Plain Language Leasing Benefits

FOR HOUSING PROVIDERS

What is plain language?

Plain language makes important paperwork easy to understand. Plain language is writing to ensure the reader understands documents as quickly, easily, and completely as possible. It makes communications more accessible, especially for people with cognitive access needs, lower literacy levels, and English language barriers. This includes residents with intellectual and developmental disabilities, whose accessibility needs may interfere with typical ways of reading and understanding content.

Why plain language leasing?

Most leases are written at a graduate school level. To make housing opportunities more accessible to people with disabilities, you can make sure that essential information is effectively communicated to all residents. Plain language is typically written at a 6th to 8th-grade reading level and geared toward audiences with cognitive disabilities.

With thoughtfully created plain language documents, you can both meet regulatory needs and provide an accessible housing experience for your residents. You can provide applications, explanations of leases, and other agreements or contracts in plain language.

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Simplifying Communication

Using straightforward language in your forms and processes can help renters understand their rights and responsibilities. For providers, simplifying communication materials can limit confusion and even speed up processes like lease-up.

Building a Stronger Community and Mutual Trust

When everyone understands each other better, it creates a safer and friendlier community for both tenants and housing providers.

Tools for Plain Language Leasing

The Kelsey's Open Source Plain Language Documents

The Kelsey, a disability-forward housing organization in California, has an online plain language guide where stakeholders can learn more about plain language in housing. The Kelsey also offers open source template plain language leasing documents that providers can adapt and use, linked below. It should be noted that these documents include all of the State of California requirements for lease language. You should work with your team to make sure adapted documents meet your needs for leasing in Michigan.

- Lease Agreement
- Reasonable Accommodation & Modification Policy
- Complaint Process (Grievance Procedure)
- Community Guidelines (House Rules)

To learn more about plain language leasing, watch this presentation from The Kelsey.

Readability Tools

The best way to learn if your documents are in plain language is to get feedback from residents with diverse backgrounds who will be using the documents. There are many tools that can help you check the readability level of your writing. You should aim for no more than a grade 8 level of readability. If you use Microsoft Word, you can use Microsoft Word Readability Statistics to check the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level for your writing. We recommend that you use readability tools as a guideline, and use your own judgment when you are writing. Here are a few readability tools that you can use to check the level of your writing:

- Microsoft Word Readability Statistics (included with any version of Word)
- Hemingway Editor (free)
- Readable

This information was compiled by Detroit Disability Power for an initiative supported by the City of Detroit.