

Richland County

COVID-19 EMERGENCY RENTAL ASSISTANCE

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES



Richland County Emergency Relocation Assistance Program
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General Provisions

This manual provides the policies and procedures of Richland County in its administration of the COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) funded through the Consolidated Appropriations Act (CAA), 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260. This document provides standard concepts, definitions and procedures that enable staff to understand and effectively administer the program. This manual is designed as a tool for staff to use as a reference and resource. This manual will be updated as needed to reflect changes in policies and procedures as well as new Treasury regulations, notices and other guidance.

The ERA program makes available \$12,573,547.40 in funds provided directly to Richland County through the CAA and administered by the U.S. Treasury. These funds are to assist households that are unable to pay rent and/or utilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an application process Richland County will offer aid to income eligible households located within the geographical boundaries of the county who have been economically impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic through job loss, furlough or reduction in hours or pay.

ERA is a grant program wherein rental or utility payments are made on behalf of an income-eligible household for a maximum period of 12 months (with an additional 3 months possible) to maintain housing and/or to reduce rental and utility payment delinquency in arrears as a result of the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Emergency assistance will be available for monthly rent payments, utility payments, rental arrearages and utility arrearages. At least 90% of the ERA funds received by Richland County will be used for these purposes. The remaining funds will be used for housing stability services, including case management or other services related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the administration of the program.

Given the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S Treasury has granted the County flexibility as to the particular form of documentation required, including permitting photocopies or digital photographs of documents, e-mails, or attestations from employers, landlords, caseworkers, or others with knowledge of the household's circumstances. The County must require all applications for assistance to include an attestation from the applicant that all information included is correct and complete.

Available Assistance

Type of Assistance

Richland County is providing ERA grants to eligible households through an application process. The funding provided will assist with the following:

- a. Rent;
- b. Rental arrearages;
- c. Utilities and home energy costs;
- d. Utilities and home energy arrearages; and
- e. Other expenses related to housing incurred directly or indirectly due to the pandemic

The Act requires that other expenses must be related to housing and be incurred due directly or indirectly due to COVID-19. Such expenses include relocation expenses and rental fees which may include rental security deposits, rental fees (which may include application or screening fees if a household has been temporarily or permanently displaced due to the COVID-19 outbreak; reasonable accrued late fees (if not included in rental or utility arrearages and if incurred due to COVID-19); and

Internet service provided to the rental unit. For internet services to qualify, the applicant must request internet services to be eligible and must attest that the internet service provided to their residence is related to housing and is being used to engage in distance learning, telework, telemedicine or to obtain government services. All payments for housing-related expenses must be supported by documentary evidence such as a bill, invoice, or evidence of payment to the provider of the service.

Utilities and home energy costs are separately stated charges related to the occupancy of rental property. Accordingly, utilities include separately stated electricity, gas, water and sewer, trash removal and energy costs, such as fuel oil. Telecommunication services (telephone and cable) delivered to the rental dwelling are not considered to be utilities. Utilities that are covered by the landlord within rent will be treated as rent.

The cost of a hotel or motel room occupied by an eligible household may be covered using ERA assistance within the category of “other expenses related to housing incurred due, directly or indirectly, to the COVID-19 outbreak” provided that:

- a. The household has been temporarily or permanently displaced from its primary residence or does not have a permanent residence elsewhere;
- b. The total months of assistance provided to the household do not exceed 12 months (plus an additional three months if necessary to ensure housing stability for the household); and
- c. Documentation of the hotel or motel stay is provided and the other applicable requirements provided in the statute and these FAQs are met.

The cost of the hotel or motel stay would not include expenses incidental to the charge for the room.

In addition, financial assistance to households that are renting their residence under a “rent-to-own” agreement, under which the renter has the option (or obligation) to purchase the property at the end of the lease term, provided that a member of his or her household:

- a. Is not a signor or co-signor to the mortgage on the property;
- b. Does not hold the deed or title to the property; and
- c. Has not exercised the option to purchase.

Rental payments for either the manufactured home and/or the parcel of land the manufactured home occupies are eligible for financial assistance under ERAP. Households renting manufactured housing and/or the parcel of land the manufactured home occupies may also receive assistance for utilities and other expenses related to housing

Program administrators shall determine the duration and amount of rental assistance provided to eligible households based on application information, monthly rent and utilities due, and amount in arrears. This duration and assistance amount will be designed to ensure households are provided with the maximum benefit possible. Prospective rent and utility assistance will be provided up to a maximum of 3 months at a time, before recertification of income and/or reapplication is required, for a period not to exceed 12 months except that the County may provide assistance for an additional 3 months only if necessary to ensure housing stability for a household subject to availability of funds. Rental and utility arrears may be paid in full.

Terms of Assistance

Rental or utility assistance will include:

- a. Monthly Payment made on behalf of eligible household to landlord/property management agent or utility provider for 3 months' rent and utilities up to a maximum of 12 months; or
- b. Monthly Arrears Payment made on behalf of eligible household to landlord/property management agent or utility provider for rent or utilities accrued after March 13, 2020; or
- c. Monthly payment combination of items a. and b. made on behalf of eligible household to landlord/property management agent or utility provider.

