

How Santa Barbara Used Emergency Housing Vouchers to Prevent and End Homelessness

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In May 2021, **215 emergency housing vouchers** were allocated to Santa Barbara County. The area received 57 vouchers a year later, totaling to 272 vouchers.

As of April 2025, **92 percent of emergency vouchers** remain leased.

Santa Barbara's Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program targeted households transitioning from **term-limited housing assistance** programs, moving on from **permanent supportive housing** programs, or **staying in shelters** for six months or longer.

The **County of Santa Barbara** determined eligibility and made referrals to the city and county public housing authorities. **Good Samaritan Shelter** provided supportive services to EHV holders as they moved into housing.

Located on the central coast of California, Santa Barbara County stretches from the Pacific Ocean to the valleys of Santa Maria and mountains of Santa Ynez. The county has a population of nearly 450,000 people,¹ with Santa Barbara as its county seat and Santa Maria as its most populous city. Despite a backdrop of beaches, coastal towns, and affluent neighborhoods, homelessness is a persistent issue across this largely suburban county. In 2024, Santa Barbara County reported 2,119 people experiencing homelessness on any given night, more than 62 percent of whom were living unsheltered and nearly half (47 percent) of whom were concentrated in the city of Santa Barbara (HCD 2024).

RESPONSE TO HOMELESSNESS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Santa Maria/Santa Barbara County Continuum of Care (CoC) reported 1,729 people experiencing homelessness on any given night in 2015.² This number increased by almost 10 percent to 1,897 in 2020. During the pandemic, city and county officials implemented a range of local, state, and federal measures to protect people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

- **Eviction prevention:** The California legislature passed an eviction moratorium from September 1, 2020, to October 1, 2021. After this date, tenants were subject to eviction for not paying rent unless they had applied for rental assistance, which protected them until June 30, 2022. The Santa Barbara County passed a two-month moratorium on evictions in March 2020, which was extended by the board of supervisors to September 2020. California's COVID-19 Rent Relief program also provided eligible households with funds to pay their rent and utilities to prevent evictions.
- **Rapid expansion of noncongregate shelters:** California Gov. Gavin Newsome established Project Roomkey in March 2020 to significantly expand noncongregate shelter for people experiencing homelessness across the state.³ Santa Barbara secured 15,000 shelter bed nights from Project Roomkey to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

- **Emergency housing relief:** The Housing Authority of the County of Santa Barbara and the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Barbara received housing vouchers through the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program to house people experiencing homelessness (see “About the Emergency Housing Voucher Program”). Santa Barbara County renters experiencing housing insecurity due to the pandemic could access financial support through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program,⁴ which provided emergency rental and utility assistance through the United Way of Santa Barbara County.⁵

SANTA BARBARA’S EHV PROGRAM

Following the US Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) announcement of the EHV program, Santa Barbara received 215 total vouchers—126 to the county housing authority and 89 to the city housing authority. The CoC promptly organized weekly meetings between staff from the CoC, including its coordinated entry team, representatives from the two public housing authorities (PHAs), and housing service providers. Because the two PHAs have overlapping jurisdictions, partners worked to minimize confusion within the community and create a unified program. This effort culminated in agreements on the target population, key program features, and allocation of additional resources to assist EHV holders.

Santa Barbara’s EHV program prioritized three groups:

1. People experiencing chronic homelessness prioritized through the coordinated entry system
2. Households fleeing domestic violence referred from victim services providers
3. Households enrolled in rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing programs identified as needing to transition to a voucher

Several considerations went into deciding these groups. First and foremost, the CoC secured \$1.9 million from a variety of resources to provide intensive case management and supportive services to EHV holders for up to three years.⁶ Without this funding, partners likely would not have selected the same target population. Staff also explained that Santa Barbara had an existing small, scattered-site supportive housing program, and with the services funding, they saw the EHV program as an opportunity to expand that approach. Finally, during the pandemic, the CoC “had housed people [using rapid rehousing] even if they were prioritized for permanent supportive housing...and were really going to need a subsidy to sustain housing.” The EHV program could “help avoid some returns to homelessness that were very likely to happen without the subsidy.”

