



Setting the Stage

A successful relocation can hinge on that first interview

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For the relocation professional, the impression you make in the initial interview with the displacee in a federally-funded project cannot be overestimated. This interaction sets the foundation for the relationship and can provide valuable information that can be used to formulate a successful relocation strategy.

Advance Planning

It is critical that the relocation agent convey a professional demeanor to the displacee. A key to making a favorable first impression is demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the parcel and its occupants. There are a variety of ways to gain this knowledge.

First, the relocation professional should become familiar with any previous contact the displacing agency has had with the displacee before the initial interview. These previous contacts may have been in the form of public meetings, surveys for relocation planning or informal contacts with agency personnel prior to the appraisal of the property. The appraiser's inspection of the property is another important early agency contact with the displacee.

What was stated during these early contacts? Was the displacee given an accurate picture of the extent and limitations of relocation benefits? If inaccurate information was conveyed, these misconceptions should be cleared up as soon as possible. Were there design or other changes that occurred between the initial public meetings and the appraisal? Were there State or Federal regulatory changes that will affect benefits?

The relocation agent should also review any available environmental and relocation planning documents prior to the first in-depth interview. These documents can help determine not only the basic facts about the property and displacee, but also provide clues as to how best to communicate with the displacee. Do language barriers exist? Are there certain cultural norms that should be observed because of the displacee's particular ethnic group? How long has the business been a part of the community? How long has the displacee lived in their home? Are there elderly or handicapped members of the household?

Reviewing the applicable regulations and how they may apply to a particular displacee is also important. The relocation agent should try to anticipate and prepare for probable questions from the displacee. It is impossible to predict every question, but being well versed in the regulations governing key aspects of the relocation will benefit the displacee. If the regulations do not give a clear answer to a particular question, the relocation agent should determine beforehand how they will react to the question if asked.

Building Rapport

During the first interview with the displacee, building rapport is crucial. The Oxford Dictionary

defines rapport as a close and harmonious relationship in which the people or groups involved understand each other's feelings or ideas and communicate well. Although the elements of good rapport are largely intangible, there are practical strategies for building it.

Listen to the Displacee

As relocation agents, we often have to convey complex and sometimes confusing information. But simply repeating regulations does not help a displacee. We must convey how those regulations affect them and their particular situation. Their key issues and concerns can only be obtained through effective listening. This can be difficult when the displacee is upset, angry or fearful. However, even when the displacee is expressing displeasure, you will likely hear valuable clues simply by listening for them.

Empathize

Another important element in building rapport during the initial interview is showing empathy. Very few people look forward to relocating, whether it's their home or business. The emotions are real and can become key behavioral motivators. If a displacee believes the relocation agent is ignoring their feelings or, worse, just doesn't care, the displacee may refuse to cooperate. Even a simple nod can demonstrate that the agent acknowledges the displacee's feelings.

Set Reasonable Expectations

During the first interview, agents not only need to convey what the relocation program can pay concerning certain expenses, but also how the claims will be processed and the amount of time that processing will take. It must be clearly understood that, under the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970 (URA), the relocation program cannot pay every

relocation expense incurred by the displacee. There may be particular state laws that could augment the URA benefits, and these must also be thoroughly discussed with the displacee. However, it is very unlikely that even with these additional benefits available in some states that the displacee will be “made whole.” Being forthright about this fact and about the time frames involved is difficult but essential for ensuring a successful relocation.

Successful Relocation Strategy

Since every relocation is unique, the agent should always have a strategy in place and be adaptable. After the initial interview, the agent should develop a clear plan for executing the relocation in terms of financial reimbursement to the displacee, necessary permitting, timing and development of the replacement site. The initial strategy may need to be fine-tuned or tweaked during the relocation process, but the sooner the strategy is developed the better. A successful relocation strategy has two major components.

Determine the Needs of the Displacee

During the initial interview, it is helpful to use a structured interview form that delineates common factors and needs in residential and commercial relocations. This form will keep the interview on track, and the agent will not have to rely on memory in order to discuss each key element. The agent needs to distinguish between the displacee’s real needs and their wish list. It is also helpful to

prioritize the displacee’s needs. Which are most pressing? Gaining as much information during the first interview is essential, as the agent may not have another chance to speak with the displacee, especially if the occupant decides to retain an attorney.

Determine Which Resources Are Necessary and Available

Answering some basic questions up front will go a long way toward ensuring a successful relocation. Which of the displacee’s needs can be met under the URA benefit categories? Which needs cannot be met by the URA? Are there state law benefits that can help? What resources are necessary for the transition of the business to the replacement site? Does the displacing agency have the depth of advisory assistance needed? Is a move planner necessary for the business? Are there sufficient low-income housing units available for residential displacees? What expenses must be absorbed by the displacee?

Conclusion

Although not all information and insights can be gained from the initial interview, the relocation professional can set the stage for an effective relocation at this early point. With in-depth knowledge about the details of the relocation and by maintaining good rapport with the displacee, a good first interview can help set a positive tone for the rest of your project. ✪



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