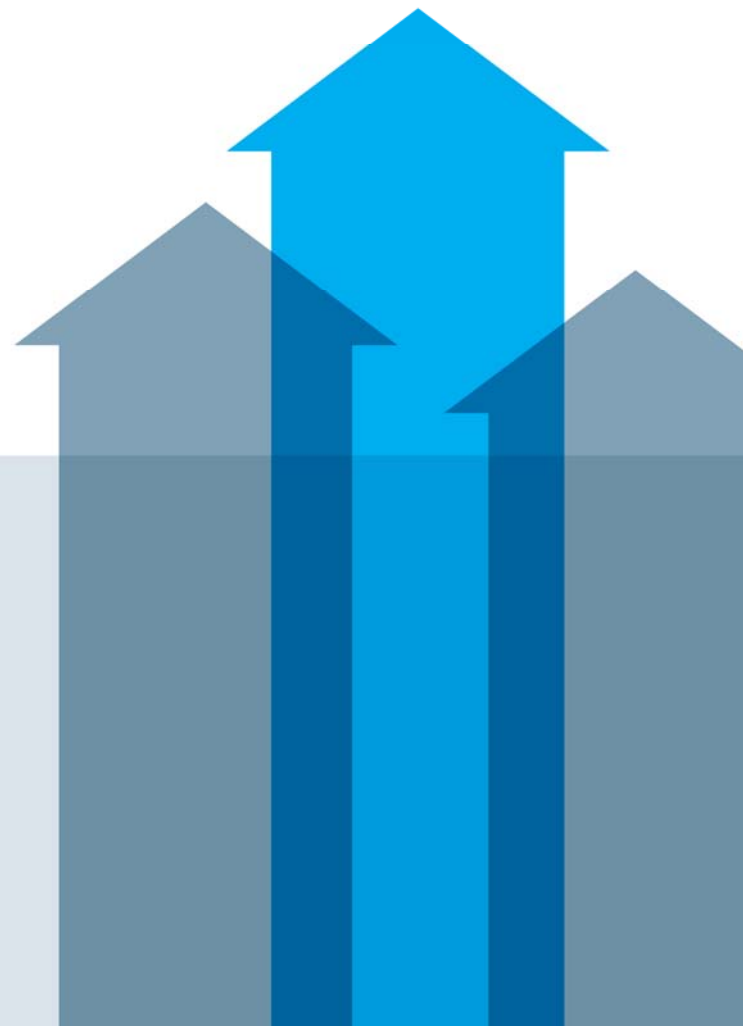


Improving Neighborhood Location Outcomes in the Housing Choice Voucher Program: A Scan of Mobility Assistance Programs

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WHATWORKS
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OVERVIEW

Improving the neighborhood outcomes for participants in the housing voucher program has been a long standing goal of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). A recent articulation of this goal can be found in HUD's strategic plan, which outlines HUD priorities and key performance measures for 2011 to 2015 and includes the goal of "expanding families' housing choices in a broad range of communities."¹ Despite efforts in this area, evidence shows that the Housing Choice Voucher Program is not living up to its full promise in delivering on neighborhood quality and much more can be done to help families take advantage of the housing choices offered through the program.

Changes proposed through the Transformation of Rental Assistance (TRA) Initiative could help improve neighborhood outcomes for voucher families. This long-term initiative, with the first phase proposed at \$350 million in HUD's 2011 budget, calls for streamlining rental assistance program guidelines and funding streams, leveraging private financing to help fund capital-needs improvement projects, and expanding housing choices and mobility for assisted housing residents. TRA would allow assisted housing residents living in a project-based unit (e.g., public housing) the option to move after two years, if a voucher becomes available. In addition, as part of TRA, the 2011 budget proposal includes \$50 million to conduct landlord outreach and improve housing choices for families participating in the voucher program, possibly through a mobility assistance demonstration program; and encourage public housing authorities (PHAs) to move toward consolidated administration of the Housing Choice Voucher Program. All of these actions may significantly improve neighborhood location outcomes for voucher holders. As Secretary Donovan notes, "TRA reflects the Department's commitment to enhancing tenant mobility" (HUD 2010).

HUD's commitment acknowledges that neighborhoods matter for families. Research shows that helping families leave high-crime, dangerous neighborhoods translates into immediate and significant improvements in their lives. Personal safety is a key factor, as is an improvement in mental health (Popkin 2005). Over the long term, benefits could be life-changing. Neighborhood location influences where children go to school, access to employment for adults (including how far they need to travel to get there), and proximity to such amenities as supermarkets, parks, and open spaces. Further, neighborhood location also affects exposure to environmental hazards and access to clean air and water, particularly for low-income households.

Despite this recognition, a large share of participants in the Housing Choice Voucher Program are located in economically and racially segregated areas. More than half of voucher holders living in the 50 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) are living in neighborhoods with poverty rates higher than 20 percent (with 22 percent of those voucher holders living in neighborhoods with poverty rates above 30 percent) (Devine et al. 2003). On average, black and Hispanic vouchers households live in higher-poverty, more racially segregated neighborhoods than their white counterparts (Devine et al. 2003). Many factors contribute to these outcomes—including discrimination in the housing market, programmatic policies, and lack of information about housing choices. Without targeted interventions to overcome these barriers, the Housing Choice Voucher program will continue to

¹ For more on HUD's goals, see the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Strategic Plan 2011-2015. http://portal.hud.gov/portal/page/portal/HUD/program_offices/cfo/stratplan

concentrate low-income families in poor neighborhoods and to perpetuate racial segregation (Turner, Popkin, and Rawlings 2008).