ABOUT THE EMERGENCY HOUSING VOUCHER PROGRAM

As part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program to address homelessness and housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2021, HUD allocated 70,000 tenant-based EHV to 613 public housing authorities (PHAs) across the country. The program targeted households experiencing homelessness; those at risk of experiencing homelessness; individuals or families fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, or human trafficking; households that were recently homeless; and households for whom providing rental assistance will prevent homelessness or reduce their risk of housing instability.

To facilitate the use of EHV within the target population, HUD required PHAs to formalize partnerships with local Continuums of Care through a memorandum of understanding. Through this partnership, communities designed a local EHV program to support and house people experiencing homelessness.

Source: “Emergency Housing Vouchers – Operating Requirements,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, May 5, 2021, <https://urbn.is/3XR74mo>.

Notes: Read more about the EHV program at <https://www.hud.gov/ehv>.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Early in the planning stage for the EHV program, the Santa Maria/Santa Barbara CoC surveyed people experiencing homelessness outdoors as well as in shelters to learn about the challenges they faced accessing housing services in the county. The feedback provided during this time informed much of Santa Barbara's approach in providing a comprehensive voucher program.

"We did some surveying in the beginning. We went to different parks and shelters and talked to people, especially about what would people need if they were entering housing with zero income...we knew that was going to be an issue and [wanted] feedback especially around that issue. And we asked also people questions about whether they knew about the coordinated entry system. And we found that a lot of people did not really understand the coordinated entry system." —Santa Barbara EHV program staff

Key Partner Roles and Responsibilities

The CoC and the two PHAs solidified their partnership through a memorandum of understanding establishing the roles and responsibilities of each agency. The CoC was tasked with identifying and referring eligible households from the prioritized groups to the PHAs. The program relied on existing coordinated entry system case conferencing groups to identify potential rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing households (i.e., group 3) to match with the EHV program. These households were prioritized based on the following factors: original coordinated entry system placements, lack of income, need for additional supportive services, and the end date of their subsidy. While there were no specific set-asides for this type of referral, staff agreed a higher proportion of vouchers should be allocated to people experiencing homelessness (i.e., groups 1 and 2). Eligible households were then referred to a PHA based on where they currently lived or their preferred housing location.

To support eligible households through the application and housing search process, the CoC partnered with housing service providers, including those linked to households referred from rapid rehousing or permanent supportive housing programs. These staff assisted households in obtaining necessary documentation, completing applications, searching for housing, connecting to mainstream benefits, and understanding lease terms, when applicable. On the housing authority side, PHAs had dedicated staff responsible for inspecting units, providing financial incentives to landlords through the service fee, and liaising with landlords. Both PHAs also hired housing navigators to guide households through the application and voucher issuance stages, as needed.

Key Facilitators of Success

Santa Barbara County successfully leased the initial allotment of 215 EHV's within the first year of its program. As a result, HUD awarded 25 additional vouchers to the city housing authority and 32 to the county housing authority. Staff emphasized that partners understood the urgency of the pandemic and were driven to design a program "to get vouchers utilized quickly and efficiently. And not just to get them utilized, but to keep them utilized, [and] keep participants housed in a home that they can be proud of and live successfully." Below, we highlight the set of tools that facilitated the program's success.

COMMUNICATION AND PROJECT MANAGEMENT

As previously noted, the CoC organized weekly meetings to plan and implement the EHV program early in the process. Partners agreed that this project management structure helped support collaboration and created a space for partners to quickly identify and resolve challenges that arose during implementation. Additionally, the CoC kept a spreadsheet to track progress across the different stages of the process among EHV holders throughout implementation. Staff described the project management and tracking system as a key facilitator of the program's success: "People make a big deal about the incentives—and they were important—but the project management was just as important. I've talked to other agencies, and just having those incentives without that intense project management and communication, we wouldn't have been able to get where we got with the lease-ups."

