



Rapid Re-housing in High-Cost Markets

What Do Programs Look Like?

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Rapid re-housing has become a large component of the response to homelessness in communities across the country. Federal, state, and local investment have grown substantially: in January 2018, nearly 110,000 people were receiving rapid re-housing assistance nationwide, a 450 percent increase from January 2013 (Henry et al. 2018). Research on rapid re-housing is still emerging, but studies thus far show that it helps families and individuals exit shelter quickly, gain entrance to permanent housing in the private market, and prevent return to homelessness within a year (Cunningham and Batko 2018).

To date, no studies have found anything conclusive on variations in outcomes resulting from differences in program implementation or housing market characteristics. As part of an evaluation Urban is conducting for Hamilton Families, a homeless service provider in San Francisco, we conducted a scan of rapid re-housing programs for families in four other high-cost markets: Boston, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Washington, DC.¹ The goal of this scan was to collect information on how the programs measure and set performance benchmarks, deliver core services, collaborate regionally, and follow up with families after exit. Across programs, we identified eight key themes.

Rapid Re-housing Is a Short-Term, Crisis Intervention

Despite the immense needs of families, our interviews confirmed that rapid re-housing is a crisis or emergency intervention designed to end an episode of homelessness. Referrals for services in the community reflected the hope that families could be successful and remain in communities they were

housed in long term and continue to build on the foundation provided by the program; however, the core services provided by and the key performance metrics used by the programs showed a focus on the immediate goals of ending homelessness and preventing returns to homelessness in the short term. The primary performance metrics programs cited were exits to permanent housing and returns to homelessness. Some of the programs interviewed also focused on the time it took to find housing and increases in income.

For programs that provided performance information, they were successfully meeting two of the national benchmarks and standards for rapid re-housing: exits to permanent housing and returns to homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2016). The third national benchmark, time from referral to housing (calculated as time from referral from coordinated entry to move-in date) was not used by most providers interviewed.

Additionally, services provided focused almost exclusively on housing location, short-term financial assistance for rent, and increasing income to pay for rent when the program ended. All other services were provided through referrals to community-based agencies with the goal of transitioning families out of a relationship with the rapid re-housing organization and into longer-term relationships with community-based service providers.

Programs Work with Families to Define Success and Tailor Goals and Service Plans to the Household

Rapid rehousing programs want families to be successful, but the definition of “success” for a family is not as standardized as other program metrics discussed above. The programs we interviewed indicated that the overall goal for families was to find and maintain housing, but programs highlighted the individualized nature of setting goals with families, finding housing, and designing service plans. Interviewed staff said, “We understand that success means different things to different families,” and, “They are the experts of their own lives.” These two statements summarize how the programs approached their work with families, including how they defined goals for a successful living situation after the program, how they conducted housing search, designed service plans, and provided referrals. This led programs to explore living situations that may look different for each family: exploring shared housing either with a roommate, another matched family, or with a family member, and considering helping families reunite with family or friends in another location. Similarly, the determination of whether a family needed to be referred to ongoing assistance—either a permanent subsidy or permanent supportive housing—was a case-by-case decision that could change over the course of a family’s participation in the program. Lastly, programs indicated that service participation for families was entirely voluntary, in alignment with housing first principles, except for regular check-ins with caseworkers—typically monthly—that were generally required by the program funder.

Housing Search Is Ongoing and Challenging, and It Requires Specialized Staff

As expected, housing search efforts were a primary component of the work these programs did with families. All programs shared some common strategies: specialized staff reaching out and working directly with landlords; staff working directly with families to complete the search, including helping them locate units and navigate the application and lease process; and policies around rent and move-in assistance (sometimes this included being able to pay additional money for security deposits and first month rent, provide referrals for furniture and other household items, and providing additional assurances in case of unit damage).

Every program had at least one specialized staff person whose primary responsibility was to recruit and maintain relationships with landlords. Programs indicated that this is an ongoing process since they knew they would inevitably lose landlords due to challenges with individual families. One program also indicated that its jurisdiction was attempting to move to a regional landlord search process in which rapid re-housing programs jurisdiction-wide would be able to access information on available units and landlords from a centralized hub. Programs also invested time in educating families on how to navigate the application and lease process, as well as how to talk to and negotiate with a landlord once in housing. One program indicated it also focused on educating landlords—particularly private landlords—on their responsibilities in a tenant relationship.