In the past, HUD has undertaken both “place-based” and “people-based” strategies to improve neighborhood outcomes for the people and families receiving housing assistance. These strategies focus on improving the neighborhoods in which poor families live while at the same time offering opportunities for families to seek better neighborhoods elsewhere if they want to move. These efforts have been limited to small-scale demonstrations or initiatives—for example, HOPE VI or the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration.² Other efforts to help improve neighborhood outcomes for families receiving housing assistance have stemmed from housing desegregation lawsuits brought against HUD or housing authorities.³ In general, these efforts have affected only a small share of the millions of households receiving federal housing assistance and, therefore, have not made substantial changes in location outcomes for most residents receiving housing assistance.

Researchers and advocates have written much about the importance of helping families move to better neighborhoods; the question, however, of how to encourage these moves is largely unexplored. Very few housing mobility assistance programs (programs that provide information on opportunity neighborhoods, housing search assistance, and follow-up counseling) exist. Further, we know little about how housing mobility programs operate, what makes them effective, how much they cost, and which components need strengthening (Cunningham and Sawyer 2005).

Public housing authorities, community-based nonprofit organizations, and fair housing agencies have encountered many challenges to implementing housing mobility programs. A lack of dedicated and continual funding from HUD for voucher deconcentration efforts is a significant barrier. Beyond the lack of funding, serious attitudinal barriers—including the lack of political will to encourage and create economically and socially diverse communities, not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) attitudes, PHA boards that resist regional approaches to affordable housing, and weak enforcement of fair housing laws—have made implementing housing mobility programs extremely difficult. The lack of a consistent national fair housing policy that prohibits discrimination against families with housing vouchers, including “source of income” protection, is also a significant roadblock.

As HUD considers how to allocate the proposed \$50 million in the 2011 budget, it will need to consider past and current efforts to help improve neighborhood outcomes among voucher holders. This study, supported by the What Works Collaborative, a foundation-supported research partnership that provides timely research and analysis to help inform an evidence-based housing and urban policy agenda, examines ongoing mobility programs. This study was intended to be a rapid scan that could provide timely and policy relevant information to policymakers.

HOUSING MOBILITY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

TRA proposes improving neighborhood outcomes for households with housing vouchers by encouraging PHAs to provide assistance in helping them find and lease housing in these

² For a summary of these programs, please see “A Decade of HOPE VI” by Susan J. Popkin and colleagues (<http://www.urban.org/publications/411002.html>) and *Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty* by Xav Briggs, Susan J. Popkin, and John Goering.

³ For a complete history, see “Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation” by Margery Austin Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings (<http://www.urban.org/books/publichousing/>).

neighborhoods. Housing mobility counseling programs are one way to help encourage moves to opportunity neighborhoods. However, there is very little empirical research on the efficacy of housing mobility assistance programs and little recent documentation on housing mobility programs currently operating across the country.⁴

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to describe different types of housing mobility programs that help housing voucher holders move to better neighborhoods, and to provide recommendations for how a mobility demonstration should be structured. The research questions focus on understanding key program services and the costs associated with those services. Specifically,

- What are the locally defined goals of housing mobility programs? How do programs define their target population and destination neighborhoods?
- How are housing mobility programs structured? What types of services are provided to participants? What is the capacity of housing mobility programs? What is the intensity level of the services? What types of organizations run these programs?
- What types of landlord outreach activities are built into housing mobility programs?
- What types of program outcomes do administrators track?
- What are the costs of housing mobility programs?

Methods and Interview Protocol

To obtain this information, we conducted phone interviews with mobility program staff in 11 mobility programs. Some of those with whom we spoke did not work directly for a housing authority but for nonprofit organizations or consulting firms charged with managing mobility programs. To guide the interview, we constructed a semi-structured interview protocol (see appendix A). The first section poses questions about the origins of the mobility program, its goals, and the definitions it uses for destination neighborhoods. Next, the protocol asks about program structure, services, and capacity. The last two sections of the interview guide cover the cost of the mobility program and the tracking of client outcomes. In addition to the protocol, we requested client and landlord program materials as well as data on cost and outcomes from all interviewees.

To construct our initial sampling frame of mobility programs from across the country, we conducted an Internet search, scanned literature on mobility programs, and consulted with key practitioners and advocates. From this scan, we identified 57 housing mobility programs.⁵ We then narrowed our sample to 16 programs that reflect geographic and programmatic diversity. Staff from 11 organizations chose to participate in the study and were interviewed by phone in March and April 2010. Of the remaining five programs from our original sample, four were doing very little distinguishable mobility work and one was unable to participate within the study's timeframe

⁴ For a review of mobility programs completed in the late 1990s, see "Housing Mobility: Realizing the Promise, Second National Conference on Assisted Housing Mobility" by Turner and Williams (1997), available at <http://www.prrac.org/mobility/97report.pdf>.

⁵ The status of these programs—that is, whether they are currently active—is unclear. As many were funded through programs that no longer exist, many are likely no longer operating.

because of overburdened staff. We selected the sample sites purposefully and, therefore, the sites interviewed do not necessarily represent mobility programs nationwide.