Three months supplemental assistance may be provided to ensure housing stability for a household after the initial 12-month period. The County Special Case Panel (SCP) (see definition below at page 16) must review and approve each case of supplemental assistance.

Emergency rental assistance will not be paid directly to households except in cases where the landlord does not agree to participate in the program. *The U.S. Treasury directs that the County must make reasonable efforts to obtain the cooperation of landlords and utility providers to accept payments from the ERA program. Outreach will be considered complete if a request for participation is sent in writing, by certified mail, to the landlord or utility provider, and the addressee does not respond to the request within 14 calendar days after mailing; or, if the grantee has made at least three attempts by phone or email over a 10 calendar-day period to request the landlord or utility provider's participation; or a landlord confirms in writing that the landlord does not wish to participate. The final outreach attempt or notice to the landlord must be documented. The cost of contacting landlords would be an eligible administrative cost.* The payments will be made by Richland County to the bona fide landlord/property management agent or company.

After all reasonable efforts have failed to obtain the cooperation of the landlord and/or utility provider, the County shall make payments directly to the household following the payment process found in Step 3: Approval and Payment below.

Utility payments will be made by Richland County directly to the respective utility company. Emergency rental assistance shall be paid by the date specified on the current lease agreement. In the event the applicant cannot provide a lease due to legitimate reasons (as determined by the County), and provides self-attestation, HUD's Fair Market Rental Rates (web site - huduser.gov) will be utilized in order to determine the appropriate allocation amount of funds.

- The allocation of these funds are conditional upon the landlord's agreement to accept the Fair Market Rate amount to satisfy arrears.

The emergency rental assistance program will log all payments made on behalf of eligible households.

Applications

Applicants

An applicant may be either a renter or landlord.

Applicant shall provide the following information to be considered as an eligible household:

1. Name and contact information.
2. Address – An applicant household must reside in a rental property located within the geographical boundaries of Richland County.

3. Status – renter or landlord.
4. Copy of current lease agreement or self-attestation in the absence of a lease agreement.
5. Household Income – must be below 80% AMI.
6. Rental payment status – In arrears or prospective?
7. Impact of Covid-19 – Is there economic hardship? How?

Eligibility

Household

A Household is defined as one or more individuals who are obligated to pay rent on a residential dwelling. The occupants may be a single family, one person living alone, two or more families living together, or any other group of persons who share living arrangements. Therefore, household occupant information must include, at a minimum, the following:

1. Full names and ages of all occupants (whether related or unrelated) living in the residence; and
2. Signature of the primary applicant(s), certifying that the information provided related to the annual household income and occupants is correct.

The term “eligible household” means a household of 1 or more individuals who are obligated to pay rent on a residential dwelling and:

1. One or more individuals within the household has
 - a. qualified for unemployment benefits or
 - b. experienced a reduction in household income, incurred significant costs, or experienced other financial hardship due, directly or indirectly, to the novel coronavirus disease (COVID–19) outbreak, which the applicant shall attest in writing (see Justifying Economic Hardship below); and
2. One or more individuals within the household can demonstrate a risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability, which may include—
 - a. a past due utility or rent notice or eviction notice;
 - b. unsafe or unhealthy living conditions; or
 - c. any other evidence of such risk, as determined by the eligible grantee involved (see Justifying Homeless and Housing Instability below); and
3. The household has a household income that is not more than 80 percent of the area median income.

Occupancy

Applicant must provide proof of occupancy.

All occupancy documentation must show services were provided anytime during the billing period of the COVID-19 pandemic period beginning March 13, 2020-to present, in the applicant or co-applicant's name, and the subject address.

Acceptable proof includes:

1. Copy of electric, gas, or water bill. The bill must confirm that service was provided anytime during the billing period of the pandemic, beginning March 13, 2020 to present; or
2. Letter from electric, gas, or water company. The letter must confirm that service was provided during the billing period of the pandemic; or
3. Other qualified documents may be presented for consideration of proof of occupancy, which include but are not limited to a voter registration card from the time of the pandemic or a driver’s license from the time of the pandemic.

Justifying Economic Hardship

Applicant households must submit documentation confirming economic hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The County must document that one or more members of the applicant's household either:

1. qualified for unemployment benefits or
 - a. If relying on this determination, the applicant will submit a signed attestation or other relevant documentation regarding the household member's qualification for unemployment benefits.
2. experienced a reduction in household income, incurred significant costs, or experienced other financial hardship due, directly or indirectly, to the COVID-19 outbreak.
 - a. If relying on this determination, the applicant will submit a signed attestation that one or more members of the household meets this condition.