WAIVERS

HUD provided a set of mandatory and optional waivers to support lease-ups for the EHV program.⁷ Staff shared that increasing the payment standard (an optional waiver) and allowing for lease terms of less than 12 months (a mandatory waiver) were essential to placing people quickly into housing. One staff member commented, “A lot of our clients wouldn’t have been able to lease up in such a high-rent area” without these waivers, and “with not having a rental history and some [having] no income, these waivers were very beneficial to [many] voucher holders.” Moreover, with the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Santa Barbara City College located in the area, a large portion of the local rental market is occupied by students. This means that the rental market can often tighten depending on the time of the year, there are more options for shared housing, and lease terms tend to be shorter than 12 months (e.g., month to month). During the pandemic, however, many students were learning remotely, leaving the market open to nonstudent renters. The HUD waiver around lease terms aligned with these market conditions in Santa Barbara.

LANDLORD INCENTIVES AND A MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Like many other communities across the country, Santa Barbara included a landlord incentive package and used the service fee and other resources to encourage landlords to participate in the EHV program.⁸ The city and county housing authorities initially agreed to offer a \$1,500 signing bonus in the package. However, after monitoring the pace of referrals and lease-ups, the PHAs increased the amount to \$5,000. Table 1 shows the financial incentive structure advertised to landlords in Santa Barbara. At the same time, partners also launched a \$10,000 media campaign using digital flyers and public service announcements to recruit to new landlords.⁹ As previously described, partners felt that this landlord incentive approach was as essential to the program’s success as the project management structure that helped developed it.

TABLE 1
Santa Barbara EHV Program Landlord Incentive Structure

Incentive type	Amount
Signing bonus (first lease-up)	\$5,000
Signing bonus for additional lease-ups	\$2,500
Security deposit	Lesser of one month’s rent or \$2,000
Mitigation insurance fund (damages and repair fund)	Up to \$5,000

Source: Urban Institute review of secondary materials.

ASSESSING RISK IN WAIVER UTILIZATION

Partners deliberately opted against using the optional waiver for self-certification of identity documents or income, citing concerns about the administrative burden and the risk of excluding households from the program if they could not obtain the required documents.

“Any delay in obtaining information for original eligibility purposes and then later trying to go back and determine if we had what we needed” would be administratively challenging, “and the fact that a lot of these clients had struggles to get to even this eligibility point, we didn’t want to create additional hurdles to make them have to return to our offices or be reaching out to them every so often to try to obtain a social security card, or whatever that may have been that we needed, so we determined it was easier to get that all upfront.” –Santa Barbara EHV program staff

INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

As previously mentioned, the CoC recognized the EHV program as an opportunity to expand scattered-site supportive housing in Santa Barbara. To support this effort, the county allocated funding for up to three years of intensive case management and supportive services and issued a request for proposals (RFP) to identify a provider

“I think the EHV’s were a big success because of that sense of urgency, and that existed because of the way the vouchers were set up but also because of COVID and this idea that we can’t have people waiting on the streets.” –Santa Barbara EHV program staff

to deliver these services to EHV holders. Staff highlighted that “part of the [RFP] was that [the provider] had to be able to provide mental health and substance use disorder services. So, they have certified providers and really good things happening there (e.g., 24-hour hotline that clients or landlords can call if there’s an issue).” Additionally, applicants were encouraged to propose an approach that “provides a high level of care and leverages other funding sources such as [California’s Medicaid initiative], CalAIM.”¹⁰

In September 2021, the county contracted with Good Samaritan Shelter to provide these services for the three years of support. Many EHV holders were connected to Good Samaritan Shelter services as they began moving into housing; however, some were connected as soon as they were referred to the EHV program. Partners emphasized that supportive services were not only essential for ensuring long-term housing stability for the target population but also served as a critical tool for building relationships with landlords.