FINDINGS

The housing mobility programs in our sample varied significantly, with some agencies administering passive programs (tenant education and information about target neighborhoods) and others offering more intensive mobility assistance (one-on-one counseling and housing search assistance, including unit identification and viewing). Housing mobility assistance programs can be broken down into six components:

1. **Pre-Move Counseling** includes tenant education on rights and responsibilities, budget and life skills workshops, affirmative marketing of destination neighborhoods, credit and savings counseling, and tours of destination neighborhoods. High-intensity pre-move counseling typically includes one-on-one interaction between a participant and a mobility advisor. Low-intensity pre-move counseling typically includes tenant education in voucher briefings and supplemental group workshops.
2. **Housing Search Assistance** includes unit lists; unit identification, referral, and viewings; transportation to view units; and help negotiating with landlords. High-intensity housing search assistance typically includes referrals to units in target neighborhoods until the participant finds an appropriate match.
3. **Landlord Outreach** includes intensive recruiting of landlords with units in target neighborhoods, which are in many cases low-poverty neighborhoods where landlords do not typically participate in the voucher program. This work requires ongoing relationship building, tenant and landlord mediation, special services (e.g., expedited inspections, direct deposit, payment guarantee, etc.) and, in some cases, financial assistance (e.g., tax credits or lease bonuses) to landlords.
4. **Moving Financial Assistance** includes grants for apartment application costs, security deposits, mover's fees, and utility hook up. Housing authorities typically base moving assistance on unit bedroom size.
5. **Post-Move Counseling** includes structured follow-up (typically home visits at 4, 10, 16, and 21 months), introductions to neighborhood schools and referrals to social services, and connections with social supports, such as church members or other community mentors.
6. **Subsequent Move Assistance** includes assistance moving with a focus on retention in a target neighborhood. This assistance includes housing search and moving financial assistance, as well as post-move counseling to help the participant acclimate in their new neighborhood.

Figure 1 shows different types of mobility assistance that may be provided by housing agencies as participants move through the housing voucher program. The yellow boxes represent the major steps in the housing choice voucher program and the blue boxes represent mobility counseling assistance.

Figure 1. Housing Mobility Assistance Programs

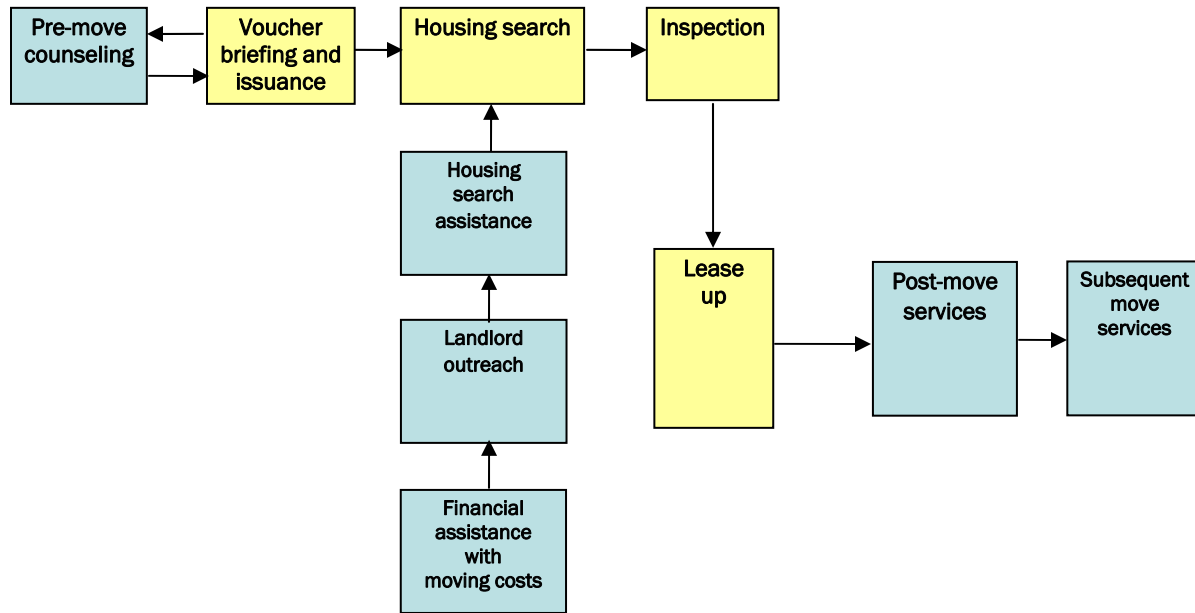


Table 1. Study Sites		
Site name	Definition of opportunity area	Origin of program
Yonkers Municipal Housing Authority	< 40% poverty, < 40% minority	Lawsuit
San Diego Fair Housing Council	Low/Lower poverty	ROC Demonstration Project
Connecticut Department of Social Services (CDSS)	Three levels of target areas: "Type A": < 15% poverty, "Type B": between 15 and 25% poverty, "Type C": a 10% change in poverty from the movers' old neighborhood to new neighborhood.	Potential lawsuit
Atlanta Housing Authority	Multiple neighborhood and unit inspection indices	New Leadership and Extension of the Moving to Work program
Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership (MBHP)	<= 41.5% minority	Lawsuit
Minneapolis Housing Authority (MHA)	< 28% households in poverty and < 33% minority residents	Lawsuit
Metropolitan Baltimore Quadel	< 30% African American, <10% poverty, and <5% assisted housing	Lawsuit
Las Vegas HA	< the city's average poverty level	Response to HUD making deconcentration a SEMAP indicator
Buffalo Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME)	< 25% households in poverty	Lawsuit
Dallas Inclusive Communities Project (DICP)	Walker Settlement Areas: <=26% African American <=17.7% poverty High Opportunity Areas: <=26% African American <=10% poverty School criteria >80% of the AMI	Lawsuit
Fair Housing Partnership of Pittsburgh (FHP)	"Lower poverty, job opportunities, less violence, better schools, and greater access to services and amenities"	Received grant funding

