

Attaining Housing Stability After the Storm

Key Findings from the Evaluation of Back@Home

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MAIN FINDINGS

Back@Home supported 798 households in finding new rental housing between October 2018 and April 2021.

Back@Home assessed 1,023 households for service eligibility, provided services to 974 households, and subsidized housing costs for 666 households.

Of the households that received services and had available exit data, 588 (66 percent) were living in stable housing when they stopped receiving services.

In total, Back@Home cost \$6.2 million, with nearly 57 percent spent on subsidizing housing and 43 percent on staff and administration.

Back@Home helped households secure stable housing in an average of 100 days, with the median household taking 77 days.

READ THE FULL BRIEF

Daniel Teles, Will Curran-Groome, Amy Rogin, and Tomi Rajninger. 2023. “Rapid Rehousing after Disaster: Evaluation of North Carolina’s Back@Home Program.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

After Hurricane Florence hit North Carolina in September 2018, nearly 140,000 state residents registered for disaster assistance. When disaster shelters closed in November of that year, people experiencing housing instability or homelessness before the hurricane had no homes to return to. In response, the State of North Carolina created the Back@Home program. Back@Home followed the rapid rehousing model, which aims to quickly move households experiencing housing instability into stable housing by providing housing search assistance, financial assistance for housing-related costs, and case management.¹

After assessing households for eligibility, four Back@Home providers offered housing navigation assistance, case management services, and financial assistance to households living within the declared federal disaster region with a household income at or below 50 percent of the area median income (AMI) that were experiencing housing instability after Hurricane Florence.

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1 shows the 894 households that received services from Back@Home and for whom we had intake and service data.

TABLE 1
Back@Home Household Demographics

Household characteristic	Percent of households
Small household (one or two people)	66
At least one child	47
At least one person with a disability	47
Housing situation before Hurricane Florence	
Living with family or friends	42
Unhoused	30
Stably housed	9
Unknown or missing	19
Race and ethnicity of household head	
Black	53
White	35
American Indian and Alaska Native	6
Other	5

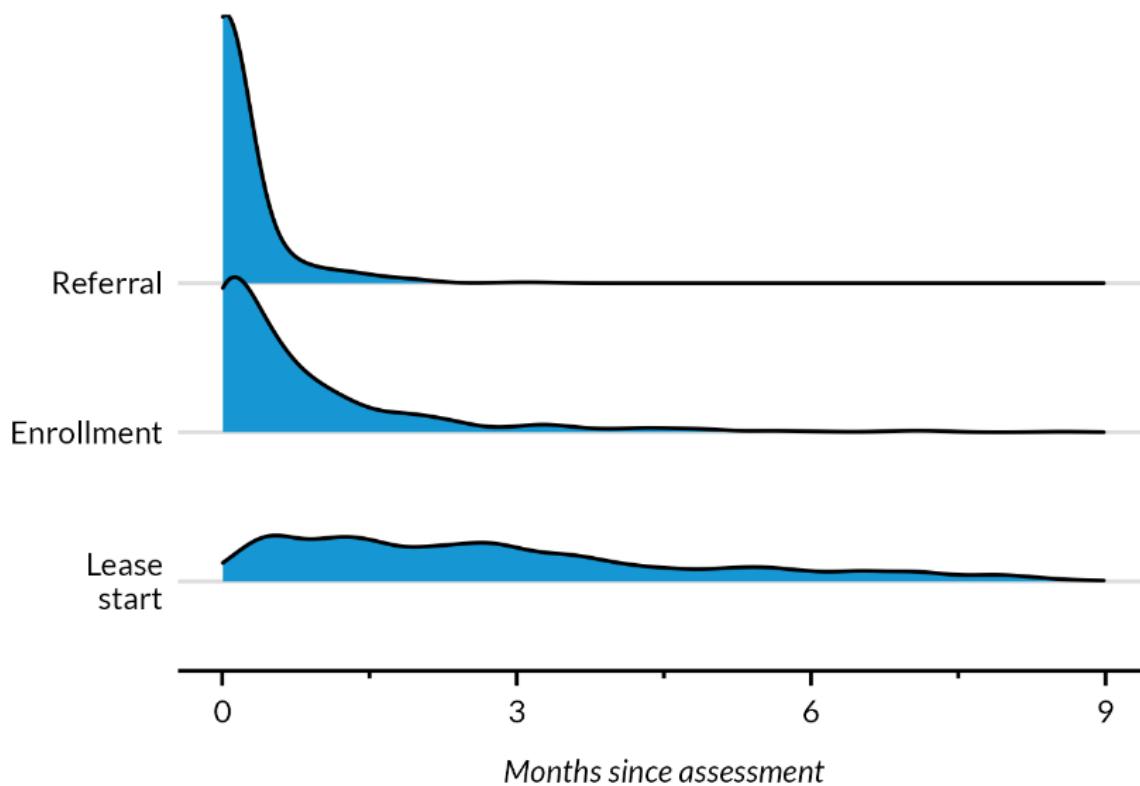
Note: Refer to the appendix of the full brief for additional information on how the variables for these groups were captured in our data.

