

# **A COMPARISON OF STATE HOUSING LOCATOR WEB SITES**

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## **I. Introduction and Summary of Findings**

A number of states have developed rental housing locators that allow online searches for affordable housing units. These sites range from bare-bones databases of state-financed developments to elaborate sites with multiple search criteria, extensive information about accessibility for persons with disabilities, current vacancy information, and links to local service agencies.

In 2004, the Florida Housing Finance Corporation engaged the Shimberg Center for Affordable Housing to review housing locator sites in preparation for development of a locator site for Florida. Florida Housing has a particular interest in providing information about affordable, accessible housing for persons with disabilities.

Through review of locator sites throughout the country, interviews with site administrators, and interviews with staff of agencies providing services to the elderly and persons with disabilities in Florida, the Shimberg Center developed this discussion of the following topics:

- Priority features to be included in a locator site, including information about housing accessibility.
- Comparisons of the types of housing and features included in the sites reviewed.
- Software development arrangements, including an exploration of off-the-shelf and subscription services available.
- Maintenance arrangements, including site hosting, receiving and updating unit information, and help desk functions.
- Techniques for marketing the housing locator to property owners and managers as well as to consumers and service agencies.

### ***Methods***

The Shimberg Center compiled a list of 24 housing locator Web sites around the country. Most of the sites provide state-level inventories of affordable rental housing, although some provide local or multi-state housing searches. Of these, 16 sites are currently operating and include information about housing accessibility as well as affordability. Table 1 below lists the sites that became the sample for the study:

**Table 1. Housing Locator Sites Reviewed**

State/Agency	URL
Georgia	<a href="http://www.rentalaccessnetwork.org">http://www.rentalaccessnetwork.org</a>
Kentucky	<a href="http://www.kyrents.org">http://www.kyrents.org</a>
Maine	<a href="http://www.adaptedhome.org">http://www.adaptedhome.org</a>
Massachusetts	<a href="http://www.massaccesshousingregistry.org">http://www.massaccesshousingregistry.org</a>
Minnesota (Minneapolis/St. Paul Metro)	<a href="http://www.housinglink.org">http://www.housinglink.org</a>
National Accessible Apartment Clearinghouse (NAAC)	<a href="http://www.naahq.org/naac/naac_search.htm">http://www.naahq.org/naac/naac_search.htm</a>
Nebraska	<a href="http://www.nifa.org/customers/project_listings.html">http://www.nifa.org/customers/project_listings.html</a>
New Mexico	<a href="http://www.housingnm.org/Secured/AffordableRentals/Search/HomePagePublic.htm">http://www.housingnm.org/Secured/AffordableRentals/Search/HomePagePublic.htm</a>
New York State	<a href="http://www.dhcr.state.ny.us/ahd">http://www.dhcr.state.ny.us/ahd</a>
Oregon (Portland Metro)	<a href="http://www.housingconnections.org">http://www.housingconnections.org</a>
Socialserve.com (AZ, NC, CO, KS, MO)	<a href="http://www.socialserve.com">http://www.socialserve.com</a>
South Dakota	<a href="http://www.sdhda.org/rent/index.html">http://www.sdhda.org/rent/index.html</a>
Texas	<a href="http://spot.tdhca.state.tx.us/pub/t_cd_hsr.hsr_unit_rpt_options">http://spot.tdhca.state.tx.us/pub/t_cd_hsr.hsr_unit_rpt_options</a>
Utah	<a href="http://webapps.dced.state.ut.us/shod/">http://webapps.dced.state.ut.us/shod/</a>
Vermont	<a href="http://www.housingdata.org/doarh/index.php">http://www.housingdata.org/doarh/index.php</a>
Washington	<a href="http://aptfinder.org/cgi-bin/index.pl">http://aptfinder.org/cgi-bin/index.pl</a>

We then developed comparisons of the types of rental housing inventory (state-subsidized, market-rate, and so forth), site features, and development and hosting arrangements for the sample sites. These comparisons can be found throughout this report. An annotated list of the sites, including staff contact information, is attached as Appendix 1.

Next, we conducted phone interviews of nine individuals who work directly with consumers of affordable and accessible housing to determine the housing locator features that their clients would find most useful. Interviewees included:

- Scott Marcelais, Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology (FAAST)
- Dan Moore, Ability First (Center for Independent Living of North Florida)
- Janice Wise and Lisa Brett, Area Agency of Aging for North Florida
- Sheila Salyer, Tallahassee Senior Center
- Douglas Towne, Disability Relations Group
- Dan Newman, Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Program
- Edi Erb, Mental Health Care, Inc.
- Peter Bishop, Florida Alliance for Information and Referral Services (FLAIRS)

A copy of the interview questions is attached as Appendix 2.

We also conducted phone interviews of the administrators of the locator sites. In most cases, these were staff members of state agencies or non-profit organizations providing locator sites. We incorporated information from earlier interviews performed by Florida Housing staff, although in most cases we re-contacted agency staff for further information. In all, the interviews covered 14 of the 16 sample sites. Staff from the remaining two sites did not respond to requests for information. A copy of the interview questions is attached as Appendix 3.

Finally, we tested the currency of the six sites that purport to offer searches for available units by calling leasing agents for 4-5 listed units on each site. For each, we asked whether the listed units were still available. Where possible, we also determined whether the leasing agent was familiar with the locator site.

### ***Summary of Major Findings***

- *Site Features:* The Florida service providers we interviewed would like a locator site to provide detailed unit information focused on their clients' financial and accessibility needs. They rank information about rents, Section 8 acceptance, proximity to public transit, target population, and move-in costs as the top priorities for locator database fields. They place less priority on current vacancy information.
- *Accessibility:* Sites that provide detailed information about the accessibility features of the housing units are far more useful to consumers than those providing a simple "accessible/not accessible" designation. This is true both because individual consumers need information about different accessibility features and because there is no single agreed-upon definition of "accessible."
- *Current Vacancy Information:* Sites including current listings of vacant units are difficult for states to maintain, although some of the more elaborate sites available as subscription services to states do provide accurate vacancy listings. In order to maintain current information, sites should include mechanisms for online listing of units, automated reminders to property managers to update information, and purging of dated listings.
- *Rental Housing Inventory Included:* Most locator sites do not include the complete inventory of subsidized housing in the state. Instead, they list units for which property managers have submitted information voluntarily. Those sites that do include a full

inventory of subsidized units derive their data from funders' development and compliance records rather than from individual property managers. These sites offer fewer consumer-oriented details about unit amenities and accessibility, since these details are not tracked in funders' records.