Definition of Destination Neighborhoods Varied; Bar Not Very High

Each program defines “opportunity,” “non-impacted,” or “destination” neighborhoods differently (see table 1). Poverty and race thresholds are common. Most of the mobility programs launched through litigation more than a decade ago are using what some might consider a low bar. A few sites use other less common factors, such as school scores, neighborhood quality, and assisted-housing concentration.

Our interview respondents identified many challenges with defining and identifying appropriate destination neighborhoods. Lack of current data is a common problem. A few programs conduct neighborhood assessments as part of the inspection; this allows sites to make decisions about neighborhood quality without having to rely on aggregate quantitative data, most of which are outdated. Further, a census tract may not be an accurate proxy for a neighborhood. One site experimented with different levels of geography but found the lack of data challenging. Another problem program administrators identified was ensuring that the mobility program was not concentrating assisted housing in neighborhoods or creating pockets of poverty. Without monitoring real-time data on where voucher holders are moving, this is difficult to achieve.

Program Participants Are a Subset of Voucher Holders; Mostly Small Programs

Most of the mobility programs in our sample are small and target a small number of voucher holders, based on specific eligibility guidelines or settlement classes. One exception is the Atlanta Housing Authority, where housing authority staff reported that significant public housing demolition and deconcentration efforts are under way. According to program administrators, Atlanta offers assistance to help all voucher holders move to target neighborhoods. Programs that originated through a consent decree of a lawsuit settlement usually define eligibility by identifying a specific settlement class (i.e., public housing residents or families on the housing authority waiting list). Other programs might screen participants for factors unrelated to their housing. One housing agency, for example, plans to include full-time employment as an eligibility criterion.

Pre-move Counseling Is Common, but Intensity Level Varies

Pre-move counseling that includes credit counseling and workshops on budgeting and tenant responsibility is common and is usually held during voucher introduction or moving briefings. However, high-intensity pre-move counseling that includes one-on-one counseling, savings requirements, etc., aimed at preparing participants for a successful tenancy is not common among the mobility programs in our sample. Only one site, Baltimore, offers intensive pre-move counseling. Baltimore holds “readiness workshops,” which include information on tenant responsibilities and credit and budget counseling. Before becoming eligible for a voucher, potential program participants must raise their credit score and save money for a security deposit (they usually pay half and the program pays the rest). According to the program’s report on outcomes, this process takes 12 months on average (Engdahl 2009). This means that participants issued a voucher are highly motivated and ready to move. While some may characterize this screening as “creaming,” it is not necessarily negative. Not all households are ready to make a move and since mobility programs are constrained by funding, it may be best to *target* program resources to households that are actively

seeking moves to opportunity neighborhoods, but just need the services to get them there. It also highlights the importance of carefully selecting eligible participants.

Financial Assistance to Program Participants Is a Key Ingredient

Most programs offer financial assistance for security deposits and costs associated with moving. The amount offered varies: some programs offer a set amount, while others base the amount available on the unit bedroom size or the type of destination neighborhood where the participant intends to lease; those moving to “higher opportunity” neighborhoods are eligible to receive more assistance. Other programs offer it as part of education efforts for voucher holders. One housing agency, for example, offers security deposit assistance to households that participate in fair housing and tenant landlord responsibility training. Program administrators reported that financial assistance is a key ingredient to encouraging “opportunity moves,” as most program participants cannot afford these costs on their own, particularly in neighborhoods where competition for apartments is higher.

Housing Search Assistance and Unit Identification Are Critical

Almost all programs in our sample reported offering housing search assistance. Housing search assistance typically includes neighborhood tours, unit lists, unit identification and viewings, and introductions to landlords. The service level varied significantly among programs and ranged from less intensive (a database or unit list shared with the participant) to more intensive (van tours and program counselors bringing participants to view specific units). Many administrators reported that housing search assistance, specifically locating units in target neighborhoods, is a critical component of their program.

Landlord Outreach and Incentives Are Less Common and Not Fully Tested

The availability of landlords willing to participate in the voucher program, particularly landlords in higher-opportunity destination neighborhoods, is critical to any mobility or voucher deconcentration effort. In tight rental markets, this can make or break a program. Most of the mobility programs in our sample recognized the need to conduct landlord outreach, and many reported sending landlord recruitment letters to real estate associations and specific apartment buildings in target neighborhoods. Most of these activities could be characterized as passive landlord recruitment. Less common, however, was ongoing, high-intensity relationship-building with landlords, and only a few sites reported having the resources to undertake such efforts. These sites have staff dedicated to landlord recruitment, offer landlord workshops and events, and sometimes offer landlord and tenant mediation and troubleshooting should problems arise.