ENSURING LONG-TERM STABILITY FOR EHV HOLDERS

As of April 2025, 92 percent of EHV’s in Santa Barbara were still leased,¹¹ demonstrating the long-term success of the program. Santa Barbara’s EHV program provides valuable insights for policymakers and services providers, especially around sustainability and supporting voucher holders with high needs.

According to staff, approximately 70 percent of people served in Santa Barbara’s EHV program were experiencing homelessness at the time they were referred, while 30 percent were households referred from rapid rehousing or permanent supportive housing programs and at risk of returning to homelessness. Given the program’s focus on highly vulnerable populations, wraparound services were critical for ensuring housing stability among EHV holders. When county funding for these supportive services ended after three years, partners aimed to secure sustained funding through CalAIM. In 2023, Good Samaritan Shelter became an Enhanced Care Management and Community Supports provider, enabling them to bill Medicaid for tenancy-sustaining services and enhanced care management. However, the success of this reimbursement model depends on continued and sustained engagement with participants.

To fully support EHV holders—particularly those who are unable or unwilling to either enroll in Medicaid or participate in case management—braided funding is essential. Policymakers should consider linking funding for supportive services directly to voucher programs targeting individuals experiencing homelessness, recognizing that case management and tenancy support is necessary regardless of a person’s level of vulnerability.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Between October and December 2024, Urban Institute researchers interviewed staff in six communities, including Santa Barbara County, to learn about the successes and challenges of planning and implementing the EHV program. To read more about this project and view our other case studies, visit <https://urbn.is/EHVprogram>.

NOTES

¹ “QuickFacts: Santa Barbara County, California,” US Census Bureau, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/santabarbaracountycalifornia>.

- ² See detailed point-in-time count results since 2007 by year and by jurisdiction at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2024-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us.html>.
- ³ “Project Roomkey/Housing and Homelessness COVID Response,” California Department of Social Services, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/cdss-programs/housing-programs/project-roomkey>.
- ⁴ The Emergency Rental Assistance Program was funded by the US Department of Treasury and made available through the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Read more at “Emergency Rental Assistance Program,” US Department of the Treasury, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/emergency-rental-assistance-program>.
- ⁵ “Rent and Utility Assistance,” United Way Santa Barbara County, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.unitedwaysb.org/rent>.
- ⁶ The county braided funding from the Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention Grant Program, the American Rescue Plan Act, and the Permanent Local Housing Allocation Program, totaling \$1,928,630, to fund supportive services for three years.
- ⁷ Read more at “Emergency Housing Vouchers – Operating Requirements,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, May 5, 2021, <https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/PIH/documents/PIH2021-15.pdf>; and “Summary Checklist: EHV Waivers and Alternative Requirements,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, October 2022, <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/EHV-Waivers-and-Alternative-Requirements-Summary-Checklist.pdf>.
- ⁸ PHAs received \$3,500 per EHV allocation for the service fee and could use them for housing search assistance expenses, security deposits, landlord incentives, and other moving expenses, including furniture. Read more about the service fee at “EHV Service Fee Guidance, Tips, and Resources,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/ehv/sfg.
- ⁹ See the Emergency Housing Voucher public service announcement in Santa Barbara at “EHV PSA,” posted July 20, 2021, by WaveComm SB, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLixpMbl4w4>.
- ¹⁰ Launched in 2022, CalAIM intends to address social determinants of health by enabling “Medi-Cal managed care plans to couple clinical care with a range of new [reimbursable] nonmedical services,” including “housing supports, medical respite, personal care, medically tailored meals, and peer supports” (CHCF 2021).
- ¹¹ “Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) Data Dashboard,” US Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 8, 2025, https://www.hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/ehv/dashboard.

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