- *Development and Hosting Options:* Most housing locator sites fall into two categories: 1) basic, searchable databases of subsidized housing, developed and hosted in-house, or 2) subscription services developed and hosted by outside companies that provide extensive unit details and current vacancy information about subsidized and private-market housing.

We recommend that Florida Housing consider a relationship with one of the major subscription services, Socialserve.com, if it is interested in developing a site with current vacancy information. One Economy's Beehive system might provide a less costly, adequate alternative if the system is upgraded to include more accessibility information and authentication features. The other subscription services either provided inadequate site features or were too expensive. Likewise, developing and maintaining a current vacancy system in-house would be time-consuming and expensive.

If current vacancy information is less important, we recommend building a more static database of housing units based on the Shimberg Center's existing Affordable Housing Inventory (AHI) and augmented by voluntary submission of information about unit rents, amenities, and accessibility from property managers.

- *Marketing:* States have not had difficulty convincing landlords to participate in the locator services. Through mailings and presentations, they market their locators as a free listing service that helps landlords find qualified tenants and, in particular, to fill the accessible units they have been required to build. Several states use their ongoing communications with property managers, such as compliance workshops or mailings, as opportunities to publicize their locator sites. Marketing of the sites to consumers and service providers tends to be less formal, with several states simply placing a link to the locator on their agency home pages or including the service in agency brochures.

These findings are discussed in more detail below.

## II. Site Features

To provide useful information, a housing locator site must offer *search* features that allow users to narrow their housing requests and *results* features that list more information about the units identified by the search. Based on reviews of comparable sites and interviews with service providers, we identified five features that make up a minimum threshold for any locator site:

1. The ability to search for units at a geographic level below the entire state.
2. Street address of the development in the results.
3. Information about the number of bedrooms in each unit, either as a search field or in the results.
4. Information about the accessibility of the unit as a search field or in the results. In the sites reviewed, this ranged from a yes/no “accessible” designation to a detailed list of features each unit provides.
5. Contact information for leasing agent, with phone number and, if possible, e-mail.

Taking these features as a given for Florida’s locator site, we asked service providers about their priorities for other features on the site, outside of accessibility information. They ranked suggested features as follows:

### ***High Priority: Essential To Have***

- Search by city, county, and possibly zip code.
- Unit rents, either in dollar amounts or as a percentage of tenant income; should appear as search field or in results.
- Whether the property accepts Section 8 vouchers, in search or results.
- Proximity to public transit, in results.
- Target population, such as elderly or farmworkers, in search or results.
- Utilities included in rent, in results.
- Move-in costs, such as security deposits and application fees, in results.

### ***Medium Priority: Helpful, But Not Essential***

- Maximum income restrictions on the unit, in search or results.

- Unit description other than the number of bedrooms, such as flooring and square footage, in results.
- Development amenities, such as laundry, pool, or pet policies, in results.
- Neighborhood amenities, such as schools and shopping, in results.

### ***Low Priority: Less Helpful***

- Current vacancy and waitlist status for units.
- Street map of development location.
- Funding programs involved in development; while this might be of interest to policymakers and some providers, it is not of interest to consumers.
- Ability to search for a particular development by name or address.

All of the locator sites in the sample include at least some of the high- and medium-priority items, although only the most elaborate sites include most of them. Table 2 on the following page shows the features included on each site. Sites are listed in order by the number of high- and medium-priority site features they include.



**Table 2. Site Features of Housing Locators**

State/Agency	High-Priority Features							Medium-Priority Features				Total Number of Priority Features
	Search by City or County	Rent in Dollars or Income Percentage	Accept Section 8 Vouchers?	Proximity to Transit	Target Population	Utilities Included	Move-in Costs	Income Restrictions	Unit Description	Development Amenities	Neighborhood Amenities	
Oregon	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	10
Socialserve.com	x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	9
Minnesota	x		x	x		x	x			x	x	7
Kentucky	x	x				x			x	x	x	6
Washington	x	x	x			x		x				5
New Mexico	x	x	x			x						4
Maine	x	x				x						3
Texas	x	x				x						3
Utah	x					x		x				3
Georgia	x	x										2
NAAC	x	x										2
South Dakota	x	x										2
Massachusetts	x			x								2
Vermont	x				x							2
New York State	x											1
Nebraska	x											1

If Florida Housing were to create its own site, one way to accommodate these multiple priorities without overcomplicating the site would be to offer “basic” and “advanced” search options. For example, the search function could include these options:

- A basic search form allowing the user to search by county, city, number of bedrooms, and rent range in dollars.
- An advanced search form with the basic fields plus zip code, acceptance of Section 8 vouchers, and target population.
- Results with all of the fields offered in the basic and advanced searches plus proximity to transit, utilities, move-in costs, and some or all of the medium-priority fields.

See sites by Socialserve.com (<http://www.socialserve.com>) and New Mexico (<http://www.housingnm.org/Secured/AffordableRentals/Search/QuickSearch.aspx>) for examples of basic and advanced search options.

### **III. Accessibility Information Features**

Nearly all of the sites reviewed provide some information about unit accessibility for people with disabilities. However, more than half simply designate a unit as accessible or not. Service providers indicated that a simple “yes/no” to this question is inadequate, both because individual consumers need different features and because there is no single agreed-upon definition of “accessible.”

Instead, we recommend providing information about specific accessibility features for each unit or development. Sites that did provide this more detailed information took two approaches:

1. Designate accessibility levels, with detailed definitions for each. For example, Oregon’s Housing Connections site lists an accessibility designation for each unit: “fully,” “mostly,” “partially,” “possibly adaptable,” “accessible to visitors,” or “none required.” Users can search their searches to units with a particular designation. For full definitions for each level, go to <http://www.housingconnections.org/Search.cfm> and click the “How are accessibility levels defined?” link in the middle of the screen.
2. List individual accessibility features in the search or results. For example, Georgia’s Rental Access Network site lists 17 features by which users can search, ranging from

“Zero Step Entrance” to “Low Vanities in Bathroom with 27” Knee Space.” For a full listing of features on the Georgia site, go to

<http://www.rentalaccessnetwork.org/accessiblesearch.asp?county=&city=&zip=&elderly=no>.