SERVICES

A key goal of rapid rehousing programs is to efficiently move households into stable housing through housing navigation assistance, financial supports, and case management services.² After being assessed for service eligibility, households were referred to a Back@Home provider that enrolled them in the program. On average, households were enrolled in Back@Home within 35 days of assessment for service eligibility (median was 20 days).

Of the 974 households that received services, 798 (82 percent) found housing. The average time from assessment to signing a lease (“lease start”) was 100 days (median was 77 days). Across these milestones, figure 1 below displays the distribution of the timeline for households participating in Back@Home. Peaks in the graph indicate that a higher frequency of households reached the milestone in the given number of months.

FIGURE 1
Time from Program Assessment to Program Milestone



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Source: Authors' analyses of North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness and North Carolina Housing Finance Agency data.

In examining rehousing timelines across the full cohort of participating households, we observed variation depending on household and provider characteristics. Households that were stably housed before enrolling in Back@Home were rehoused faster than households that were not stably housed (statistically significant at 0.01 level). Providers that served fewer households were able to place them more quickly in stable housing or, in other words, had a shorter time from assessment to “lease up” (statistically significant at 0.01 level).

OUTCOMES

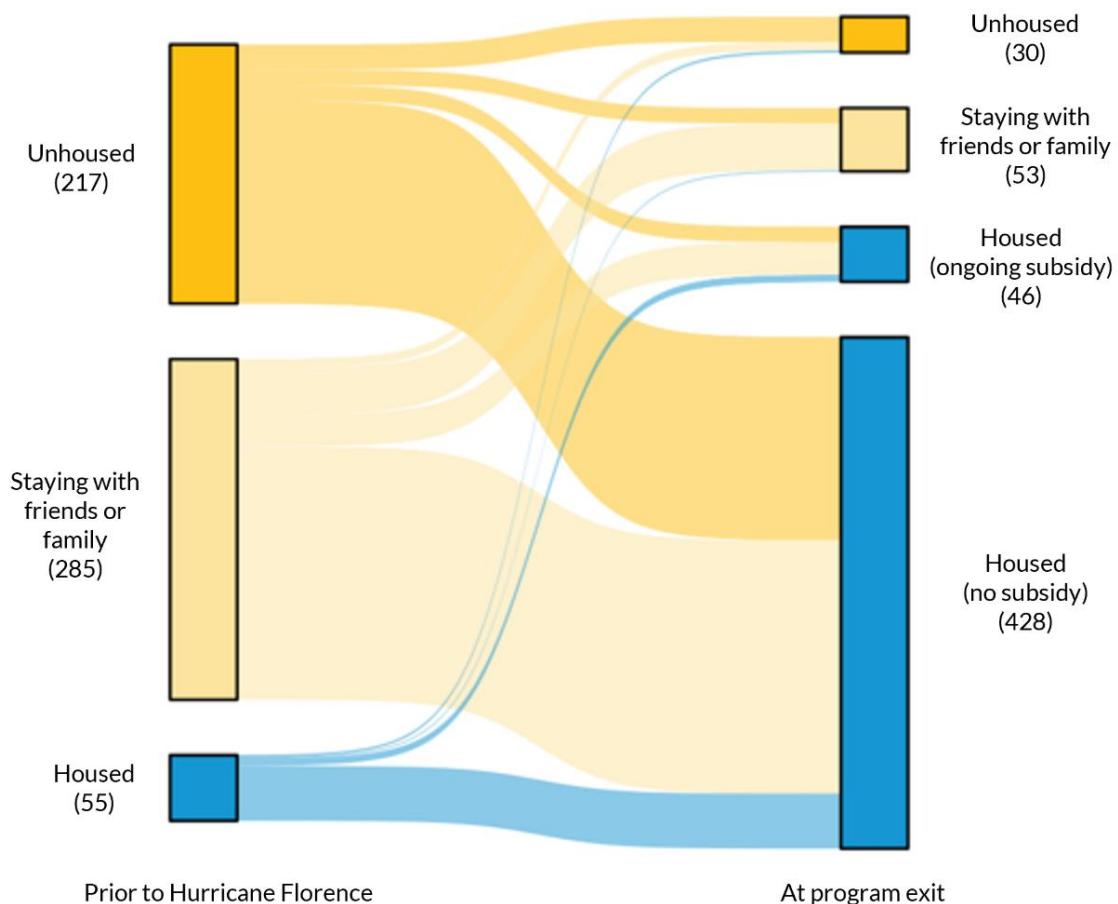
Back@Home helped connect most households to stable housing.

- Among the 557 households for whom we have data both prior to the Hurricane and at exit, 85 percent exited to stable housing (figure 2).
- Most households who were staying with friends or family at exit had also been doing so prior to the hurricane and most households who were unhoused at exit had been unhoused prior to the hurricane (figure 2).
- Even if we assume that all households with missing exit data had an unsuccessful exit, 66 percent of households (588 of the 894 households for whom we have intake and service data) exited to stable housing.

Larger households (five or more people) and households with children were less likely to be unhoused when they exited Back@Home compared with smaller households (one or two people) and those without children, respectively (both statistically significant at 0.01 level). Also, having at least one person with a disability was associated with exiting to subsidized housing and staying with friends or family (statistically significant at 0.02 and 0.01 levels, respectively).

FIGURE 2

Housing Status of Back@Home Households before Enrollment and at Program Exit



Source: Authors' analyses of North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness and North Carolina Housing Finance Agency data.

Notes: Figure 2 does not visualize the 337 households that were missing data on their living situation either prior to Hurricane Florence or after program exit. Therefore, numbers do not match those described in the preceding text (which accounts for all households for which we had both intake and service data including those for whom housing status either prior to Hurricane Florence or at program exit was missing).

