

NAHMAanalysis

News and Analysis of Breaking Issues in Affordable Housing



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Conversion from Sprint Mail to TRACS Mail - Part 2

The conversion from Sprint Mail to TRACS Mail continues. The implementation schedule is slipping, and today in the quarterly TRACS Industry working group Fred Tombar announced a revised schedule for the implementation of TRACS Mail. In short the implementation of both TRACS mail and Version 2.01B have been extended a month.

Here is the REVISED Implementation Schedule which will be officially published by HUD later today.

10/25 - 11/9/2001 TRACSMail - 201A user acceptance testing by the software industry
11/13/2001 - TRACSMail User Addresses will be distributed to Owner/Agents
11/19/2001 Pilot Testing for 201B TRACSMail
11/20-2001 TRACSMail goes to production, and becomes available to use
12/01/2001 Initiate TRACSMail - 201B pilot testing (Note: Early conversion to 201B will be available to those participating in the 201B pilot.)
2/28/2002 Discontinue SprintMail
TRACSMail - 201B available for use
TRACSMail - 201A support continues
4/30/2002 Discontinue 201A

As you compare the current schedule with the previous one you will note that since October 10 the finalization of TRACSMail for release to the Software firms for distribution has slipped three weeks to the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. In our conversations with the Software firms we anticipate that their updated software will ship to us about December 7, 2001. This means that you will be able to begin converting from Sprint Mail to TRACSMail in mid December. You will have to be converted no later than February 28, 2001.

George's Spin - As you can see from the above schedule we have slipped three weeks in three weeks time. We understand reliably that most of the problem has been with Sprint getting their phone lines set up. Anyone who has done business with Verizon knows about delays and technical problems, the surprising part is that Sprint uses New England Bell.

Fortunately Fred Tombar and his folks recognized that with the slippage in finalizing the TRACSMail software getting our TRACS Software updated, installed and operation would be very difficult in the roughly six weeks from December 7 to January 31. They agreed with our request to lengthen the transition period by a month.

As this is being distributed there are still bugs to be worked out in the TRACSMail software. One example; the TRACSMail specification was to have the data to be an attachment on the TRACSMail E-mail. Yesterday we found out that currently the file is included in the body of the message. This was news to everyone in the room, it emerges that the software developer thought that the system should be able to handle either method, and that is now being fixed, only attachments will work. This shows the degree to which things are still in flux at the very last minute. The software developers have not yet been able to do any testing of the TRACSMail system beyond logging on and off. The serious testing will start this coming week, and as we hear about issues we will keep you posted.

At this point you need to begin planning how you are going to manage the upgrade for your various sites. Here are a few additional issues that you will need to begin considering.

- The TRACSMail implementation will come with an I-Planet Password management system. Your TRACSMail passwords will be managed through this system once you are assigned your E-Mail account in early November. If you don't already have a system for managing passwords, you will need to develop one, bear in mind that you will now have two separate password systems that you will have to manage, one for REAC Secure System access and a second one for TRACSMail Secure System access. There is a plan to merge the two systems at some point in the future but for present you will have two separate systems. The software vendors will be looking at managing this process in the background, it is not clear that the I-Planet password system can be automated.
- TRACSMail does not support Social Security and SSI reporting. REAC does partially support SSI reporting. If you have a Section 8 contract you can get SS and SSI verification through REAC for current tenants. Unfortunately if you have a straight 236 and some other older non Section 8 contracts you will not be able to use the REAC system, and you cannot use it with new residents in any property. In those cases we are told that when the first TRACS submission goes in, if the SS and SSI matching data are not correct you will get an error message, and be able to correct it the day after the first data run is processed by TRACS. To access the REAC system you will have to have an internet connection and a TRACS compatible browser (currently Netscape 4.76 and IE 5.0). *More spin - for some time we have been noting that we are at the point where all sites that process data need internet access, this is further confirmation of HUD's move to the internet for nearly everything as time goes by. It is troublesome that HUD while pushing in this direction seems to have a tin ear when it comes to having their software compatible with the current operating systems and browsers when something is introduced. It appears no one has yet tested this system with Internet Explorer 6.0 and Microsoft XP Even the current version of Netscape, 6.1 is not supported by TRACS or REAC. We continue to emphasize to the decision makers that having old and non standard software standards adds complexity to our job.*
- TRACSMail is a secure proprietary system and Sprint has added virus protection, and transmissions will be screened for viruses, and messages that contain viruses will be quarantined and deleted. The system will only handle MAT files for present. As this is implemented it will increase the need to ensure that you have good virus protection and scanning software that is regularly updated.

- The TRACSMail user manual and related materials will be updated as this implementation goes forward. We will keep the most current version of the materials available on the NAHMA web site. None of the documents and manuals can be handled through the TRACSMail system, so the internet will be your source for monitoring updates.
- As regards replacing existing equipment and software at sites, several Contract Administrators have taken the position that replacement equipment hardware and software are not eligible replacement reserve items. That is not correct, Fred Tombar confirmed that all hardware and software necessary to support this are both approved site expenses and are eligible to be drawn from reserves. The citation on this issue should you need it is 24CFR part 208, the Automation Rule adopted in 1993.
- One final technical issue, TRACSMail is supported only as a dial up standard V90 Modem application. TRACSMail will not run on DSL, T-1, Fractional T-1, Cable or other broadband services. The coming internet only application in late 2002 will support broadband services. *More spin - Here again HUD has one foot in the future and one in the past, why the architecture of this replacement system would be constrained to a system introduced in the 1880's is puzzling particularly when you consider that the HUD end of TRACSMail goes into a T-1 connection.*

The final spin - We are in regular contact with everyone involved here and will keep you posted as this implementation moves forward. Going forward as well as regular NAHMAAnalyses, we will also keep all of the materials we have on the Member Section of the Website in the NAHMAAnalysis section.

George