The Florida service providers interviewed indicated that listing these features in the search or results would be helpful:

- Wheelchair access, with a detailed definition of features this involves
- Roll-in shower
- Grab bars
- Low kitchen and bathroom cabinets
- Door widths
- Elevator or ground floor access

Finally, the locator site itself must be accessible to people with disabilities, particularly for people with visual impairments. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), an international project to develop uniform Web standards, provides guidelines for the development of accessible sites. See <http://www.w3.org/WAI/>. The state’s Division of Blind Services and the Real Choice Partnership may be able to assist in developing the site appropriately. See <http://www.myflorida.com/myflorida/accessibility.html> for the state’s policy and resources for creating accessible Web sites.

#### **IV. Current Vacancy Information**

A major decision in the design of a housing locator is whether the site will track vacancies. Surprisingly, the Florida service providers interviewed generally were lukewarm to the idea of a current vacancy search. Most felt that such a function could be useful but were skeptical that vacancy information could be kept current enough to provide an accurate listing of consumers’ choices. They felt that an inaccurate listing was worse than no vacancy information at all, and they placed more importance on narrowing search results to those meeting their clients’ rent and accessibility requirements.

In fact, some providers felt that searches for vacant units only would be too limiting. They argued that consumers sometimes start housing searches months before they need the unit

and that at times contact with a property manager might reveal units or waiting lists that are not “officially” open.

Of the sites reviewed, nearly half include current vacancy information.

**Table 3. Vacancy Information Included**

Vacancy Information	No Vacancy Information
Kentucky Maine Massachusetts New Mexico Oregon Socialserve.com Utah	Georgia Minnesota NAAC Nebraska New York State South Dakota Texas Vermont Washington

To determine how well this feature works, we contacted a sample of 4-5 complexes to see whether listed apartments were actually available. We found that sampled listings for the Housing Connections, Socialserve.com, and Mass Access sites were largely up to date. The Kentucky Rents site had more mixed results, with some apartments not actually available or with a waiting list. The New Mexico, Maine, and Utah sites all contained inaccurate vacancy information. The Utah site contained a number of listings with “last updated” dates before 2004, while the New Mexico and Maine sites listed units as vacant that are actually occupied.

A key to developing an accurate vacancy listing system is a built-in mechanism reminding or requiring landlords to update their listings. For example, Portland’s Housing Connections site sends an automatic weekly e-mail reminder to landlords with properties listed and a monthly reminder to landlords without current listings. Vacancy listings carry an end date, and the listing automatically expires on that date if not updated by the landlord. In contrast, New Mexico’s site depends on landlords to send updated information for manual input. The state does not expect that availability information is updated regularly and is looking into adding an online data input form for landlords to make listings more current.

Finally, while only a few sites now have true vacancy information available, this may change. Several site administrators indicated that they would like to add vacancy information as the next logical step in updating their sites. The subscription services that offer this option are

actively seeking new states to participate. Therefore, current vacancy information may eventually become the norm for housing locator sites.

## V. Rental Housing Inventory Included

Defining the inventory to be included in a housing locator entails answering two questions:

1. *Will all rental housing be included, all subsidized units, or only state-subsidized units?*

About half of the locator sites reviewed include any rental housing, whether subsidized or not, as long as it meets designated affordability or accessibility requirements. Four others include any state- or federally-subsidized housing. Three others include only developments subsidized or monitored by the state housing finance agency. Table 4 below lists the types of housing included in each locator site.

2. *Will the site include all units in these categories, or will it rely on voluntary participation of a subset of property owners whose units fit these categories?*

Most sites rely on voluntary participation. Five of the systems allow any landlord with housing meeting affordability or accessibility requirements to list their units, including private-market housing without subsidies. These include the locator subscription services: Socialserve.com, the Beehive, and HousingPoint.<sup>1</sup> Four other sites call for voluntary listing of subsidized units only. In either case, voluntary listing allows property managers to submit detailed unit information that might be of particular interest to consumers, such as accessibility features and amenities.

Four sites do include complete inventories, either of state-financed units or of all subsidized rental housing in the state. These sites rely on information from funders or from state compliance monitoring to populate and update their databases. That is, none of these sites require all property owners with subsidized housing to submit data about their properties specifically for a locator site.<sup>2</sup> Because funders' development and compliance records usually do not contain extensive details about unit accessibility and amenities,

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<sup>1</sup> HousingPoint is the commercial name of the software developed by the city of Portland, Oregon for its Housing Connections Web site. In this paper, the term "HousingPoint" refers to the software and subscription service available to other states for purchase, while "Housing Connections" refers specifically to Portland's Web site.

<sup>2</sup> The Arizona Department of Housing does require all owners of projects receiving financing from the state as of July 1, 2004 to participate in Socialserve.com. This requirement does not apply retroactively to older projects or to projects without state subsidy.

these sites include less consumer-oriented information than those based on voluntary listings by property managers.

Finally, the Mass Access site (<http://www.massaccesshousingregistry.org>) requires participation from all public and private landlords with accessible units. This participation is mandated by law, although even then the site does not reach full landlord participation. The site also includes an inventory of all subsidized housing, both accessible and non-accessible units.

**Table 4. Rental Housing Inventory Description**

<b>State/Agency</b>	<b>Type of Participation</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Housing Included</b>
Kentucky	Voluntary	Property Management	Any private market or subsidized
Maine	Voluntary	Property Management	Any private market or subsidized
Massachusetts	All	Property Management	All subsidized; private market accessible
Minnesota	Voluntary	Property Management	Any subsidized
NAAC	Voluntary	Property Management	Any private market or subsidized
Nebraska	All	Funders	All subsidized
New Mexico	Voluntary	Property Management	Any subsidized, including private accepting Section 8 vouchers
New York State	All	Development Records	State-subsidized through 5 programs only
Oregon	Voluntary	Property Management	Any private market or subsidized affordable at 80% AMI or below
Socialserve.com	Voluntary	Property Management	Depends on client; generally any private market or subsidized
South Dakota	Voluntary	Property Management	State-subsidized or -monitored; includes HUD units
Texas	All	Compliance Records	State-subsidized
Vermont	All	Funders/Property Management	All subsidized
Washington	Voluntary	Property Management	Any subsidized, including private accepting Section 8 vouchers

Florida Housing has suggested that its locator site include all subsidized housing units in the state. Based on the Shimberg Center’s Affordable Housing Inventory (AHI), this would

include approximately 2,700 properties with 250,000 units. Two sites reviewed contain similarly complete inventories: Vermont (<http://www.housingdata.org/doarh/index.php>), with 575 properties and Nebraska ([http://www.nifa.org/customers/project\\_listings.html](http://www.nifa.org/customers/project_listings.html)), with 1,245 property listings.<sup>3</sup> Nebraska’s database is based solely on information from funding agencies. Vermont began with an internal list of all subsidized properties, with staff soliciting periodic updates from property managers.