A few mobility programs offer financial incentives to landlords. These incentives are usually provided at the end of the deal, after a participant has identified the unit. These costs usually cover any repairs a landlord may have to make to bring the unit up to HUD quality standards (HQS) or as a bonus to make the housing voucher more financially attractive. While it varies by program, landlord incentives range from \$700 to \$2,200. The implications and effectiveness of these incentives are unclear; though respondents reported that they thought the incentives made a difference in attracting landlords who might otherwise not participate in the voucher program.

Post-Move Support Is Typically Ad Hoc, Not Structured

A handful of programs reported providing post-move support. Post-move support—following up with the participant after they are settled in the neighborhood and connecting them to social services and social supports—is usually done on a client-by-client basis. For example, if a participant developed a strong relationship with their mobility caseworker or housing search worker, he or she may contact the worker for assistance after the move. Baltimore is one exception, with structured post-move follow-up. Counselors follow up at least four more visits in the two years after the move, usually at 4, 10, 16, and 21 months.

“Second-move” assistance or services focused on retention in the destination neighborhood also appear critical and, indeed, some programs focus entirely on second moves. It is unclear how comprehensive or common second-move assistance is. For some sites, it is a major focus. The Inclusive Communities Project (ICP), for example, which services families that were issued vouchers as part of the Walker settlement, helps these families remain in Walker target areas over time (17.7 percent poverty or less and 26 percent or less African American) and encourages moves to even higher opportunity neighborhoods (10 percent of the poverty level, 80 percent of area median income [AMI] schools meet accountability standards, and 26 percent or less African American).

Caseload Size and Counselor Qualifications Vary Significantly

Mobility programs are staffed with counselors, advisors, or coaches who assist with navigating the voucher program, provide housing search assistance, and, sometimes, provide post-move support and referrals to social services in the community. Counselor-to-participant ratios vary significantly. Program administrators from mobility programs in our sample reported counselor-to-participant ratios ranging from 1:30 to 1:150. Some programs participants remain with one counselor through the entire program, while others are assigned different counselors for different parts of the program (i.e., before or after the move). Qualifications for these entry-level positions usually include experience with the client population, knowledge of the neighborhood, and experience with housing programs. Interview respondents reported that continuity and relationship building are key ingredients in helping program participants make mobility moves. Clearly, the quality of the counselor matters; very few programs, however, largely due to funding constraints, require counselors to have advanced degrees, such as a master’s of social work. Counselors’ qualifications also reflect the level and types of program services provided.

Data on Performance Outcomes Lacking: Most Are Collecting Limited Data

We asked the mobility administrators about program outcomes. Most programs are currently tracking or planning to track some type of program data to report and monitor outcomes. At a minimum, housing agencies reported tracking the number of voucher holders receiving mobility services and the number that made a move to a target neighborhood. Some housing agencies went beyond these indicators and tracked the following:

- the number participating in incremental levels of services within the mobility program,
- the number of landlords in target areas contacted or partnered with,
- the number of clients leasing up within the required period,

- demographic information on participating families (race, source of income, number and age of children),
- detailed information on the characteristics of the new and old neighborhood (income, racial makeup, measures of school quality, unemployment and joblessness levels), and
- family stability in the new target neighborhood over time.

In addition, two mobility programs use follow-up participant surveys to assess participant satisfaction and perceived changes or improvements in the new neighborhood. These surveys can help program administrators address immediate implementation flaws and improve the program over time with participant input and a focus on outcomes.

Generally, program outcome information was not readily accessible or available and more research is needed on program outcomes to understand if mobility programs were successful in helping voucher participants make “mobility moves.”

Little Information on Cost of Services; Problems with Apples to Oranges Comparisons

Previous evidence finds that the cost for mobility assistance ranges from \$200 to \$1,400 per family counseled and \$600 to \$3,300 per family placed.⁶ Our interviews revealed an even wider range of costs from \$70 to \$6,000 per case. While some of this stems from programmatic differences in the scope and scale of mobility services, much of it results from differences in how programs conceptualize costs.

We found that making “cost per case” calculations was difficult for several reasons. First, mobility programs were often unclear about how they counted their clients and services. This was particularly problematic when they only reported to us the cost per case and not any raw numbers on cost or people served. Several different measures could be used to gauge the cost-effectiveness of a mobility program: *number of families* receiving some kind of pre-move assistance or counseling, *number of moves*, and *number of “successful” moves* to opportunity neighborhoods. At the same time, some mobility programs do more than just place families in housing; some also administer the vouchers or provide post-move counseling or support aimed at retention. It’s unclear how these families and services should be counted. For example, one program helped approximately 30 families to relocate per year but also served as the voucher administrator for three times that number of families that were part of their caseload. What is the cost per case—their total budget divided by 30 or by the total caseload?

The second issue is that mobility programs did not think about total costs in the same way. Most of the mobility programs that were operated by outside contractors were able to give us their annual budget as an estimate of total program cost. This included both staffing costs and overhead (supplies, security deposit payments, rental space, etc.). However, the rest of the programs were usually only able to provide us with estimates of their overhead costs either because of the way their program was funded (e.g., only security-deposit assistance) or because they had difficulty parsing out the hours that their staff spent serving clients for the mobility program from the other work that they performed. As a result, the cost estimates we obtained from mobility programs are often not easily

⁶ For cost estimates by program, see “Housing Mobility: Realizing the Promise,” <http://www.urban.org/publications/407420.html>.

comparable with each other. To further complicate matters, the programs that provided total cost data were not able to disaggregate their costs by staffing and overhead charges to make them more comparable to the other data we received.

