



Rent Stabilization Board
Office of the Executive Director

DATE: July 15, 2021

TO: Honorable Members of Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board

FROM: Matt Brown, Acting Executive Director 

SUBJECT: Proposed Office Closure for all Wednesdays through the end of the year and Revised Office Hours through September 30, 2021

Earlier this year, the Board received results from an internal survey conducted by Keren Stashower in preparation for hiring a new permanent executive director. One of the primary findings was that all too often Board staff have dealt with important issues at the last minute and that this frenzy of activity creates uncertainty and discomfort – particularly for staff that serve the public on a regular basis. Many Board employees have expressed that it would be helpful to work in a more structured environment where there is a focus on strategic planning and a more cohesive framework for teamwork across all units at the Rent Board.

Approximately half the staff have positions that require daily contact with members of the public. Given the demands of these positions, many of these employees are unable to engage in any serious planning or other functions that allow them to connect on a regular basis with employees from other units. Board staff is currently engaged in a review of all agency protocols with an equity and inclusion lens. In order to promote fairness and involve all staff members, it is imperative to dedicate time to these planning and coordination activities in such a way that allows all staff members to participate.

At its May 6, 2021 meeting, the Board approved a proposal to close the office to the public every second and fourth Wednesday of each month and Voluntary Time Off (VTO) days. Staff advocated for this change, and Commissioners supported a structure that would allow all staff the opportunity to meet across the agency's various units and dedicate considerably more time to necessary strategic planning.

More recently, other City departments have contemplated closing their offices to the public one day a week for the remainder of the year. While there is not yet a final plan, it is likely that other departments will also reduce their office hours to four days a week. Moreover, the City closes offices to the public on all VTO days already – the proposal before you would have the Board office open on VTO days.

This proposal ensures that all staff have the opportunity to meet internally at least four days a month. It also would allow the Board to reconsider whether to continue with this

schedule at the end of the calendar year. Staff will devise a system to ensure that we attend to emergencies should any arise.

The agency has recently lost two valuable employees through resignation – one housing counselor and one analyst in the Registration Unit. Additionally, the Public Information Unit (PIU) Supervisor is on leave until the end of August, so housing counselors are taking on additional responsibilities. I have made an offer to a replacement housing counselor, but that person will not be fully trained for four to six months, so PIU will be considerably short-staffed for quite some time. I also put in a requisition to Human Resources for another analyst to replace the outgoing person in the Registration Unit, but hiring a replacement will take at least six weeks.

These losses come at a time when the agency is managing several large projects, like the conversion of the RTS database to the fully integrated 3di system, the website replacement project (which the City has indicated will begin moving forward quickly), and the tenant survey. We are also in the midst of implementing the Fair Chance Ordinance.

In short, we are operating on very thin margins right now. Various staff have also been hard-pressed to return to the office for a normal working schedule given that some employees had to temporarily relocate and many are not able to access the same level of dependent care and public transportation that they relied on prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently, we have staff from the Administration, Planning, and Legal units filling in for counseling shifts, but this arrangement is not sustainable long-term as these employees are also very busy with their daily duties. Given the shortages, staff have proposed that we maintain walk-in hours from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on days the agency is open to the public. This will allow staff the ability to maintain considerable flexibility to work remotely which is something a number of employees have informed me is very important to them. This proposal is temporary and would only be in place through September 30, 2021, at which time the Board can reassess.

If the Board approves of this proposal, staff will maintain constant contact with community members who request our service. The proposal to limit the hours that our office is open to the public will only limit walk-in clients, but others will be able to call and speak to a housing counselor between 9:00 a.m. – 4:45 p.m. on days we are serving the public. If a community member is unable to reach an employee, there are protocols in place to ensure that staff reach out to clients as soon as they are able.

Board staff have been able to maintain the high level of customer service the community expects from us, and this proposal will do nothing to change our commitment to responding to calls as soon as we are able. This proposal simply allows us to operate more fluidly with fewer staff available who are dedicated to direct services. Board staff have been seeing the public in the office in some limited capacity since the end of May and more expansively since July 6th. There have been very few walk-in clients as many from the community continue to contact us by phone and email. Moreover, we will continue to evaluate this plan and adapt it to client demand as necessary.