

# HOW TO WRITE A POLICY

There are several important considerations and steps in writing an effective policy. Well written, concise policies are the framework that holds your organization together and makes everything run smoothly while ensuring fairness and consistency. If clear and transparent policies aren't present, an organization runs the risk of suffering from unfortunate misunderstandings, critical mistakes, or even a lawsuit that could be very costly.

## **WHERE TO BEGIN**

You must begin by getting your thoughts together regarding the subject policy. The Policy you write is going to dictate how you carry out the related functions in your organization. You will need to ask your self the following questions:

- What is the purpose of the policy?
  - ✓ Include a concise statement of the rationale for the policy including, if appropriate, reference to federal regulations.
- Are there any Federal, State and/or Local laws that will apply?
  - ✓ If yes, these will be the foundation of the policy; in the absence of all else, these standards must be met!
- Is this a discretionary policy, or do applicable laws allow for discretionary decisions in the policy?
- Are there other policies or procedures that will be referenced in the policy?
  - ✓ If yes, ensure consistency

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD POLICY**

- Policy is written in clear, concise, simple language.
- Policy statements address what is the rule rather than how to implement the rule.
  - ✓ Note: Some policies are an exception, and it is appropriate to develop a “Policy and Procedure” – i.e. Grievance Policy & Procedure, Section 8

- If revising a policy that is stated in your Administrative Plan or Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy, be sure to revise that policy also!
  - ✓ Can be done by including a statement in the Resolution that adoption of this policy also amends Section XXX.XX.X of the Admin Plan/ACOP.
- Avoid using big words or difficult phrases that may not be easily understood by the reader. Remember, you and your staff will not be the only ones subject to reading the Policy – your board will need to understand it, as well as your clients (applicants, residents, landlords, etc.) and the general public.
- If you use an acronym, spell it out the first time you use it.
- If you include procedure with your policy:
  - ✓ Develop specific procedural statements with the user in mind.
  - ✓ There is a sense of ownership among procedure users. It helps to involve users in the development of the procedure.
  - ✓ The procedures must be understandable; it should be written so that what needs to be done can be followed by all users.
  - ✓ When feasible, procedures should not be overly restrictive and offer the user options.

### **USING POLICY TEMPLATES / SHARING**

There are policy templates available for many policies, the most common being the larger more difficult policies to write such as the Section 8 Administrative Plan and the Public Housing Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy (ACOP). Be sure that you insert agency specific information so that it reflects your agency's information.

Often times agencies will network and share policies with one another; this is great, but always be sure to read the policy you receive from another agency to ensure that:

- ✓ The specific information is appropriate for your agency; and
- ✓ Any references to agency name and/or acronyms are revised to reflect that of your agency

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  - ✓ Note: Some policies are an exception, and it is appropriate to develop a "Policy and Procedure" – i.e. Grievance Policy & Procedure, Section 8 Informal Hearing and Review Policy and Procedure, Pet Policy.
- Policies are readily available to staff, residents, the public, and the board, and their authority is clear.

- Avoid using information that could quickly become outdated (i.e. staff names instead of positions).
- Definitions must be present either at the beginning or end of a policy.
- When the Policy states the agency may have discretion in an action, the Policy should be specific as to *who* (i.e., “*the Executive Director has the discretion to...*”) has the authority to exercise the discretion; if the discretionary authority is not specific to a position, then it should state so (i.e., “*the ABC Housing Authority has the discretion to...*”).

### **USING FEDERAL REGULATIONS AS THE GUIDELINE**

Some policies can be written almost verbatim from the Federal Regulation

- Example: Section 8 Informal Hearing and Review
  - ✓ Will need to make decision about specifics such as time frames for requesting informal hearing or review

Some policies can be written using Federal Regulation as a guideline, but more decision making will be required, making it difficult to write verbatim

- Example: Pet Policy
  - ✓ Federal regulations require a Housing Authority to develop a Pet Policy, but allow discretion as to how many pets, in what developments, size restrictions, enforcement, etc. Therefore it is difficult to use the Federal Regulation to write a policy verbatim, but the Federal Regulation should be used as a guideline in order to ensure compliance with federal regulations.

### **THINGS TO REMEMBER**

- Great care must be taken to ensure that where mandatory actions are required, the policy must use the words ‘shall’, ‘will’, or ‘must’, as opposed to ‘should’ or ‘may’.
- If there are statutory regulations involved be sure you have read and understand them before you write a policy incorporating or referencing them.

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