No National Discrimination Protections for Voucher Holders

We asked program administrators about programmatic challenges that thwarted moves to destination neighborhoods. One common theme was the lack of nationwide antidiscrimination protections for voucher holders. Many landlords do not accept vouchers, many claim that enrolling in the program is too costly, some reject voucher holders based on stereotypes about participants, and some use not accepting vouchers as a proxy for discrimination against minority households. Only 13 states, the District of Columbia, and approximately two-dozen local jurisdictions have adopted antidiscrimination laws that protect voucher holders, leaving most families vulnerable to discrimination (Daniel 2010). There is some evidence that antidiscrimination ordinances can increase voucher success rates in leasing up, but, importantly, ordinances must be accompanied by enforcement measures to make a significant impact. In the long term, this could help improve PHA costs to administer the voucher (HUD 2001).

Lack of Funding Hampers Long-Term, Comprehensive Efforts

Our interview respondents reported that the cost of operations is also a major impediment to implementing mobility programs. Landlord outreach, housing search, credit counseling, post-move support, and other related services for families do not fall within the normal operating funds available to any housing agency. Time limitations on funding cut short the ability to work with families over several years. The perception of mobility counseling as a special or “boutique” program makes integrating the effort into the voucher program’s core operations very difficult. This often means that the PHA’s voucher program policies do not support mobility moves.

Local Conditions and PHA Management Play an Important Role

Conventional wisdom holds that the availability of affordable housing in the local housing market, the capacity of the housing authority, historical patterns of income and racial segregation, NIMBY issues and landlord willingness to participate in the program (including local ordinances that protect voucher holders), and amenities in destination neighborhoods (transportation, child care, social services), all play an important role in how the mobility program is administered, how effective it is, and how landlords and potential program participants view the benefits of the program.

In addition to local conditions and services provided through the mobility program, program administrators identified other important factors that helped facilitate mobility moves:

- Antidiscrimination ordinances
- Exception rents
- Regional administration
- Housing authority management and agency reputation among landlords
- Moving to Work status (provides flexibility to alter program regulations)

- Setting aside project-based voucher units in target neighborhoods

According to interview respondents, these factors were critical to the success of the mobility program.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While this scan offers a glance at a handful of mobility assistance programs operating across the country, we know little about how housing mobility programs operate, what makes them effective, and which components need strengthening. Given this enormous gap in knowledge, HUD should design a research demonstration that tests different “mobility counseling” strategies for encouraging moves to target neighborhoods and expanding housing choices for families. Since the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration, which tests *how* high-opportunity neighborhoods benefit families, is already under way, the proposed demonstration will answer other important questions by testing the efficacy of service strategies to *help families move* to such neighborhoods. Further, this is an opportunity to examine the impact of housing counseling services for a “typical” family that is not necessarily relocating from public housing.

Key Decision Points for Designing a Housing Mobility Demonstration

HUD will need to consider several key decisions when designing a housing mobility demonstration, including:

- What are the key hypotheses the demonstration should test?
- What entities should participate as sites in the demonstration?
- How should HUD define “destination” neighborhoods?
- How should participant eligibility for the demonstration be determined and what treatment groups should be included?
- What key performance measures should HUD and the demonstration sites track?
- What are the desired outcomes of the demonstration?
- What methodological strategies should HUD utilize in a long-term evaluation of the demonstration?

We discuss our preliminary recommendations on each of these key decision points below.

Key Hypotheses

Pre-Move Counseling and Financial Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Providing pre-move counseling and financial assistance increases moves to target neighborhoods. -Pre-move counseling and financial assistance increases lease-up rates.
Housing Search Assistance and Post-Move Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Providing housing search assistance increases moves to target neighborhoods. -Housing search assistance increases lease-up rates. -Structured post-move follow-up increases retention in target

	neighborhoods.
Target Groups	<p>-Providing pre-move counseling and moving financial assistance to “second movers” increases moves to target neighborhoods and increases retention in those neighborhoods.</p> <p>-If provided assistance, second movers are more likely to move to target neighborhoods than those off the waiting list.</p>

Random Assignment and Demonstration Sites

To test the stated hypotheses, the demonstration should randomly assign eligible households (families with children under age 18) to treatment and control groups. Housing agencies would apply to test different hypotheses. To ensure that the demonstration is conducted in different housing markets across the country, HUD should conduct this demonstration at 8 to 12 sites.⁷ Site selection should be made on a competitive basis, with housing authorities eligible to apply. The demonstration guidelines should provide extra points to housing authorities that have previously administered mobility programs or those that collaborate with nonprofit and for-profit agencies that have experience administering housing mobility assistance programs.

Defining Destination Neighborhoods

In the past, housing mobility assistance programs have defined high-opportunity neighborhoods in different ways, including poverty rate, share of minority households, quality of schools, and share of assisted housing. Evidence-based criteria about what makes a neighborhood a “high-opportunity” neighborhood are still unfolding, but it is clear that poverty thresholds are not enough. Recent research indicates that HUD should consider defining destination neighborhoods based on the following criteria that are not limited to, but include, the following:

- High quality schools;
- Low poverty rate (as measured by low share of children receiving free lunch); and
- Low crime levels.

