

Newark Housing Authority (NHA)

Web-Based Applicant Portal for Public Housing Waiting List Lottery

Customer



- Newark Housing Authority (NHA)
- www.newarkha.org

Industry

- Government, Public Housing

Location

- Newark, New Jersey

Challenges

- Previous waiting list application process was paper-based, requiring a lot of staff time to handle crates of paper mail, envelopes and manual data entry of paper-based information into housing management application
- Recent waiting list application project using paper-based process not possible given staff and budget reductions

Peelle Tech Products and Services

- On-line waiting list application portal tailored for NHA
- IT infrastructure hosted and managed by Peelle Tech
- Data validation, deduplication and random lottery application ranking built into the Peelle Tech process to help manage the large volume of applicant submissions

“Given our staff and budget reductions, dealing with paper applications, crates of mail and manual data entry would have been virtually impossible for our most recent waiting list project. I’ve been with Newark Housing Authority for over 25 years and the Peelle Tech on-line waiting list solution made our last process by far and away the easiest one we’ve ever been through.”

— Inez Smith, Newark Housing Authority (NHA), Director of Occupancy

With a portfolio of 44 public housing communities and over 8,000 rental units, Newark Housing Authority (NHA) is the eleventh largest public housing authority in the nation. NHA administers up to 4,000 Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8) within the city limits. NHA also serves as a redevelopment authority, with a stake in creating safe neighborhoods within the City with expanded economic opportunities for Newark citizens.

NHA’s last waiting list project (2009) required citizens to pick up a paper application form from the NHA building and return it within 6 weeks. NHA collected 8,000 paper forms and hired temp workers to manually review each application, respond to applicants and then enter the data into their housing management application. The process was labor-intensive and prone to data error due to illegible hand-writing and inaccurate data entry into the housing management application. With this latest waiting list cycle, NHA didn’t have the budget or staff to handle a paper-driven process again and searched for a better solution.

NHA does not open waiting lists that often and a typical waiting list is only open for a few weeks. Inez Smith, NHA Director of Occupancy, states, “With this latest waiting list project, we were looking for a partner that could oversee the project and also help us meet our HUD funding requirement to keep applicant data up-to-date.”

Peelle Tech enabled NHA to offer its citizens an easy-to-use multilingual applicant web-site. Applicants submitted their information on-line, avoiding the hassles of printing, hand-writing and mailing forms. Smith continues, “Peelle Tech’s solution was more secure, accurate and efficient than any process we had used in the past. Plus, the project helped us keep our applicant database up-to-date to meet HUD requirements.”

Waiting List Management Applicant Portal Customized for NHA's Requirements

NHA gathered all documents such as waiting list application forms, frequently asked questions and HUD-required information and collaborated with Peelle Tech on what information to put on the waiting list web-site and how to display it. Smith states, "Our goal was to offer an easy to navigate on-line site full of information to promote self-sufficiency. We also wanted to ensure that we complied with HUD requirements."

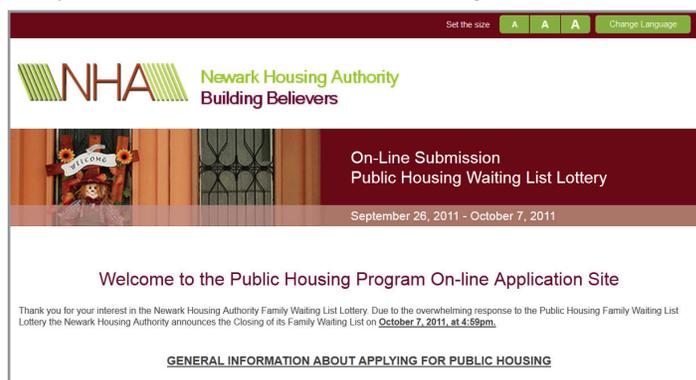
The web-site Peelle Tech set up had a dedicated URL for NHA, used the NHA logo and the burgundy and green colors on NHA's official web-site. Unique requirements for NHA such as large font sizes for the sight impaired and a page displaying a notice of reasonable accommodations for applicants with disabilities were built into the web-site. The site also featured an easy-to-click language control icon at the top, enabling users to switch between English and Spanish (Peelle Tech can translate sites to almost any language).

FAQs were included on the site's home page along with a link to the on-line application form. Applicants could apply for the first available housing unit or select up to 3 specific property sites they were interested in. Smith states, "Giving applicants the option to select up to 3 of the 36 NHA property sites with check-boxes made it easy to validate the types of properties (e.g. townhouse or apartment) and locations of interest to the applicant. This information was automatically propagated to the online application form." The on-line application form had required fields to ensure that all the necessary information was collected (versus paper forms where applicants may not write legibly or ignore certain fields). Once the applicant applied, they received a confirmation number, validating that their form was successfully submitted.

The NHA web-site was hosted at secure, redundant Peelle Tech data centers and all applicant data was submitted to systems managed by the Peelle Tech technical team. Smith states, "We were very comfortable knowing that Peelle Tech has an experienced technical team that has managed many waiting list projects before. With Peelle Tech overseeing the IT infrastructure, we eliminated the need to find Newark IT resources and greatly reduced our risk of succumbing to security breaches or losing application data. This was important to us due to the private information our citizens were giving us." The Peelle Tech data centers are SAS 70 compliant, having undergone 3rd party security and audit assessments.

Overwhelming Response: Two Weeks and 17,000 Applicants

NHA opened the on-line waiting list for two weeks and received an overwhelming response. Smith states, "We were expecting about 10,000 applicants, but 17,000 names came in. Given our staff and budget reductions, dealing with paper applications, crates of mail and manual data entry would have been impossible. I've been with NHA for over 25 years and the Peelle Tech online waiting list solution made our last process by far and away the easiest one we've ever been through."



Newark Housing Authority online waiting list application

Applicant List Deduplication and Independent, Random Lottery Applicant Ranking

After the waiting list site was closed to the public, Peelle Tech worked with NHA to determine that Social Security Number and Date of Birth were to be used to deduplicate the applicant information. Peelle Tech sorted the information and kept the newest entry based on the time-date stamp. Once all duplicates were removed, Peelle Tech used a computer-based process to randomly rank the applicants. "Using a disinterested third party like Peelle Tech was a great way to rank the applicants in a fair way and it also reduced NHA staff requirements," states Smith. "The turnaround time for the waiting list data was only one week after the waiting list closed – that helped us respond to the applicants in a timely manner."

Next Steps

NHA discovered that some of the applicants were already living in NHA housing units and re-applying to move somewhere else rather than going through the transfer process. NHA is working to remove these applicants from the waiting list while also consolidating its existing applicant data with this new waiting list applicant data. "We've been very happy with Peelle Tech; they've saved us a lot of time and effort as we work through our applicant database," concludes Smith.