Acceptable documentation sources are:

1. If workplace closure or reduced hours due to COVID-19, including lay-off, termination, loss of working hours, income reduction resulting from business closure or other employer economic impacts of COVID-19:
 - A copy of household member(s) notification of job loss/termination from employer during the eligible pandemic period (March 13, 2020 to present); or
 - A copy of household member(s) notification of furlough from employer during the eligible pandemic period (March 13, 2020 to present); or
 - A copy of household member(s) notification confirming reduction in hours and/or pay during the eligible pandemic period (March 13, 2020 to present); or
 - A copy of household member(s) application during the eligible pandemic period (March 13, 2020 to present) and/or approval for Unemployment Insurance benefits; or
 - A signed self-certification that includes the name of the household member who is self-employed, the name and nature of the business, and narrative confirming economic impact on self-employment during eligible pandemic period (March 13, 2020 to present).
2. Documentation of sickness with COVID-19 or caring for a household or family member who is sick with COVID-19;
3. Documentation of extraordinary out-of-pocket childcare expenses due to school closures, medical expenses, or health care expenditures stemming from COVID-19 infection of the tenant or a member of the tenant's household who is ill with COVID-19;
4. Documentation of compliance with a recommendation from a government health authority to stay home, self-quarantine, or avoid congregating with others during the state of emergency;
5. Documentation of Reasonable expenditures stemming from government ordered emergency measures; and
6. Documentation of any additional factors relevant to the tenant's reduction in income as a result of the COVID-19 emergency.

Justifying Homeless and Housing Instability

The Act requires that one or more individuals within the household can demonstrate a risk of experiencing homelessness or housing instability, which may include:

1. a past due utility or rent notice or eviction notice,

2. unsafe or unhealthy living conditions, or
3. any other evidence of risk, as determined by the grantee.

The first criteria the applicant would either submit a copy of a past due utility or rent notice or eviction since March 13, 2021 or attest to the same in the on-line application form.

The second criteria the applicant would attest to living in an unsafe or unhealthy living condition with documentation attached such as photographs, other documentation and/or an attestation from a third party that the household is living in an unsafe or unhealthy living condition.

The final criteria would only be used if the applicant cannot meet either of the first two criteria. The applicant would submit any other evidence supporting homeless or housing instability in the application. The evidence presented by the applicant will be considered by the County. This would be reviewed and decided on a case-by-case basis by the SCP. Examples of other evidence of risk include overcrowding, moving frequently, staying with relatives, or spending the bulk of household income on housing.

Duplication of Benefits

The statute creating the ERA Program requires that ERA payments not be duplicative of any other federally funded rental assistance provided to an eligible household. All applicants must provide a signed self-certification (electronic accepted) that includes the names of household members and a narrative confirming that no other federal rental assistance has been received during the eligible pandemic period (March 13, 2020 to present). The program may verify the accuracy of all self-certifications.

WARNING: ANY PERSON WHO KNOWINGLY MAKES A FALSE CLAIM OR STATEMENT MAY BE SUBJECT TO CIVIL OR CRIMINAL PENALTIES UNDER 18 U.S.C. 287, 1001 AND 31 U.S.C 3729.

Income Determination

Income is determined in each household in 2 possible ways (household income):

1. The household's total income for calendar year 2020, as determined using the adjusted gross income (AGI) as defined for purposes of reporting under the IRS Form 1040 series for individual Federal annual income tax purposes, or
2. Sufficient confirmation, as determined by the Secretary of the Treasury, of the household's monthly income at the time of application for such assistance.
 - a. County will consider all income received in the two months prior to application
 - b. Applicant using the monthly income method must provide self-certification of their income amounts in addition to any other income documentation available.
 - c. For household incomes determined using this method, income eligibility must be reconsidered every 3 months. Households may reapply for additional assistance at the end of the three-month period, if needed, and if the overall time limit for assistance is not exceeded.

To determine program eligibility, all sources of income for each household member over the age of 18 and the exact amounts earned from each income source must be accurately documented through one of the methods described above. The primary applicant(s) are also required to certify by signature that

the information provided regarding household members is correct. The primary applicant is responsible to provide this documentation as part of eligibility consideration.

Eligible households must be at or below the 80% of area median income (AMI) or “Low Income” limits for confirmed household size, and priority will be given to those applicants at or below 50% of AMI or “Very Low.” See chart below.

Annual Income Limits

2020 MAXIMUM TOTAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME LIMITS
Effective April 1, 2020 for Richland County, SC

Family Size	Extremely Low Income	Very Low Income	Low Income
	Equal to or less than 30% of Area Median (\$)	31% to 50% of Area Median (\$)	51% to 80% of Area Median (\$)
1	15,300	24,450	40,700
2	17,450	29,050	46,500
3	21,720	32,700	52,300
4	26,200	36,300	58,100
5	30,680	39,250	62,750
6	35,160	42,150	67,400
7	39,640	45,050	72,050
8	44,120	47,950	76,700

Data Source: <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il/il2020/2020summary.odn>

Priority Assistance

Renter households that qualify as very low income (less than 50% AMI) and/or households in which one or more member is unemployed and has been unemployed for 90 days will be given priority. The program will disburse funds on a rolling weekly basis. At the time of disbursement, recipients that are very low income and/or households in which one or more member is unemployed and has been unemployed for 90 days will have their funds disbursed first. Remaining funds will then be disbursed to qualified low income applicants.