In addition to aggregate measures of neighborhood quality, HUD should require site- and neighborhood-based assessments as part of HQS unit inspections.

Performance Measures, Tracking, and Desired Outcomes

HUD should require demonstration sites to track key service ingredients (pre-move counseling; housing search assistance, including number of units identified, referred, and viewed; landlord outreach and financial incentives; moving financial assistance; post-move counseling, including how many home visits post-move; and subsequent move assistance), as well as client to caseworker ratios and performance outcome measures. Performance outcome measures should include lease-up rates, neighborhood outcomes, and duration in target neighborhoods. Since consistency in performance measurement across sites is critical, HUD should provide sites with an “out of the box” system for tracking these outcomes or add a housing mobility module to the 50058 form.

⁷ Prior to launching the demonstration, HUD will need to complete a power analysis to identify the appropriate sample size.

Impact Evaluation and Cost Effectiveness

The demonstration should be accompanied by a rigorous impact evaluation that includes a cost analysis component. The cost study should compare relative costs to different outcomes and create cost-effectiveness ratios. To ensure sites are consistently evaluated and that a cross-site perspective is captured, it is critical that one national evaluator be selected, but HUD should also encourage an “all hands on deck” approach by requiring that each demonstration site have a local evaluator. These evaluators could track implementation and other outcomes of interest.

Challenges with Experimental Demonstrations

In many ways, random assignment is the gold standard for testing new interventions because it removes potential selection bias by ensuring that the treatment group (those that receive the intervention) and control group (those that receive “services as usual”) are essentially equivalent at baseline and can, therefore, answer the question: what would happen absent the intervention? However, this approach is not without challenges. Finding an “effect” of the intervention rests on the assumption that the control group is not exposed to the intervention at any time. However, given the often-intertwined living conditions and social networks of Housing Choice Voucher holders, some families in the treatment group may pass on information that they glean from the intervention to families in the control group. In addition, unlike other well-known random assignment experiments, like drug trials, program interventions are often not implemented in the same way across sites or even among staff at a single program. This makes it important to supplement quantitative analysis with a detailed process study at each site to assess each demonstration’s implementation. This step also would ensure that we understand “why” and “how” the intervention works to think strategically about rolling out similar programs on a larger scale.

CONCLUSION

As this paper notes, not much is known about mobility assistance programs. This gap in knowledge leaves policymakers unclear about what types of mobility assistance strategies to bring to scale, whom mobility programs work for, and how much these interventions would cost. TRA provides an important opportunity to test a range of housing mobility services and develop an evidence-based program that helps facilitate successful moves to opportunity neighborhoods.

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APPENDIX A: HOUSING MOBILITY PROGRAM GUIDE

HOUSING MOBILITY PROGRAMS

Interview Guide

1. Screener

Hello, I'm calling from the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. The Urban Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization. We are working on a research project that examines mobility programs that help Housing Choice Voucher holders move to better neighborhoods and are talking to people in the organizations that currently run these types of programs. Specifically, we would like to understand how mobility programs are structured and how they work for families. This research project is part of the What Works Collaborative, a foundation sponsored collaborative that focuses on responding to HUD's research needs.

We will summarize data from all the interviews we conduct for this project in a research brief, which will inform HUD's Rental Assistance Transformation Initiative. It is important that you know that nothing you say will ever be associated with your name or your organization's. So, please share your opinions and insights freely. At the completion of the project, we will make the summary available to people who have participated in the interview.

To ensure that I am talking to the right person, I just have a couple of short questions for you.

- [\[If the respondent does not work at a housing authority\]](#) Can you tell me a little more about your organization in general? [\[Probe: mission, tenure, types of services provided, staffing, etc.\]](#)
- Can you tell me a little bit about your role at your organization?
- How long have you been in this position? Working for your organization?
- Are you the staff person who would best be able to answer questions about your mobility program?
- When would be a good time to schedule a call to talk more about your program?

2. Background and Program Goals

To start out, we'd like to learn about the program that you have to help voucher holders move to better neighborhoods—its goals and how it's structured.

- **What do you call your program?** [\[Probe: mobility program, housing choice, etc.—USE THEIR TERMINOLOGY FOR THE REST OF THE INTERVIEW\]](#)
- **How did your program come about?**
[\[probe: litigation, moving to opportunity demonstration, vacancy consolidation, regional opportunity counseling initiative\]](#) [\[FOR ORGS OTHER THAN PHAs: How did your organization get involved?\]](#)
- **How long has your program been operating?**

- **What are the primary goals of your program?**
[If the organization considers neighborhood factors in their program]
- **To what extent is explicit language about moves to low poverty, suburban, or opportunity neighborhood used....**
 - In issuance, application, or other program materials?
 - In standard group briefings?
 - In one-on-one counseling sessions?

CAN YOU SHARE COPIES OF THESE MATERIALS WITH US?