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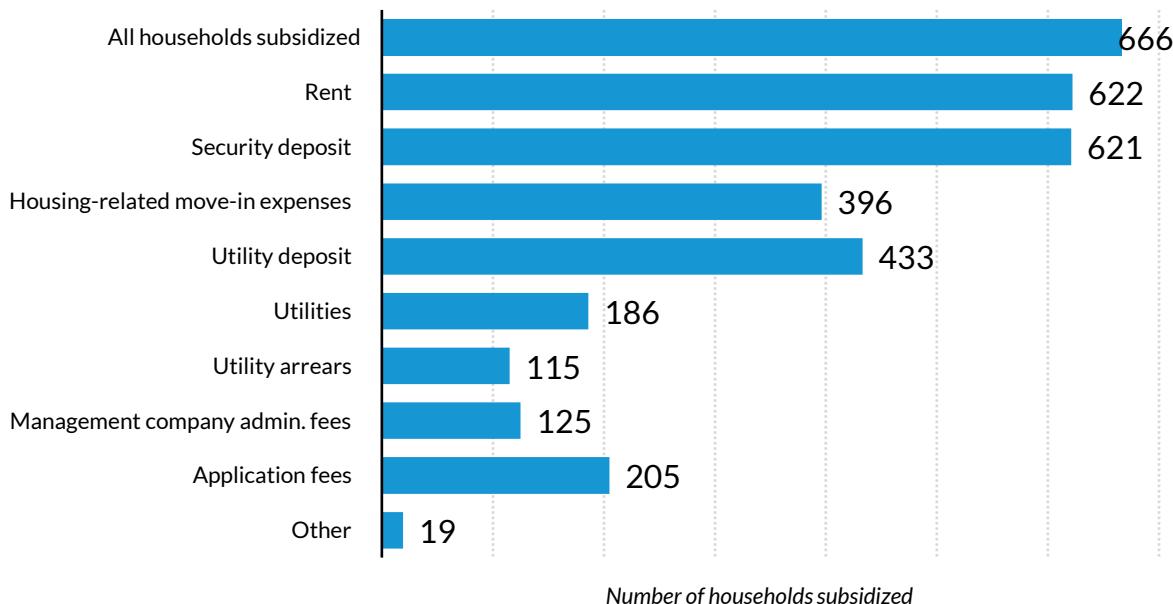
COSTS

Overall, Back@Home cost \$6.2 million, with nearly \$3.6 million (57 percent) spent on financial assistance and \$2.6 million (43 percent) on staff and administration costs. Financial assistance was provided to 666 households (68 percent of the 974 households that received services) and covered housing-related expenses including rent, deposits, and utilities. The vast majority (68 percent) of financial assistance went toward rent payments, totaling \$2.4 million across 622 households. Table 1 indicates how many households received each category of financial assistance.

FIGURE 3

Subsidized Housing Costs by Category

Type of expense



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Source: Authors' analyses of North Carolina Housing Finance Agency data.

Notes: This table reflects analyses of the 666 households for which we had reliable cost data. The "Other" category includes expenses for rent arrears, document fees, and renters' insurance, which accounted for less than \$4,000 in total costs.

IMPLICATIONS

Through services including housing search assistance, financial assistance for housing-related costs, and case management, Back@Home helped 798 households secure housing in the wake of Hurricane Florence. Among the 894 households for whom we had both intake and service data, 66 percent were stably housed by the time support from Back@Home ended, while 72 percent of these households were experiencing housing instability before Hurricane Florence. Looking just at the participants who were unhoused prior to the Hurricane, 68 percent exited to stable housing. Hurricane Florence flooded nearly 75,000 structures, affecting roughly 140,000 people (NWS 2019). In this post-disaster context, with housing, transportation, and other public and social service systems in flux, Back@Home helped rehouse households served in a median of 77 days (average of 100 days) after their initial eligibility assessment.

Because the use of rapid rehousing following a disaster is still novel, it is crucial that lessons learned are documented and shared so that new and existing programs can continue to improve. If other disaster-affected areas are able to

stand up rapid rehousing programs in the future, adaptations related to program structure, services, and eligibility criteria may support improvements in efficiency and even greater positive impacts. Dedicated federal funds could help rapid rehousing become a standard part of the disaster recovery process. But this would require significant changes to federal rules regarding eligibility for post-disaster aid and mechanisms to ensure programs can be launched quickly. In the interim, other states may consider laying the groundwork or setting aside the funding needed to stand up a program similar to Back@Home in the event of a large-scale disaster.

NOTES

¹ Samantha Batko, "Why Communities Should Prioritize Rapid Re-housing for People Forced to Live Outside," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, July 16, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/why-communities-should-prioritize-rapid-re-housing-people-forced-live-outside>.

² "Rapid Re-Housing: Performance Benchmarks and Program Standards," National Alliance to End Homelessness, March 2016, <http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Performance-Benchmarks-and-Program-Standards.pdf>.

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