Based on other states’ experiences, a complete inventory of all subsidized properties in Florida with information supplied by individual property managers does not seem feasible. Instead, Florida Housing can choose among three options:

1. A comprehensive inventory of subsidized units with information limited to that which is available from the funding agencies, similar to the current AHL.
2. A less comprehensive but more detailed inventory that consisted solely of properties for which managers voluntarily submit consumer-oriented information.
3. A hybrid of a complete inventory and a voluntary participation site, whereby basic, funder-supplied information is available for all units and additional unit details are available for those properties whose managers submit data.

These options are explored further in the *Development and Hosting Options* section below.

## VI. Development and Hosting Options

We identified two viable models for developing and hosting Florida’s locator site: an in-house or Shimberg Center-built inventory without vacancy information or a subscription service with vacancy information. Examples of each of these types of sites are discussed below.

### ***In-house, “Static” Inventory***

Most of the sites reviewed fall into this category. These sites were developed by state agencies or non-profit agencies operating within a single state. They are “static” sites in that they do not include current vacancy data. Examples include these sites:

- Vermont (<http://www.housingdata.org/doarh/index.php>)
- South Dakota (<http://www.sdhda.org/rent/index.html>)
- Nebraska ([http://www.nifa.org/customers/project\\_listings.html](http://www.nifa.org/customers/project_listings.html))

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<sup>3</sup> A number of these listings appear to be duplicates, so the actual number of properties is likely to be substantially smaller.

- Texas ([http://spot.tdhca.state.tx.us/pub/t\\_cd\\_hsr.hsr\\_unit\\_rpt\\_options](http://spot.tdhca.state.tx.us/pub/t_cd_hsr.hsr_unit_rpt_options))
- Minnesota (<http://www.housinglink.org>)

Most of the static sites reviewed were developed by one agency staff person working with an in-house IT department over a period of one year or less. Estimates of development costs usually ran in the tens of thousands of dollars or less: “In-house staff time only”; “Three months’ in-house staff plus \$10,000 to contract programming staff”; “1 FTE for nine months”; “Less than \$20,000.” For this level of investment, the states have developed basic sites that may include some, but not most, of the priority features and accessibility details desired by Florida’s service providers.

States continue to use in-house resources to host and maintain these sites. Because basic unit information does not change often, maintenance for the static sites is limited once the database is in place. Most of the databases are updated manually by agency staff as they receive new information from funders or from landlords by mail, e-mail, fax, or phone. Most agencies devote less than 1 FTE per year to maintenance, with time usually spent in mailings to landlords requesting information and manual updates. While these sites do not provide a formal help desk for locator users, most provide a phone number or e-mail address for the site administrator if consumers or landlords need assistance.

The Shimberg Center’s existing Affordable Housing Inventory (AHI) is comparable to a static locator site, although it incorporates information about more types of subsidized units and a far larger inventory than most locators. Either in-house Florida Housing staff or the Shimberg Center could build a consumer-oriented locator site with the AHI as a basis. Adding a more consumer-friendly user interface to the AHI would be a first step.

However, the AHI does not include the information about unit rents, accessibility, and amenities that service providers indicated would be useful. Therefore, a next step might be to invite property managers to submit additional unit information via an online form. Under one approach, the AHI would serve as the mailing list to invite participation, but the locator database would consist solely of the properties for which managers choose to submit information. South Dakota’s site (<http://www.sdhda.org/rent/index.html>) provides an example of this approach.

A second approach would be to build a hybrid system that provides basic data from the AHI for all subsidized properties but also gives property managers the opportunity to submit additional unit information. Search results would turn up any properties in the AHI meeting the



user's choices for geography and number of bedrooms, but the names of properties with additional rent, amenities, and accessibility information would appear with a link to full property details. This hybrid approach would enable consumers to find at least basic information about Florida's entire inventory of subsidized housing without limiting the locator fields to the types of data collected by all of the funding agencies.

Note that the hybrid approach for the state of Florida would require more development time and cost than most of the sites reviewed here, for a number of reasons. First, most states do limit their databases to information submitted voluntarily by property managers, as in the first approach, rather than attempting a full inventory of subsidized housing. Second, some state agencies that provide full inventories include only the properties that the states themselves subsidize. The Shimberg Center's experience in developing the AHI has demonstrated that developing and maintaining data from multiple funding agencies requires considerable staff time. Third, the two states that do compile inventories of subsidized housing from multiple funders, Vermont and Nebraska, have much smaller inventories and populations than Florida. Finally, none of the states that provide a comprehensive inventory of subsidized housing employ this hybrid approach; their databases depend solely on funders' records. Florida's site would need to include much more information from property managers than a typical inventory site in order to cover all of the priority features requested by service providers.

Under either approach, building a site without a current vacancy information feature would allow Florida Housing or Shimberg staff to concentrate on keeping basic unit data current and encouraging property managers to submit additional details. Given that most service providers place a higher priority on development features than current vacancy information, such a site could be highly useful to Florida consumers and service providers.

### ***Subscription Service with Current Vacancy Information***

Three subscription services provide housing locators with current vacancy information: Socialserve.com, HousingPoint (commercial version of Oregon's Housing Connections), and the Beehive (source of Kentucky Rents). In addition, New England Index, the company responsible

for the technical aspects of the Mass Access site, offers database development and Web hosting for other states.<sup>4</sup>

These sites invite property managers to submit current vacancy information along with unit details. They generally provide more details in their searches and results than the static sites. The sites are hosted by the subscription service, although HousingPoint also offers the option of in-house hosting by its customers. The housing agency's staff time is largely involved in the beginning of the project, in setting parameters for the site and negotiating a contract with the subscription service. The housing agency also is responsible for marketing the site to landlords and encouraging them to participate. The day-to-day maintenance and updating of the site, however, is performed by the subscription service.