- **How do you define opportunity or “non-impacted” areas?**
[probe: income/poverty rates, race, other criteria; level of geography and data source used
IMPORTANT TO GET THE SPECIFICS - % poverty rate they use, etc.]
- **How was this definition formulated?**
[probe: who was involved, why they chose specific wording]
- **To which households is the program available?**
[probe: new voucher holders, public housing relocates, “second movers,” FSS participants]
- **How do participants find out about the program?**
[probe: active vs. passive outreach]
- **Is participation in the program mandatory?**
[probe: differing policies for different types of families—i.e., general TBV holders vs. family sufficiency participants; new TBV holders vs. “second movers”]
- **Are participants required to move to a non-impacted/opportunity area if they receive services or participate in the program?**
- **What, if any restrictions are placed on participants’ ability to port out to other jurisdictions?**
[probe: minimum time in jurisdiction, agreements with other PHAs]
[For PHAs only] Have you revised any Housing Choice Voucher administrative policies or received waivers through MTW (Moving To Work) to assist with your mobility efforts?
- **Does the housing agency have other policies that may encourage mobility among voucher holders?** [probe: portability procedures, regional waiting lists, exception rents and FMRs]

3. Program Structure and Capacity

- **What types of services do you provide to families through your program to help voucher holders move to better neighborhoods?** [Note: Open-ended first to get a feel for what their program consists of]
- **Please describe a typical participant’s experience with your mobility program from his or her first contact with the program until his or her last.**

- We're interested in knowing if you offer some services in particular. I heard you mention that you offer x and y services [note: insert what they mentioned above], how about....?

[NOTE: USE IN-HOUSE CHECKLIST TO PROBE FOR AND DOCUMENT INDIVIDUAL SERVICES]

- Do you work with any other organizations to provide these services?
 - [If so], What kind of organizations are they and what is their role?
 - Public Housing Authority
 - Social service agencies other than those providing mobility assistance
 - Schools
 - Community colleges and universities
 - Legal service organizations
 - Faith institutions
 - Transportation providers
- How have the services you offer families in the mobility program changed over time? [probe: more effective strategies, issues with cost, etc.]
- [If they have specific mobility counselors]
 - Describe the typical caseload for a mobility counselor at your PHA.
 - How light or heavy do you consider that caseload to be?
 - How have caseloads changed over time?
 - Does the participant have the same counselor throughout the program?
- What services do you think are the most helpful for helping participants move to opportunity neighborhoods?

4. Local Housing Market

The local housing market often affects how easy or difficult it is for families to find affordable housing in opportunity neighborhoods. We want to know a little more about the dynamics in your housing authority's jurisdiction.

- What jurisdiction does your housing authority serve?
- What's the vacancy rate in your area? In opportunity neighborhoods?
- What are some of the challenges for participants searching for housing in opportunity areas?

5. Landlord Outreach

In addition to providing services directly to clients, some housing authorities conduct strategic outreach to landlords.

- What are the most common barriers in getting landlords to participate in mobility or housing choice programs?
- Do you do targeted recruitment of landlords in opportunity neighborhoods [i.e., not just general recruitment for TBV participation]?

- **How do you identify these landlords?** [Probe: recruit satisfied landlord, real estate trade organizations, advisory committee of supportive landlords, outreach through community organizations, local advertisements]
- **Do you provide special incentives to landlords in opportunity neighborhoods? Please explain.**

[NOTE: USE IN-HOUSE CHECKLIST TO PROBE FOR AND DOCUMENT SPECIFIC INCENTIVES]

- **Do you have any recruitment materials targeted specifically for these landlords?** [Note: TRY TO GET A COPY OF THE MATERIALS FOR OUR USE]
- **How do you adapt your recruitment efforts to avoid clustering of voucher holders—i.e., re-concentration of poverty?**

6. Costs of the Mobility Program

- **How much do you estimate your mobility program costs per year?**
- **How many people does your program serve per year?**
- **How do you calculate the cost?** [open-ended to get a sense of how they think about it][probe: staff costs, program supplies, security deposit loan assistance or other direct financial assistance to participant, tour van, landlord incentives]

[probe: ASK FOR BUDGET OR ITEMIZED BREAKDOWN IF AVAILABLE]

- **What component of the program is the most costly? Why?**
[probe: by component—i.e., landlord outreach and development, case management, housing search assistance, follow-up support, security deposit assistance]
- **How is your program funded?**
- **Do you receive any support/funding from any of the following groups:**
Local businesses (funding in-kind donations)
Local government agencies
Foundations

7. Program Outcomes

- **How does the housing authority measure the success of the program?**
[probe for specific outcomes—i.e., number of families moved to low-poverty neighborhoods, number of “second movers” who returned to low-poverty neighborhoods]
- **How does the housing authority track the outcomes of the program?**
[probe: method (administrative data vs. survey, who gathers data, which outcomes, how frequently, longitudinal or cross-sectional. Ask for specific software name)]
- **Would it be possible to get a list of the measures that you track?**

[Probe: ASK FOR CODEBOOK, SURVEY INSTRUMENTS IF AVAILABLE]

- We'd love to know more about outcomes for the participants in your program. Could you share with us the latest statistics on the participants in your program?

[Probe: ASK FOR WRITTEN REPORTS OR MATERIALS]

- What would make your program even more successful?
- What are the barriers to doing these things?
[Probe: Does HUD make it more difficult? How?]

8. Closing

- Thank you so much for talking to us today. Your answers were very helpful. Is it all right if we follow-up with you later if there are things that we need to clarify?
- Is this the best number to reach you?
- What days of the week are usually best for you?
- I also wanted to follow-up on the materials about your program that you offered to share with us (i.e., brochures for clients, landlords; budget info; outcomes codebook; reports). Could you please send them to ?