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LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT TOOL

**Reducing Housing
Barriers for
People Involved
in the Justice
System:**

How to Assess the
Landscape of
Background
Screening in Your
Community



LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT PROCESS OVERVIEW

Criminal background screenings are a significant barrier to accessing housing for people involved in the justice system. It is crucial to understand how these screening procedures operate in each community to address the harmful impacts of criminal background screenings in housing applications. A "Landscape Assessment" can help identify trends in screening procedures and areas for reducing barriers. CSH designed this Landscape Assessment tool to help you conduct a comprehensive analysis of criminal background screening procedures in your community that can reduce barriers to housing and lead to recovery and stability for people involved in the justice system.



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Part 1 DEFINE YOUR GOALS

Knowing why you're conducting this landscape assessment is important to ensure you design your study appropriately. As you begin, consider the following questions:

- **What is the purpose of this study?**

- Some communities have legislation to expand housing access, and an environmental scan can help assess progress. Other communities struggle to house people exiting jail and prison and need to know what screening procedures exist to advocate for change effectively. Your community may have different reasons for doing this research.

- **What geographic area are you focused on?**

- Is your landscape assessment focused on an entire state? A county? A city?
- No matter the geography, you should ensure representation from a cross-section of that community (for example: all regions in a particular state or all census tracts in a specific city).

- **What type of properties are you interested in?**

- Are you focused on affordable housing? Market-rate housing? Public housing?
- Financing fluctuates for different types of properties, and different financing can initiate other requirements for background screening. Consequently, it is essential to understand funding sources and associated regulations (ex: certain screening procedures apply to all public housing projects. A study that includes public housing would need to consider those requirements).

What prompted you to conduct this analysis?





- **What materials do you need to collect?**

- What data sources are needed to answer the questions your landscape assessment is trying to ask?
- Most background screening procedures are found in Tenant Selection Plans (TSPs), a necessary process for all developments receiving Low Income Housing Tax Credits. TSPs include information about the property, procedures for taking applications and screening tenants, and other policies and procedures relevant to identifying new tenants and moving them into the property.
- You might also want to supplement your TSP data with surveys or conversations with case managers, people seeking to access housing, and other partners who can offer more detailed insight into their experiences with criminal background screenings.

- **Who will provide input?**

- It is critical to incorporate input from people who have experienced the barrier of background checks personally. Consider putting together an advisory committee with community members who have this lived experience.
- Your advisory committee should also include people with knowledge of how the justice system operates in your community. For example, re-entry nonprofits or corrections or supervision staff, and other allies who align with your mission and can speak to the nuances of the justice system.
- Others partners to consider for this committee include local housing finance agencies, housing departments, behavioral health departments, and others with knowledge of, and experience with, housing and justice systems.
- Consider also who needs to be informed of progress and at which stages (for example: board members, stakeholders, partners) and create a plan for keeping them updated.

Part 2

DESIGN YOUR ANALYSIS TOOLS & GATHER MATERIALS

Your goals will inform how you design and conduct your analysis. Develop or gather the following materials as you prepare to begin your Landscape Assessment:

- **Tenant Selection Plans (TSPs)**

As noted above, most background screening information will come from Tenant Selection Plans.

- How do I find TSPs? TSPs are publicly available documents that anyone can request from the property itself or the state Housing Finance Agency (HFA). Ask the HFA for support obtaining these plans, or consult with other partners such as Continuum of Care agencies, government housing departments, or other government partners.

- **TSP Data Collection Tool**

- TSPs vary significantly in their format, level of detail, and language used to describe background screening procedures. A standardized set of questions will help you glean the necessary information from each plan and compile usable data for analysis.

See the appendix for an example of the data collection categories.



- Consult your advisory group for guidance on what information to gather from each plan.
- Consider best practice research to identify topics for analysis.
- Tools such as Google Forms, Microsoft Forms, Survey Monkey, and other similar software can help compile the data from the plans.

- **TSP Data Entry Guide**

- To ensure methodological consistency when gleaning data from the TSPs, create a data entry guide with specifications of how to identify and pull each piece of data from each TSP. This guide serves as a resource for anyone using the tool to collect data from the TSPs. Also, it protects the integrity of your analysis. Some points to include in the Data Entry Guide are: which criminal convictions fit into which category, format for numbers and dates for ease of data analysis, or how to interpret vague language. *See the appendix for an example data entry guide.*

You can answer these questions however you'd like, but you must ensure every person completing data entry answers them in the same way.

- **Other Survey(s)**

- You may want to supplement the TSP data with experiential input from community partners. Consider sending a survey to case managers who work with the relevant population, people who are seeking housing themselves, or other populations to learn about how they experience housing barriers. Think about alternative ways to collect this information such as focus groups, listening sessions, or town hall meetings.

See appendix for example of case manager survey questions.



Part 3

CONDUCT YOUR ANALYSIS

Once you have gathered your TSPs and other materials and have designed your survey and analysis tools, you are ready to collect data for your landscape assessment. Consider the following tips and tricks as you are conducting the analysis:

- **Consistency is key in pulling data.**
 - TSPs can be vague and confusing to interpret. If you have multiple people pulling data from TSPs, ensure you follow the methodology guide and check in with each other regularly to ensure you interpret the plans similarly.
 - Include an "other notes" section in your analysis tool and use it liberally – if you find phrases of interest in a particular plan or something unclear, flag them in your notes to return to later.
 - You likely do not have to read the entire plan from beginning to end. Usually, TSPs will have a section devoted to criminal background screenings with much of the information you need.
 - When designing a survey for outside input, consider the length of the survey. Though you likely are looking for a wealth of information, if it is too long people will be less likely to fill it out. Aim for no more than ten questions, and indicate an estimate of how long the survey will take when you send the survey out, so respondents know what to expect.



Part 4

SHARE & BUILD ON YOUR ANALYSIS

Now that you've collected your data, what will you do with it?

- What trends do you identify in the data? Do the TSPs align with the laws in your community? What procedures align with best practices? What are areas for improvement?
- What pieces of data are confusing to you? Are there trends in the TSPs that contradict your survey input or vice versa? What needs further exploration?
- With whom do you need to share the analysis? What is the best approach for sharing with them (for example: large group presentation, one-to-one or small group conversations, or something else)?

- **Did we achieve our goals?**

- If so, what's next? If not, what else do we need to do? Below are some examples of how this analysis can help lead to change:
- Research can help identify areas for technical assistance to property management or housing providers to help update background screening processes (for example: including best practices in screening processes.)
- Sharing the findings with housing providers can uncover common concerns or misconceptions related to people impacted by the justice system. This could lead you to develop educational resources and other tools to help dispel myths and address concerns.



- You may want to engage Property Managers/Housing Providers in a dialogue about how they utilize TSPs or the realities of background screening on the ground to assess how the policies align with practice. Invite them to share their experiences with background screening with you.
- You may also want to engage government partners to share your findings, justice partners working on housing access, or re-entry and justice system partners.

As your community engages in this landscape assessment and identifies opportunities to lower barriers to housing access, we invite you to share your experience with us!

Contact justice@csh.org with questions or to share how your landscape assessment has shaped your work.

APPENDIX

- [TSP Analysis Categories](#)
- [Case Manager Survey](#)
- [TSP Data Entry Guide](#)

ABOUT CSH

CSH works to advance affordable housing aligned with services as an approach to help people thrive.



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