Unlike the static sites, these sites incorporate a more formal help desk to assist landlords and consumers. Socialserve.com offers an English/Spanish toll-free call center for consumers and landlords who prefer to complete transactions by phone, Housing Connections uses Portland's 211 referral line as a call center for consumers, and the Kentucky Housing Corporation plans to establish an in-house help desk for users of the Kentucky Rents site.

Costs to use these services and time to launch site are as follows:

- *Socialserve.com*: The company was reluctant to give an estimate without in-depth discussion of a scope of service. However, a general estimate to provide services for any properties in the state that might want to participate, including private-market properties, ran to \$150,000-180,000 per year. The company indicated that a site including only Florida's inventory of subsidized housing might be much less expensive, more in line with Arizona's costs of \$5,000 to set up service and \$17,000 per year to maintain. Arizona's site covers only state-subsidized units, approximately 600 properties with 32,000 units. It took four months to develop.
- *HousingPoint*: Bowman Internet Systems is the company marketing the software on the city of Portland's behalf. While Bowman would prefer to give a presentation on the software's features before giving an exact price estimate, it did send a "pricing grid" that indicated a one-time licensing fee of \$425,000 and an ongoing yearly

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<sup>4</sup> The remaining subscription service reviewed, the National Affordable Apartment Clearinghouse (NAAC), does not yet offer current vacancy information. While it intends to offer this service via an online update form for landlords, it is too early to tell whether the follow-up with landlords would be sufficient to maintain a current vacancy site.

maintenance fee of \$510,000, far higher than any of the other options for a locator site. It would take 45-60 days to launch the site.

- *The Beehive*: One Economy, the company that administers the Beehive, estimated a cost of \$50,000 to build a locator site and an ongoing cost of \$8,000-12,000 per year to host the site. It would take one month to define site specifications and then two months to build the site.
- *Mass Access*: New England Index charges \$20,000-24,000 to build the initial site and \$3,000-6,000 per year to host and maintain the database, depending on features selected. Mass Access spends \$86,000 per year to market site and input updates. If a state gives clear specifications and does not request non-standard features, New England Index can build the site in two weeks.

Table 5 on the following page provides a comparison of the subscription services.

**Table 5. Comparison of Subscription Services**

	<b>The Beehive (Kentucky Rents)</b>	<b>HousingPoint (Housing Connections)</b>	<b>Socialserve.com</b>	<b>New England INDEX (Mass Access)</b>
<b>URL</b>	www.kyrents.org	www.housingconnections.org; www.wifrontdoorhousing.org	www.socialserve.com	www.massaccesshousingregistry.org
<b>Cost to Subscriber</b>	\$50,000 initial; \$8,000-12,000 per year maintenance	\$425,000 initial; \$510,000 per year maintenance	Depends on extent of inventory; ranges from \$5,000 initial and \$17,000 per year maintenance to \$150,000-180,000 per year	\$20,000-24,000 initial; \$3,000- 6,000/year maintenance
<b>Number of Priority Features<sup>5</sup></b>	6	10	9	2
<b>Accessibility Information</b>	Yes/no accessible designation only	Unit listings include accessibility designation: “fully,” “mostly,” “partially,” “possibly adaptable,” “accessible to visitors,” or “none required.” Site includes detailed definitions of each designation.	Yes/no accessible designation only; will be adding 42 accessibility features fields	Units may be designated as barrier-free or stair-free; amenity information includes roll-in showers, communications devices, transit accessibility, and wheelchair-accessible transportation available
<b>Vacancy Test Results<sup>6</sup></b>	2 of 5 listings available; 1 waitlist only; 1 rented recently	4 of 4 listings available	3 of 4 listings available	4 of 4 listings available
<b>Update Mechanisms</b>	Landlords submit listings online. E-mail reminders to landlords with properties listed. Listings expire after 90 days if not updated.	Landlords submit listings online. Weekly e-mail reminders to landlords with properties listed. Listings expire if not updated based on vacancy end date.	Landlords submit listings online or by phone. E-mail or phone reminders to landlords with properties listed every 10 days.	Online form for listings can be included in software. Mass Access does manual updates based on responses to quarterly mailings to landlords.
<b>Help Desk for Landlords &amp; Renters</b>	Not included in subscription. To be developed by Kentucky Housing.	Not included in subscription. Portland contracts with 211 agencies to provide call center.	English/Spanish toll-free call center included in subscription.	Not included in New England INDEX’s hosting. Site encourages landlords to call CHAPA for assistance and renters to contact local Center for Independent Living.

<sup>5</sup> High- and medium-priority site features identified by Florida service providers. Total of 12 possible. See Table 2.

<sup>6</sup> Results of test calls to property managers with units listed as available.

	<b>The Beehive (Kentucky Rents)</b>	<b>HousingPoint (Housing Connections)</b>	<b>Socialserve.com</b>	<b>New England INDEX (Mass Access)</b>
<b>Other Tools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links to service providers and housing information</li> <li>• Property managers' narrative description of units</li> <li>• Links to information via the Beehive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very detailed search and listings, including property managers' narrative description of units</li> <li>• Password-protected accounts for consumers; can save a list of properties</li> <li>• Maps and photos of units</li> <li>• Housing costs calculator</li> <li>• Links to service providers</li> <li>• Housing news articles</li> <li>• Will be adding waitlist management tool for landlords and on-line rental applications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very detailed search and listings</li> <li>• Links to service providers</li> <li>• Housing costs and moving costs calculators</li> <li>• For-sale housing listings for some states</li> <li>• Maps and photos of units</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Housing-related fact sheets</li> <li>• Links to Centers for Independent Living</li> </ul>

Based on our review of the sites and costs, we recommend that Florida Housing explore a relationship with Socialserve.com and possibly One Economy's Beehive service.