Implementation Procedures

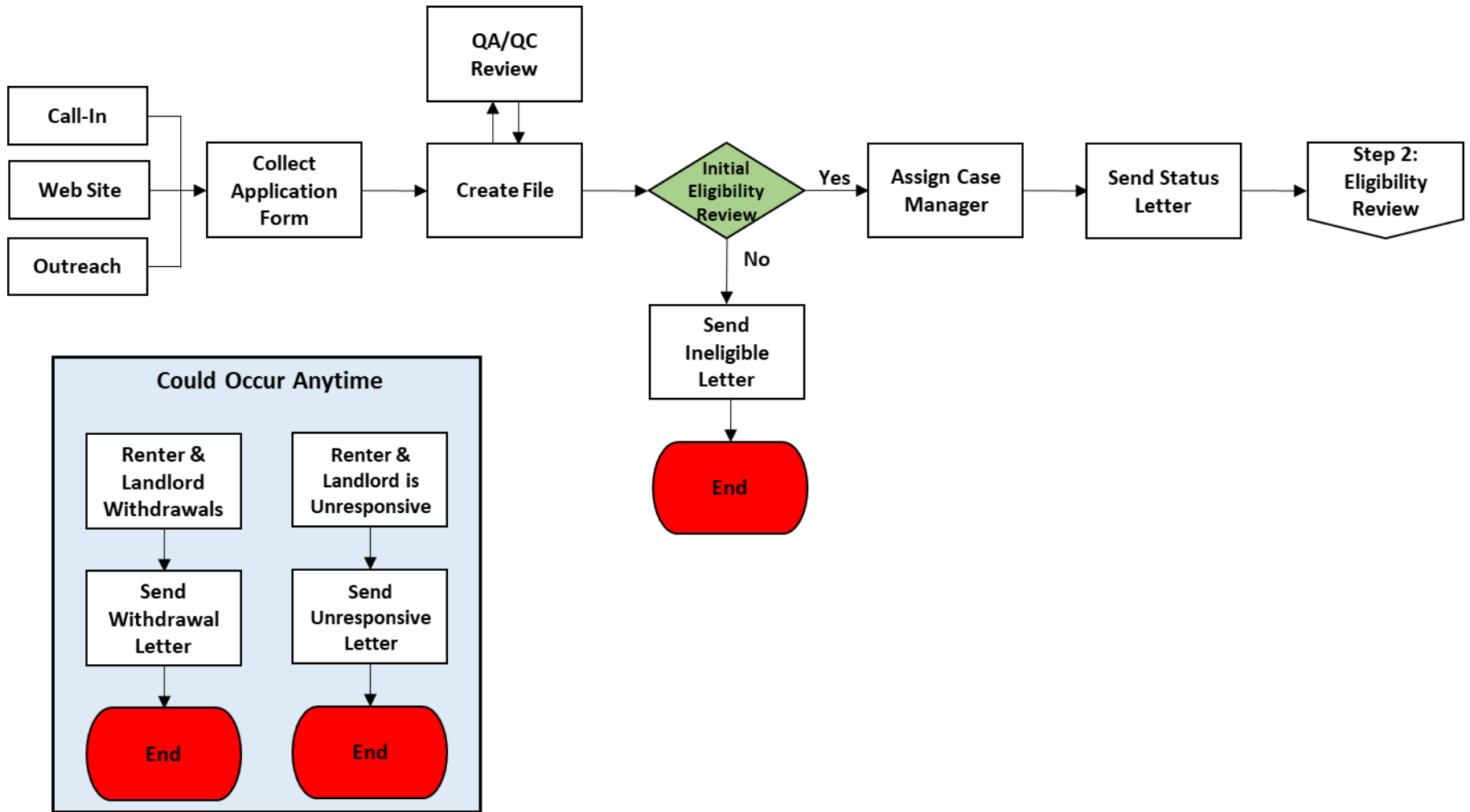
Richland County recognizes the immediacy of the COVID-19 crisis and will automate as much of the ERA program as possible. This will help ensure eligible applicants receive the assistance they need as promptly as possible.

Richland County will identify and utilize the appropriate information management system, which will provide efficiency and effectiveness in both application processing, and compliance with all federal/state/local program regulatory requisites.

Prior to starting the intake phase of the program, Richland County will develop and implement a public information campaign to notify and educate potential applicants that a program exists, the eligibility requirements, and how and when County residents and their landlords can apply.

Richland County will follow a three-step process to implement the program:

Step 1: Intake



Intake Policy

The purpose of the intake phase is to collect applications, required documents, and forms from applicants (tenants and landlords). The full intake phase will allow for the applicant to submit all required and relevant documentation to establish eligibility for funding and determine an award amount. Once an applicant has submitted all required documentation and forms, a case manager will be assigned to the application and a confirmation notice will be sent to the applicant. Intake specialists will respond to inquiries and assist applicants with completion of the applications either via phone, email, and if necessary, regular mail.