Housing Subsidy Structure Varies, but Families Are Regularly Assessed for Continuation and Changes in Subsidy Level

There was little consistency in how programs structured their housing assistance, and programs indicated that there was continuing evolution of this piece of the program model. Strategies included determining subsidy amounts based on a share of family income (ranging from 30 to 60 percent) paid toward rent each month, a gradual increase in the share of income paid toward rent over time, and a calculation based on a combination of SPDAT score² and income-to-rent ratio. One common theme, regardless of the source of funding for rapid re-housing, was that families were not provided with financial assistance for a predetermined amount of time. Instead they were regularly reassessed for ongoing eligibility for assistance and the level of assistance needed, most commonly every three months. One interviewed program referred to this as a progressive engagement strategy. Programs acknowledged that regardless of how much families paid in rent during the program, they were likely to be rent burdened when they exited. Programs indicated families were likely to be paying anywhere from 60 to 90 percent of their income toward rent when they exited the program, given the reality of high-cost markets.

Regular Check-Ins with a Caseworker Are the Only Mandatory Service

As discussed above, the only requirement for families with regards to service provision was participation in regular (typically monthly) meetings with a caseworker. Most programs indicated the format for these meetings were flexible: at the person's home, at an agreed-upon meeting point, or on the phone. The purpose of these meetings is to check in on progress toward agreed-upon goals and collect financial information. Families are encouraged to meet with caseworkers more frequently when appropriate, and programs indicated that caseworkers actively worked to engage families in more frequent touch points. Programs indicated that the caseloads for caseworkers who served in these roles is between 21 and 35 families at a time.

Services Provided by the Rapid Re-housing Program Primarily Focus on Increasing Income

Services provided by the programs focused on increasing a household's income. Three of the four programs interviewed had dedicated employment staff who families were referred to as soon as possible—at one program, an employment specialist was at the intake meeting with each family. One program also had a performance benchmark for increasing income (for 15 percent of families, a goal the program was significantly exceeding at the time of interview). Families were not required to participate in employment services, but programs emphasized that every effort was made to engage families in income-related services. Specifically, employment work within programs focused on increasing income within a short time frame.

Rapid Re-housing Providers Rely on Referrals to Specialized Service Providers for Other Services

Programs consistently stated they relied upon specialized service providers in communities where families are housed to provide other services for families, such as physical, mental, and behavioral health treatment; legal and financial advice; domestic violence support; and child care and other children's services. The reasons for outside referrals were twofold: one, these providers held expertise in these areas and would provide services better than the rapid re-housing program could; and two, re-housing programs wanted families to build service relationships in the neighborhoods in which they lived that would outlast their participation in the rapid re-housing program. Programs primarily relied on families to follow up on referrals but would provide warm hand-off support when appropriate or when a family indicated challenges accessing the referral agency. One interviewed staff member said: "We place a high emphasis on referrals since we won't be there in 12 months most likely. Families need to be connected in the community and not rely on us to be the only support."

Programs Do Not Collect Feedback from Families after They Exit

Programs indicated they have some informal methods of collecting information from families, and some indicated formal efforts to survey families while they were enrolled in the program. Universally, programs indicated that collecting feedback from families after they exited the program is extremely difficult and time consuming for staff. For programs that had attempted it, they reached out to families after program exit via email, text, and phone call, but none of these methods generated strong response rates, so most stopped follow-up efforts. Programs also indicated that once a family exited from the program successfully, the program did not want the family to be reliant on them any longer. Program staff thought reaching out could be counterproductive in that respect. Programs used outcomes at program exit and available administrative data (namely HMIS) to track outcomes for families who exited.

Notes

- ¹ Four programs—HomeStart in Boston, LA Family Housing in Los Angeles, Neighborhood House in Seattle, and Community of Hope in Washington, DC—were selected for interviews on the basis of several criteria: (1) publicly available performance data that met or exceeded at least two of the national benchmarks and/or the program was included in a study, (2) the program had the capacity to serve at least 100 households in a year, (3) the program was operating a rapid re-housing program for at least five years, and (4) the program and/or its staff were recognized as national leaders or experts on rapid re-housing or one of its components. As a limited number of programs was interviewed, our findings are not generalizable to all rapid re-housing programs in high-cost markets, and as no programs in other lower-cost markets were interviewed, no assumptions can be made about programming differences between high- and lower-cost markets. The primary interview candidate was the program director responsible for rapid re-housing in the agency. Three of the four programs had additional staff members, including housing search and services supervisors, join the interview. Capacity across programs at the time of interview varied because of fluctuations in rapid re-housing funding at the programs. The program with the smallest family capacity at the time of interview had served larger numbers of families in previous years and had a large rapid re-housing program for individuals. One program operated multiple rapid re-housing programs. Most of those programs were receiving referrals through coordinated entry, but one was a partnership with the schools in the district and received referrals through the school system.
- ² The SPDAT is a case management tool used to identify the areas in a person or family's life where support is most likely necessary to avoid housing instability.

References

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