failed HSQ inspections. These reasons included lack of working smoke or carbon monoxide detectors, exposed electrical wires, or missing light switch covers (The full list is available in Appendix A). Realizing that the list contained many items that were relatively easy fixes, a HUD-VASH Peer Support Specialist proposed stocking toolboxes with supplies, tools, and equipment that could be used to address these items. The idea quickly came to the attention of the staff from Swords to Plowshares, a local SSVF grantee. Swords to Plowshares purchased two new toolboxes and all the supplies needed, including batteries (9v, AA, and AAA), hammers, flashlights, screwdrivers, electrical

outlet testers, tape measures, carbon monoxide and smoke detectors, light bulbs, and electrical and light switch covers.

Locally, the innovation was called "Flo's Toolbox", named after the inventive Peer Support Specialist who implemented it. When new apartment units became available, the San Francisco VA HCS's HUD-VASH housing team coordinated with landlords and property owners to complete inspection pre-checks. Working from SFHA's list of commonly failed inspection items, the VA HUD-VASH staff informally inspected the units themselves, pointed out deficiencies, and fixed outstanding issues on the spot. Whenever the housing team was invited to tour a new prospective apartment community, they brought their toolboxes to complete pre-checks and fixed issues there as well. The landlords and property owners appreciated these checks, recognizing that lease-ups delays resulted in lost revenue. It did not take long for first-time pass rates to improve substantially.

*"If an apartment will fail due to something easy like a battery or a light bulb, I'll tell the inspector that I have it in my truck. She'll say "What? Put that thing up there then!" It's really great."*

**Florencio Rios**  
**HUD-VASH Peer Support Specialist**  
**San Francisco VA Health Care System**

Today, San Francisco has two VA HUD-VASH staff dedicated to inspection pre-checks. Using the toolboxes and the pre-check process to immediately fix common items, units now only fail due to serious issues. Having completed hundreds of inspections, the pre-check process is finely tuned to the deficiencies HQS inspectors look for. Additionally, the HUD-VASH housing team and the SFHA staff now meet every Tuesday morning to work out inspection schedules, requests for tenancy approvals, housing assistance payment contracts, and other issues. Although the community did not meet their initial Accelerator goal, having housed 41 Veterans during the 90-day period, they kept the momentum going and immediately started a second Accelerator with the goal of housing 102 Veterans by March 31, 2017. Not only did they exceed that second goal by housing 143 homeless Veterans, they also improved inspection pass rates. **Flo's Toolbox was implemented in August 2016 and by the second Accelerator's conclusion in March 2017, the first-time pass rate surged to over 90%.**

## CONCLUSION

When failed inspections impede housing efforts, sometimes the simplest fixes can have the biggest impact. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the San Francisco VA HCS for sharing their practice with us. If you have any questions about this practice, please contact Florencio Rios III, Certified Peer Support Specialist at [Florencio.Rios@va.gov](mailto:Florencio.Rios@va.gov).

## **APPENDIX A – SAN FRANCISCO HOUSING AUTHORITY’S TOP 25 REASONS PROPERTIES FAIL HQS INSPECTIONS**

The following is a list of the top 25 reasons why properties fail HQS inspections within the San Francisco, CA area. The most common causes for failed items are listed first.

1. No working smoke detector: At least one smoke detector is needed on each level of the unit.
2. No working carbon monoxide detector: At least one carbon monoxide detector is needed on each level of the unit whenever there are gas appliances (gas stoves, gas heaters, water heaters).
3. Access to unit: Tenant is a no show, doorbell or intercom system is not working or programmed with the tenant’s information.
4. Inoperable front and back door locks. Double keyed locks. Keyed locks/padlocks on interior doors.
5. Insufficient weather stripping around exterior doors.
6. Inoperable appliances: Stove burners or oven not working or missing knobs. Range hood fan not working.
7. Refrigerator gasket repair: Refrigerator gasket/seal needs repair or replacement.
8. Broken cabinets or drawers.
9. No working lights in kitchen or bathroom.
10. Leaking plumbing in kitchen sinks, bathroom sinks, tubs, showers, etc.
11. Inoperable toilet, sink, tub, or shower.
12. No ventilation in bathroom.
13. Inoperable or insufficient heat.
14. Missing hot water heater temperature pressure relief line: Must be no shorter than 6 inches from the ground.
15. Exposed electrical wires.
16. Ungrounded outlets or inoperable ground fault circuit interrupter. Missing or cracked outlet or light switch covers.
17. Broken or inoperable windows and locks.
18. Loose, broken, or missing stairs.
19. Missing handrails: Handrails needed wherever there are four or more stairs.
20. Missing guardrail: Guardrail needed wherever there is a drop of 30 inches or more.
21. Pest control: Unit must be free from bedbugs, roaches, rodents, and other pests.
22. Water damage on walls and ceilings.
23. Mold and/or mildew like substances.
24. Ripped, torn, and/or frayed carpet. Broken floor tiles.
25. Blocked egress of doors and windows.