The ERA program will include safeguards for the protection of personally identifiable information (PII) for all applicants. All staff members who process application information are trained in dealing with PII. Applications, documents, and forms will be stored in the system of record and can only be accessed by staff members.

Procedures

Applicants will be able to submit an application in the following ways:

1. Online on the Richland County website (<http://www.richlandcountysc.gov/>)
 - a. A program & application link will be established on the website.
2. Via phone: A telephone hotline will be established for assistance in submitting an application. The hotline number will be promoted on all outreach efforts.
 - a. The hotline will allow the prospective applicant to speak directly with an intake staff member.

Application Status

All applicant information will be entered into the system at the time of application. Applicant household's initial eligibility for emergency rental assistance will be determined upon first consultation, but the County will not move forward with submission of a completed application until all required information and documents are provided. After the application is complete and submitted, program staff will review application information and provide an eligibility determination as quickly as is practicable. All applicant household's information and supporting documentation will be recorded in the system to demonstrate eligibility/ineligibility for this program.

At any time during the process, if an applicant becomes unresponsive then the intake specialist or eligibility specialist (depending on when the applicant becomes unresponsive) will have the system send an unresponsive letter to the applicant and mark the applicant's file in the system as unresponsive. Unresponsiveness is defined as an applicant not responding to requests for documents, emails and phone calls for a period of three consecutive calendar weeks.

At any time during the process, if an applicant indicates a desire to voluntarily withdraw from the program to the intake specialist or eligibility specialist (depending upon when the applicant indicates their desire to withdraw) will ask the applicant to submit a withdrawal letter (not required, but always good for documentation), have the system send a withdrawal letter, and mark the applicant's file in the system as an applicant voluntary withdrawal from the program.

Richland County will ensure timely communication of application status to those who have submitted applications. An auto-generated notice will be sent to each applicant if the application is incomplete and documents or forms are still needed to be submitted to complete the intake phase. Only after all required documents and forms have been submitted by the applicant will a case manager be assigned to the application to verify program eligibility. At this time, an auto-generated notice will be sent to the applicant that their application is complete and will be reviewed for program eligibility.

While the program application process will be paperless, ERA program personnel in the ERA Center will aid persons who might have difficulty using or accessing the internet with a wide range of methods available.

Initial Eligibility Review

The Richland County information management system, will conduct an automatic review of the application and ensure applicant is in preliminary compliance with the following:

- Rental location is within the geographical boundaries of Richland County.
- Self-reported income is within program eligibility limitations.
- Applicant is either a Renter or Landlord of record.
- Applicant provides a copy of current lease agreement or self-attestation in the absence of a lease agreement.
- Applicant certifies they have been financially impacted by COVID-19 which has negatively impacted their ability to make rental and/or utility payments.

An approved applicant file shall contain all submitted information and documentation necessary to meet all required eligibility criteria and contain completed forms, documentation, and necessary information for all members of an applicant household. Once the verification process is completed and if basic applicant eligibility is established, the Lead Eligibility Specialist will approve the pre-application in the Richland County Information System and an email will be generated to the applicant. This email will notify the applicant of their initial eligibility and include:

1. Applicant Username.
2. Temporary Password.
3. Website link to their specific application.
4. The program hotline number and any associated program personnel identification.
5. The Program Manager's contact information:
 - Michael King – 803-731-8363 - King.Michael@richlandcountysc.gov