Socialserve.com clearly is the more comprehensive system. It offers much more information about units than the Beehive or Mass Access sites, including nearly all of the high- and medium-priority features listed above. Socialserve.com's site offers a number of other Web-based tools, including links to service providers and housing and moving costs calculators. The company's services include an English/Spanish toll-free call center that can assist renters with housing searches and landlords with submitting vacancies. While the site does not currently provide detailed accessibility information, Socialserve.com plans to add 42 fields with accessibility features to its database. The site includes mechanisms to allow landlords to enter vacancy information online and e-mail and phone reminders from Socialserve.com to update potentially dated information. Finally, Socialserve.com is actively seeking new customers. With one of the largest populations and rental housing inventories in the country, Florida would be a prize account for the company.

While the HousingPoint system is of very high quality and includes nearly all of the high- and medium-priority site features, it is simply too expensive without a drastic reduction in price. The price quoted by Bowman Systems actually exceeds Portland's own costs to develop, maintain, and market the Housing Connections site.

The Beehive site, while far less detailed than Socialserve.com's service, potentially could be upgraded to a higher quality locator site at a lower cost than the alternatives. It also includes an automated, online data entry service for landlords; e-mail reminders to landlords to update unit information; expiration of listings over 90 days old; service provider links; and many unit and development features. The site is easy to use and less cluttered than the more detailed sites. However, the site has several deficits. First, it offers only a "yes/no" accessibility designation. Second, the listings include fewer details than the Socialserve.com listings, including fewer of the priority data fields identified earlier. Third, test calls to unit listings revealed some dated information. If Florida Housing were to pursue a relationship with One Economy, we recommend negotiating upgrades to provide detailed accessibility information, more data fields, and further authentication of vacancy data.

The Mass Access site is more of a "bare-bones" system that offers few of the high- and medium-priority site features. While the initial cost to develop the site might be lower, the site

would not be useful as a locator site without considerable upgrades from the currently available service.

We do not recommend that Florida Housing pursue development of its own current vacancy information system. First, as noted above, many state-level sites that purport to offer current vacancy information do not actually have the resources or the mechanisms in place to keep them updated. Second, building a site that offers both accurate vacancy information and all of the priority features would be very expensive. For example, Portland's Housing Connections, which meets both these criteria, cost \$1 million over five years to build, administer, and market. Software development alone cost \$335,000. Third, with Socialserve.com offering nearly all of the priority features, there is little reason to expect that Florida Housing will want other features that only a custom-built system can accommodate. Finally, given that Florida service providers are not demanding a current vacancy system, it seems unnecessary to build an expensive in-house site with that feature.

## **VII. Marketing the Locator Site**

### ***Landlords and Property Managers***

Any system that requires property managers' input will require marketing to property owners and managers, whether the site is developed in-house or through a subscription service. While the subscription services have mechanisms in place to encourage updates of listings already in the database, it would be Florida Housing's responsibility to encourage landlords to participate in the service at the outset.

In interviews, state agency staff indicated that they had little difficulty convincing landlords to participate in their locator systems. All but one of the sites offers free listings to landlords.<sup>7</sup> Generally, the states market the sites to landlords as a free listing service that helps them to find income-qualified tenants, fill accessible units that they have been required to build under use agreements, and comply with Fair Housing affirmative marketing requirements. If the sites are free and easy to use, the states have found, there is little reason for landlords not to participate.

Techniques to encourage landlord participation in locator sites include the following:

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<sup>7</sup> The site that does charge landlords for listings, Washington's Apartment Finder site, is administered by an association of affordable housing property managers rather than a state agency.

- Mailings to landlords, using the states' compliance mailing lists and membership lists from landlord trade associations.
- Including flyers in public housing authorities' Section 8 payment mailings to private landlords.
- Trade show booths.
- Presentations at conferences and compliance workshops.
- Press releases.

State housing finance agencies are in a good position to promote locator sites because of the ongoing relationships they build with property owners and managers through the development and compliance processes. Florida Housing may wish to use its own contacts with developers and managers as an opportunity to gauge their interest in a free housing listing site before it undertakes development of a locator.

### ***Consumers and Service Providers***

With a well-built and easy-to-use system, the job of marketing a locator site to consumers and service providers is ensuring they know it exists, not convincing them to participate in it. All of the service providers interviewed were enthusiastic about the development of a locator site. Many already keep in-house lists or databases of housing programs in their communities that provide accessible units, and they would be happy to use a more complete and detailed system.

Many housing finance agencies do not do extensive marketing of their locator sites to consumers and providers, relying mostly on links from the agency's home page to direct users to the locator. Those that do market their sites have used the following techniques:

- Posters and brochures in public libraries, the main source of Internet access for low-income consumers.
- Brochures and information to Centers for Independent Living and other service agencies.
- Working with the state's office on disability.
- Mention of the site in general agency marketing materials.
- Trainings and demonstrations for caseworkers and other service agency staff. Portland combines its Housing Connections trainings with training in other Web-based tools for service agencies. All of the trainers are familiar with each other's sites and can train in all of them.



- A housing-related e-mail newsletter to service providers.
- Transit advertisements.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Florida Housing is entering the market for a housing locator at a time when the field is in flux. Many of the states with basic, static sites are interested in upgrading to sites with detailed property information and real-time vacancy listings. The major subscription services are actively seeking new clients and may be willing to make changes and upgrades to their sites to attract new states.

Regardless of which type of site it chooses, Florida is well situated to develop a state-of-the-art locator site. The AHI provides a strong existing base for a detailed static site; it just needs more property details and a consumer-friendly interface. If Florida Housing chooses a subscription service for a site listing vacancies, the state's large population size and rental housing inventory place it in a strong negotiating position with vendors.