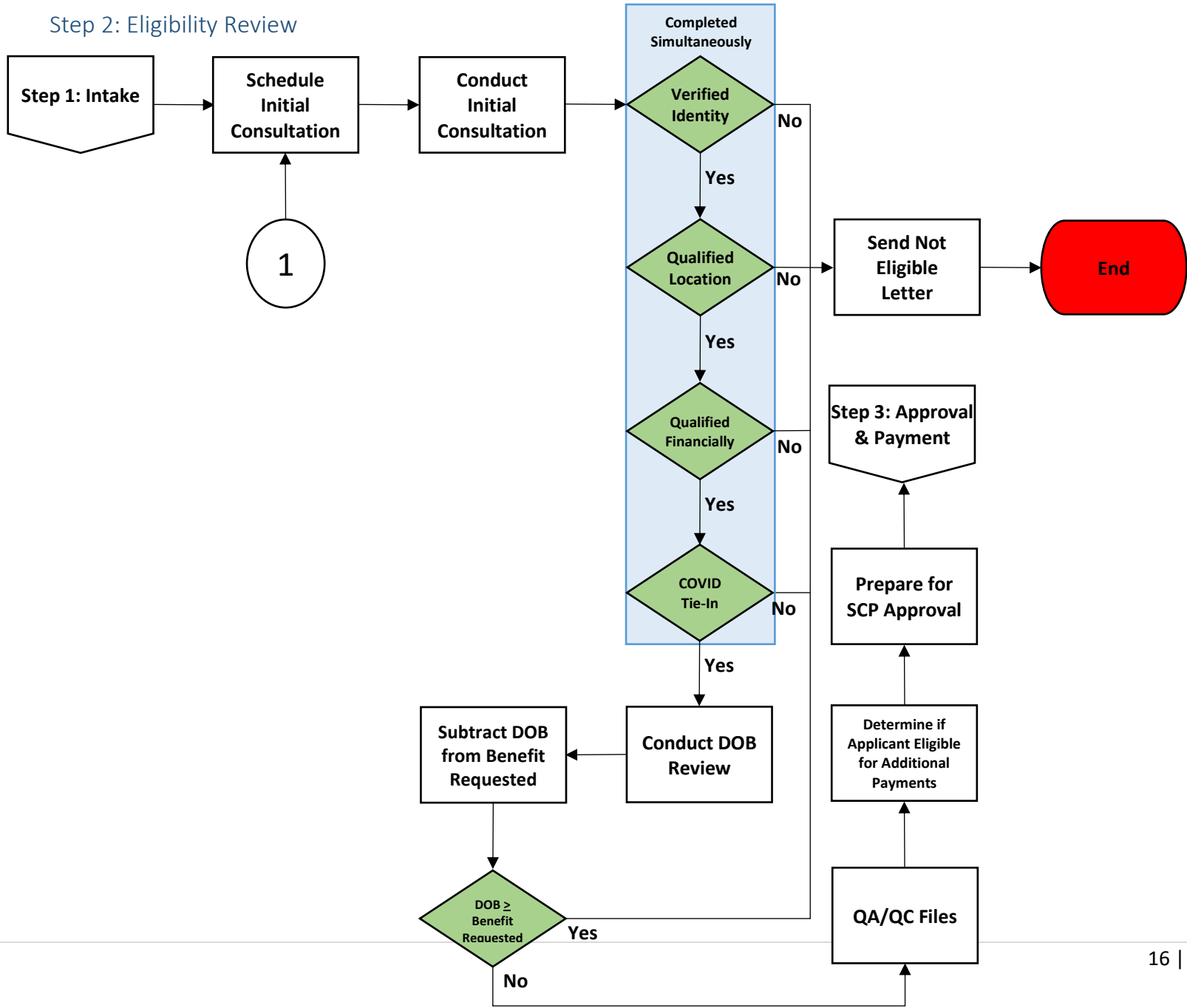
If the applicant does not have email and/or internet access, program personnel will contact the applicant at the phone number(s) they provided and will provide documentation with the above-mentioned information follow-up via U.S. Mail.

Applicants who do not qualify for assistance will be notified via phone at the number(s) they provided and will be sent a follow-up denial letter via U.S. Mail, which will cite the specific basis for the denial.

- a) A denied applicant system file shall contain all submitted information and documentation, as well as the reason for denial (ex: over income limits, incomplete information, reside outside Richland County).

- b) The denial letter will also provide the applicant the process for appealing the denial and any other available information regarding additional and/or supplemental assistance resources.

Step 2: Eligibility Review



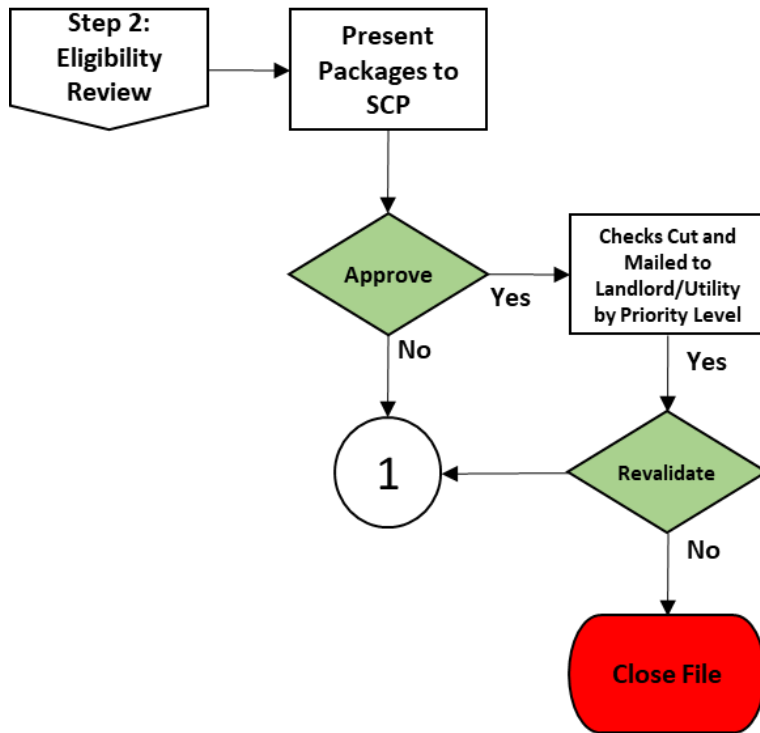
This section outlines the procedure to apply the eligibility requirements from the CAA as laid out in the statute and in the eligibility section of this document.

The following are threshold requirements, which must be met in order for an applicant to be eligible for assistance. Eligibility does not assure assistance, since it is expected that there will be more eligible applicants than can be served with available funds. In each given week that funds are not available to serve all eligible applicants, renter households that qualify as very low income (less than 50% AMI) and/or households in which one or more member is unemployed and has been unemployed for 90 days will have their funds disbursed first.

Eligibility Review Procedure

1. After the initial eligibility review is completed, the assigned case manager will begin the formal eligibility review process:
2. During the formal eligibility review process the case manager will verify:
 - a. Identity of applicant;
 - b. Eligible location of residence;
 - c. Income Qualification; and
 - d. Negative Impact from COVID-19.
3. Applicants who do not qualify for assistance after the formal eligibility review process will be notified via email or mail which will cite the specific basis for the denial.
 - a. The denial letter will also provide the applicant the process for appealing the denial and any other available information regarding additional and/or supplemental assistance resources.
4. After eligibility is verified, case manager will conduct a duplication of benefits analysis, based on self-certifications from the applicant.
 - a. Once the duplication of benefits analysis is completed and the applicant still has identified unmet needs, the case manager will recommend the applicant for approval and will identify the eligible amount for rent and for each eligible utility.
 - b. The case manager will mark the file for revalidation in 2.5 months until the applicant reaches their 12-month payment limit.
 - c. If the applicant reaches their 12-month payment limit, the case manager can recommend an additional three months of payments if the case manager can verify that not extending the rental assistance by three additional months would cause a housing instability for the household.
5. The file is then reviewed by the case manager's team leader, verified, and submitted for approval by the SCP.
6. The Eligibility Manager will prepare and maintain an up to date project spreadsheet which will provide information on all applications recommended for SCP review and approval. The Eligibility Manager will ensure the spreadsheet does not contain applicant PII prior to submission to the SCP for batch approval.

Step 3: Approval and Payment



Payment Procedure

1. The SCP will review the spreadsheet submitted for approval. The spreadsheet will contain:
 - a. Case number;
 - b. Verified size of Household;
 - c. Verified household Income;
 - d. Level of income;
 - e. If the household has one or more members is unemployed and has been unemployed for 90 days;
 - f. Negative impact from COVID;
 - g. Amount of rental assistance;
 - h. Amount of utility assistance;
 - i. Duplication of Benefits findings; and
 - j. Combined number of months of assistance provided.
2. The SCP will approve or disapprove each application. The SCP may batch approve if no objection is raised by a member of the SCP.
3. For those applications not approved by the SCP, the application will go back to the case manager to address whatever issues the SCP raised.
4. For those applications approved, the spreadsheet will go back to the Eligibility Manager. The Eligibility Manager will provide the required data to the Richland County Finance Department in order for checks to be issued to the respective landlords and utilities. The Eligibility Manager will submit the spreadsheet with a completed request for payment form to Richland County Budget and Grants Management for payment by the County.

Each week, Richland County Finance will provide the Eligibility Manager with a list of the payments made on behalf of the household and to whom the payment was made.

Program Oversight

Oversight Committee Policy

The Richland County ERA Program Oversight Committee will provide policy and overall program oversight of the Richland County ERA Program.

The Oversight Committee will review the following:

- Any proposed changes to the ERA Program Policy & Procedures (P&P) Manual;
- Any matter that must go to the County Administrator or Council to include contracts and change orders;
- Any appeals from actions taken by the Special Case Panel (SCP); and
- Program status reports.

Policy Scope

This policy is applicable to all ongoing activities of Richland County ERA Program as detailed in ERA P&P Manual Guidebook.

Procedures

The Oversight Committee will consist of an Assistant County Administrator (Chair), the County Ombudsman, and the Richland County Legislative Coordinator. It will meet as the chair requires.

Special Case Panel Policy

The Richland County ERA Program will consider and respond to citizen concerns, suggestions, requests and other issues pertaining to its ERA program by using a Special Case Panel (SCP).

The SCP must review the following:

- Any requested action outside of the current policies and procedures;
- Approvals of applications recommended for approval by the eligibility manager.

Policy Scope

This policy is applicable to all ongoing activities of Richland County ERA Program as detailed in the Richland County ERA Program Policy & Procedures Manual.

Procedures

The SCP will consist of the Director of Community Planning & Development (Chair), the Local Disaster Recovery Manager (LDRM), and the Director of GCS. It will follow the process detailed in ERA Citizen Concerns, Requests, Suggestions, and Appeals Policy. As stated in ERA Program Citizen Concerns, Requests, Suggestions, and Appeals Policy, a decision memorandum or equivalent will set forth the Panel's findings on each matter it considers.

Appeals

Richland County will utilize the model established for the Advisory Committee and the Special Case Panel for the ERA Programs as is utilized for the Richland County CDBG-DR program for Appeals.

Citizen Concerns, Requests, Suggestions, and Appeals Policy

During the activities of the ERA Program, many decisions will be made involving each application. These decisions will be made based on Richland County's interpretation of:

1. Applicable federal and state statutes,
2. The Code of Federal Regulations,
3. State and local codes and ordinances,
4. Local guidelines, and
5. The Richland County ERA Program Policies & Procedures Manual.