## Appendix 1. Directory of Sites Reviewed

- Agency: Kentucky Housing Corporation  
Site Name: Kentucky Rents  
URL: <http://www.kyrents.org>  
Contact: Kim Lyon  
502-564-7630 x 318  
[klyon@kyhousing.org](mailto:klyon@kyhousing.org)
- Cost/Time: \$80,000 to develop full Beehive site; \$17,000 to develop locator site. Site development took six months. \$8-12,000 annual hosting fee. Kentucky Housing will staff a help desk.
- Comments: Site developed and hosted by One Economy as part of Kentucky's "Beehive" site, which provides a variety of types of information to low-income residents. Includes current vacancy listings. Multiple search criteria. Links to service providers.
- Agency: Alpha One (Maine)  
Site Name: Adapted Home  
URL: <http://www.adaptedhome.org>  
Contact: John Nunan  
207-767-2189  
800-640-7200  
[jnunan@alphaonenow.com](mailto:jnunan@alphaonenow.com)
- Cost/Time: Unknown
- Comments: Alpha One is a Center for Independent Living based in Portland, Maine. The site provides a statewide listing service for available accessible apartments; currently only 23 properties listed.
- Agency: Citizens' Housing and Planning Association (Massachusetts)  
Site Name: Mass Access  
URL: <http://www.massaccesshousingregistry.org>  
Contact: Melissa Quirk  
617-742-0820  
800-466-3111  
[mquirk@chapa.org](mailto:mquirk@chapa.org)
- Cost/Time: \$100,000 for initial research and startup, \$86,000 per year to maintain, market and update site. CHAPA devotes .5 FTE, down from 1 FTE, to marketing and manual updates. New England INDEX will build sites for other states for \$20-25,000 upfront cost and \$3-6,000 annual hosting fee.
- Comments: Current vacancy listings for accessible rental units in Massachusetts. All owners of accessible rental units required to participate. Site developed and hosted by New England INDEX. CHAPA responsible for marketing and updating listings. New England INDEX will build and host accessible housing database for other states; contact John Rochford, 781-642-0255.

Agency: HousingLink (Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN metropolitan area)  
Site: HousingLink Online Directory of Subsidized Housing  
URL: <http://www.housinglink.org>  
Contact: Colleen O'Brien  
612-520-9221  
[cgobrien@housinglink.org](mailto:cgobrien@housinglink.org)

Cost/Time: Three months of in-house staff time plus \$10,000 to contractor to develop locator application from existing printed directory. 2004 budget for the Online Directory was \$72,000, including direct and allocated costs, an extensive data update, and \$24,000 for printing costs. Future years' budgets are expected to be lower.

Comments: HousingLink's site provides a number of products similar to a housing locator service. The Online Directory of Subsidized Housing is a voluntary listing database for landlords that does not provide vacancy information. Site also includes a weekly, downloadable list of private market vacancies and an inventory of all subsidized housing in the area. Colleen O'Brien is interested in serving as a contact and information resource for Florida Housing.

Agency: National Apartment Association  
Site: National Accessible Apartment Clearinghouse  
URL: <http://www.forrent.com/naac/naac.html>  
Contact: Barbara Vassallo  
703-518-6141 ext. 106  
[Barbara@naahq.org](mailto:Barbara@naahq.org)

Cost/Time: Cost and time to develop unknown. NAAC plans to charge states \$10-15,000 to subscribe. Site maintained in-house by 2 FTE.

Comments: Nationwide listing service for accessible apartments. Renters can use Web search or call toll-free hotline to receive listings. No current vacancy service available, although will be adding as a field. Starting subscription service for state housing finance agencies, with Virginia as first subscriber.

Agency: Nebraska Investment Finance Authority  
Site: Affordable Rental Housing Developments  
URL: [www.nifa.org/customers/project\\_listings.html](http://www.nifa.org/customers/project_listings.html)  
Contact: Susan Stibal  
800-204-6432  
[susan.stibal@nifa.org](mailto:susan.stibal@nifa.org)

Cost/Time: Initial development required staff time for several meetings with housing funding agencies to compile data, then less than \$1,000 for database development. Site took 3-4 weeks to develop after meetings with funders. Maintenance requires 1-2 days every six months for manual database updates.

Comments: Basic inventory of all subsidized housing in the state. Multiple search criteria. No current vacancy information. Database populated from funders' records rather than landlord submissions.

Agency: New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority  
Site: New Mexico Apartment Search  
URL: <http://www.housingnm.org/Secured/AffordableRentals/Search/HomePagePublic.htm>  
Contact: Debbie Davis  
505-843-6880  
[ddavis@housingnm.org](mailto:ddavis@housingnm.org)  
Cost/Time: Less than \$20,000 in staff time to develop. Six months from project concept to implementation, including two months of programming time. Maintenance costs involve only minimal staff time for semi-annual manual updates to the database.  
Comments: Voluntary listing service for landlords of subsidized rental housing. Basic and advanced search options with multiple criteria. Allows search for available units, but vacancy data is not updated regularly.

Agency: New York State Division of Housing and Community Renewal  
Site: Affordable Housing Directory  
URL: <http://www.dhcr.state.ny.us/ahd>  
Contact: Audrey Dean  
518-473-1655  
[adean@dhcr.state.ny.us](mailto:adean@dhcr.state.ny.us)  
Cost/Time: To develop site, \$87,400 for consulting fees (largely for GIS development), \$68,650 for mapping software. Site took two-and-a-half years to launch. Problems with consultant led to increased costs and time to launch site. Ongoing maintenance cost is internal staff time only.  
Comments: GIS-based system allowing user to click through state and regional maps to find state-subsidized units in particular geographic areas. Limited unit information. Database populated from state development records rather than landlord submissions.

Agency: Portland, Oregon Bureau of Housing and Community Development  
Site: Housing Connections  
URL: <http://www.housingconnections.org>  
Contact: Tracy Lehto  
503-823-2355  
[tlehto@ci.portland.or.us](mailto:tlehto@ci.portland.or.us)  
Cost/Time: Software development cost \$335,000. Initial planning and outreach cost \$571,000. Site took about two years to develop. Has required 2-3.5 FTE per year to maintain and market site, now down to 1.5 FTE.  
Comments: Elaborate site offering current vacancy listings, extensive unit details, links to service providers, and tools such as housing cost calculator. Users can establish account and save listings. Help desk staffed by Portland's 211 agency. Can be used as a subscription service. Software and hosting marketed as HousingPoint by Bowman Internet Systems. State of Wisconsin is the first customer outside of Portland; see <http://www.wifrontdoorhousing.org>. Bowman sales contact: Gene Doeker, 888-580-3831, [gdoeker@bowmansystems.com](mailto:gdoeker@bowmansystems.com).