During these Program activities and decisions, it is possible that citizens may wish to present a concern, suggestion or request related to the Program and/or one or more of its decisions. In addition, once they receive a response to their issue, they may believe they have a legitimate reason to appeal that response. To allow for such circumstances, Richland County will allow citizens to submit their issues for consideration through the SCP. The aim of the County will be to always attempt to resolve such issues in a manner that is both sensitive to the citizen's needs and achieves a result fully compliant with all applicable laws, regulations, and local codes and ordinances. The goal of the County and SCP are to provide:

1. An opportunity for citizens to receive a response to and/or resolve their issues in a timely manner, usually within fifteen (15) business days, if feasible, and
2. The right for citizens who participate in this process to appeal adverse program decisions, which involve:
 - a. An eligibility and/or priority determination or
 - b. Special circumstances where citizens have a demonstrable hardship.

Citizens may submit a written concern, suggestion, appeal or request by email at

King.Michael@richlandcountysc.gov or by postal mail to: Richland County Disaster Recovery, Assistant Director King, 1410 Laurens Street, Columbia, SC 29204.

A citizen's right and process for appealing a response will be provided in a written response to each citizen who submits a concern, suggestion, or request.

Policy Scope

This policy is applicable to all ongoing activities of Richland County ERA Program as detailed in this Policy and Procedure Manual.

Procedures

The procedures for this policy are as follows:

1. Notice of citizen's right to convey a concern, suggestion, or request; the right to appeal a decision response; and the process for conveying a concern, suggestion or request, or starting an appeal, will be made available to all citizen applicants of the ERA Program, and posted on the website.
2. The SCP will consist of the Director of Community Planning & Development (Chair), the Local Disaster Recovery Manager (LDRM), and the Director of GCS;
3. Citizens may choose to convey their concerns, suggestions, and requests:

- a. Informally through a verbal conversation with their case manager, or
- b. Formerly using a written or electronic document, which is emailed or postal mailed to the ERA Program.

Complaints/Concerns/Suggestions/Requests may be submitted in the following ways:

Mail:

Richland County Disaster Recovery
 Attn: Assistant Director King
 1410 Laurens Street
 Columbia, SC 29204

Email: King.Michael@richlandcountysc.gov

Phone: 803-731-8362

- 4. The ERA Program Manager will review all concerns, suggestions, requests, and appeals and decide if the issue can be resolved without further scrutiny or if it should be escalated to the SCP.
- 5. The SCP will receive and review all citizen concerns, suggestions, and requests forwarded by the ERA Program Manager at its weekly meeting at the Richland County Administration Building.
- 6. The SCP will attempt to resolve each citizen’s issue and/or provide them with a decision response in a timely manner, usually within fifteen (15) business days of hearing the issue, if feasible.
- 7. When considering citizen concerns, suggestions and requests, the SCP will utilize the following process:
 - a. All SCP members will review information provided by each citizen to ensure they fully understand all aspects of the citizen’s issue and viewpoints;
 - b. All SCP members will review all policies, if any, relevant to the citizen’s issue and viewpoints and any other related information provided by the ERA Program Manager;
 - c. The SCP will meet to weigh each citizen’s issue, viewpoints, policy implications, the ERA Program Manager and Legal Counsel’s analysis, if any, and make a decision by majority vote;
 - d. The ERA Program Manager or designee will document each SCP meeting, decision and rationale in a Decision Memorandum and send it to the Community Planning & Development Director for his review and approval; and
 - e. Once the SCP decision has been approved, the ERA Program Manager or designee will communicate the decision in a response to each citizen, inform them of their right to appeal, and fully explain the appeal process.
- 8. Citizens will be informed that they have the right to appeal the decision of the SCP if they have reason to believe their case was not handled according to applicable law, regulations, Program policy or if they have new information, which has an impact on the case. This appeal should be sent to the ERA Program Manager via email or postal mail using the same communication information provided above within 10 business days of the date of denial. The ERA Program Manager will forward all appeals and the associated case folders to the ERA Oversight Committee. The goal of the ERA Oversight Committee will be to decide on the appeal and respond to the citizen in a timely manner, usually within fifteen (15) business days of receipt of the appeal, if feasible.
 - a. The ERA Oversight Committee will consist of an Assistant County Administrator (Chair), the County Ombudsman, and the Richland County Legislative Coordinator.
- 9. The ERA Oversight Committee’s decision is final.

10. The ERA Program Manager and/or assignee will maintain case files on all citizen concerns, suggestions, and requests to include the date input was received/case opened, citizen name, input summary, follow up activities, a reference to the Decision Memorandum for the case and the date the case was closed.

Disclosures

Conflict of Interest

No COVID-19 ERA funding will be provided to any member of the governing body of Richland County, nor any designee of the County or the operating agency who is in a decision making capacity in connection with the administration of this program; no member of the above organizations shall have any interest, direct or indirect, in the proceeds from a grant from this program.