Agency/Site: Socialserve.com  
URL: <http://www.socialserve.com>  
Contact: Van Gottel  
877-428-8844  
[vg@socialserve.com](mailto:vg@socialserve.com)  
Cost/Time: Cost varies depending on number of properties and call volume. Florida's full inventory, including private market units, likely to cost \$150-180,000 per year to list. Arizona's inventory of 600 subsidized properties cost \$5,000 to launch and \$17,000 per year to maintain. Arizona's listings took four months to launch.  
Comments: Subscription service offering for-rent and for-sale affordable housing locators. Elaborate site with current vacancy listings, extensive unit details, links to service providers, and tools such as housing and moving cost calculators. Includes English/Spanish call center for renters and landlords who do not wish to use Internet listings. Non-profit agency. Currently has listings for Arizona, North Carolina, Colorado, Kansas, and Missouri; will be adding New Jersey and possibly Indiana and South Carolina. Terri Jones of the Arizona Department of Housing (602-771-1081; [terrij@housingaz.com](mailto:terrij@housingaz.com)) would like to serve as a reference and contact.

Agency: South Dakota Housing Development Authority  
Site: Rental Locator  
URL: <http://www.sdhda.org/rent/index.html>  
Contact: Shalista Anderson  
605-773-3363  
[shalista@sdhda.org](mailto:shalista@sdhda.org)  
Cost/Time: Unknown cost and time to develop site. One FTE to maintain and market.  
Comments: Voluntary listing service for landlords of state-subsidized or -monitored apartments. Most eligible landlords participate. Search by city and by zip codes for larger cities. Includes photos, amenity information where submitted. SDHDA plans to upgrade the site to include a search by target population, accessibility, and number of bedrooms. No vacancy information on the site currently, but may be added in an upgrade.

Agency: Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs  
Site: Property Inventory  
URL: [spot.tdhca.state.tx.us/pub/t\\_cd\\_hsr.hsr\\_unit\\_rpt\\_options](http://spot.tdhca.state.tx.us/pub/t_cd_hsr.hsr_unit_rpt_options)  
Contact: Chad Landry  
512-475-4595  
[chad.landry@tdhca.state.tx.us](mailto:chad.landry@tdhca.state.tx.us)  
Cost/Time: Unknown  
Comments: Basic inventory of state-subsidized units with search by city or county only. Data from state compliance monitoring records. No current vacancy information.

Agency: Vermont Housing Finance Agency  
Site: Directory of Affordable Rental Housing  
URL: <http://www.housingdata.org/doarh/index.php>  
Contact: Maura Collins  
802-864-5743  
[mcollins@vhfa.org](mailto:mcollins@vhfa.org)

Cost/Time: Development took 9 months of 1 FTE. Maintenance requires fraction of 1 FTE for periodic manual updates to database.

Comments: Inventory of subsidized housing linked to state housing data site. Multiple search criteria. No vacancy information on site now, but may test this function in the future. More graphically oriented than most basic inventory sites.

Agency: Multifamily Affordable Properties (Washington State)  
Site: Aptfinder.org  
URL: <http://aptfinder.org/cgi-bin/index.pl>  
Contact: Sheila King  
253-383-3861  
[sheila@aptfinder.org](mailto:sheila@aptfinder.org)

Cost/Time: Cost for contract software development services was about \$20,000. Site took about two years of continual changes to develop to current application. Maintenance requires 10-20 staff hours per month.

Comments: On-line listing service for landlords of subsidized housing in Washington State. MAP is a non-profit founded by the Affordable Housing Management Association of Washington, a professional association of affordable housing property managers. MAP charges landlords \$2 per listing. Basic and advanced search options with multiple criteria, including wait list length. No current vacancy information. Results include photos and extensive unit information as submitted by property managers.

Agency: Georgia Department of Community Affairs  
Site: Rental Access Network  
URL: <http://www.rentalaccessnetwork.org>  
Contact: [RAN@dca.state.ga.us](mailto:RAN@dca.state.ga.us) (no interview response)  
Cost/Time: Unknown  
Comments: Listing service for property managers of state-subsidized developments. Includes search by multiple accessibility features.

Agency: Utah Department of Community and Economic Development  
Site: Subsidized & Special Needs Housing Database  
URL: <http://webapps.dced.state.ut.us/shod/>  
Contact: Sharon Johnson (no interview response)  
801-538-8627  
Cost/Time: Unknown  
Comments: Inventory of subsidized and special needs housing with multiple search criteria, including a number of target populations and income levels. Allows search for available units only, but most listings have not been updated in the past year. Results for accessible units include detailed list of accessibility features.

## Appendix 2. Florida Service Agency Interview Questions

1. How do consumers typically find rental housing? (e.g. newspaper ads, driving around, lists of subsidized housing)
2. When a consumer comes to you to look for housing, what steps do you take?
3. For a locator site, would you prefer just a list of subsidized units or real-time vacancy and waitlist information?
4. Do you expect your clients to have Internet access (personal, library), or would you be using locator with them?
5. For each of the following site features, rate as **Essential/Nice to have/Less important**
  1. Search by county
  2. Search by city
  3. Unit rents
  4. Income restrictions
  5. Search by address or name for particular development
  6. Unit description (square footage, flooring, etc.)
  7. Development amenities (laundry, pool, etc.)
  8. Neighborhood amenities
  9. General Accessibility (if so, how do you define?)
    - a. Wheelchair access
    - b. Roll-in shower
    - c. Grab bars
    - d. Low kitchen and bathroom cabinets
    - e. Elevator
    - f. Communication devices for hearing impaired
    - g. Other (please suggest)
  10. Proximity to public transit
  11. Accept Section 8 vouchers?
  12. Security deposit and fees



13. Map of unit location
14. Housing funding programs (Low Income Housing Tax Credit, US Rural Development, etc.)
15. Target population (farmworkers, persons with HIV/AIDS, etc.)
16. Other (please suggest)

### **Appendix 3. Locator Site Staff Interview Questions**

1. Which units are included on your site? (e.g. all in state, all subsidized, all HFA-subsidized, voluntary subsidized, voluntary any)  
  
Number of projects/units:
2. Who developed the Web site? Is the host the same?
3. Who maintains the site? If the site is maintained in-house, how much staff time does it require?
4. How did you get the project data initially? How do you keep it updated?
5. What was the initial cost to develop the site? How long did it take?
6. What is the ongoing maintenance cost?
7. How do you market to landlords or get updated information?
8. How do you market the site to consumers and service providers?
9. (If don't do current vacancies) Did you consider doing real-time vacancy information? Why did you decide not to?  
  
(If do) How has it worked?