

RESEARCH REPORT

# Moving On Initiative

Second Annual Report

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# Executive Summary

This report is a preliminary assessment of the early implementation of the Moving On Initiative (MOI). MOI's objectives are (1) to help long-term, stabilized tenants of permanent supportive housing (PSH) in San Francisco move into independent housing through the use of a Housing Choice Voucher and (2) to use the opening created when a person "moves on" from PSH to house chronically homeless individuals currently living on the streets or in shelters. When MOI works well, it creates greater efficiencies in the homelessness response system by ensuring that resources are allocated based on individual need.

Our findings demonstrate that MOI fulfills a widespread desire among PSH tenants to move to independent housing while supporting the goal of the City and County of San Francisco (CCSF) to increase the availability of PSH for people experiencing chronic homelessness. Expanding MOI could be crucial to reducing chronic homelessness, particularly over the next few years as CCSF's current plans do not show a significant number of newly built PSH units opening until 2021–22.

As of July 2019, 193 single adults had successfully moved into independent housing with a voucher through MOI. Seventy-three percent of program participants who received a voucher used it to rent an apartment in the Bay Area. This is comparable to the national success rate for the voucher program in large cities, which is estimated to be 69 percent (Finkel and Buron 2001). MOI achieved this level of success despite working with a highly vulnerable population in the most expensive housing market in the country. The keys to success for MOI included having housing specialists who secured units for participants and housing coordinators who served as intermediaries between participants and property owners; choosing participants ready to handle the increased independence; communicating the limitations of MOI; and creating trusting relationships between staff and participants.

All 193 MOI participants who successfully moved into independent housing remain housed. MOI allowed participants to live in more desirable neighborhoods and with more independence than they had while in PSH. This led to improved quality of life and strengthened social connections. Participants spoke of reestablishing connections with family and feeling as though they were returning to the life they had before becoming homeless.

Staff members in the PSH properties with the greatest number of MOI participants reported that replacing their most stable residents with chronically homeless individuals entering from the streets or shelters did not create any significant challenges.

The program succeeded in identifying people who were ready to move out of PSH and into a more independent setting. However, the housing search process was stressful for most participants, particularly for those who entered in the early stages of the program. For the 27 percent of participants who were unsuccessful in using their vouchers, the experience was more stressful than for those who did find housing and often created lingering feelings of resentment and distrust. PSH staff members also reported that even some PSH residents who did not participate in MOI felt demoralized watching their neighbors try and fail to move on. In addition, some participants who successfully moved on felt socially isolated or struggled with paying bills or other aspects of independent living. If the program is expanded, many of these challenges could be addressed by revising the application process to be more transparent, client-centered, and user friendly; expanding services; and improving coordination between partners.

At the time of this report, MOI is effectively stalled because the financial challenges at the San Francisco Housing Authority preclude it from issuing any more Housing Choice Vouchers. However, 239 eligible households are on the waiting list. Thus, if alternative sources of subsidies are identified, MOI could resume. This report discusses the potential benefits of expanding the program and recommends ways that MOI could be improved.

# Moving On Initiative

Permanent supportive housing (PSH) provides an ongoing rental subsidy and voluntary services for people with disabilities experiencing homelessness. Despite its name, tenants need not live in PSH forever. In San Francisco, PSH units are often single-room occupancies (SROs) with shared kitchens, bathrooms, and living spaces in aging buildings in need of repair. Many PSH tenants would prefer living situations that offer more independence, better amenities, or a more desirable neighborhood than their PSH unit provides, but they cannot afford to do so. “Moving on” programs give PSH tenants who no longer need supportive services the ability to move into private rental housing with a voucher. These exits in turn make PSH available to people currently experiencing chronic homelessness. Communities are increasingly turning to these programs to help facilitate positive exits from supportive housing, and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has embraced these programs as part of its strategy for ending homelessness.

San Francisco’s Moving On Initiative (MOI) was launched in December 2016 as a collaboration of the nonprofit organization Brilliant Corners (BC), the San Francisco City and County’s Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH), and the federally overseen, locally managed San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA). HSH identifies and screens applicants; SFHA provides the vouchers; and BC secures rental units, helps participants use their vouchers, and provides up to 12 months of housing retention services after participants move in. These housing retention services include help finding furniture, managing the move, paying rent and other bills on time, and resolving potential conflicts with the property owner or other tenants. Tipping Point Community (Tipping Point) funds BC’s housing placement and retention services as part of Tipping Point’s Chronic Homelessness Initiative (CHI). Rental assistance is funded through HUD’s Housing Choice Voucher Program. The Urban Institute, with support from the Center for Vulnerable Populations at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF), is evaluating MOI as part of a larger evaluation of CHI.

CHI is a five-year, \$100 million philanthropic effort to reduce chronic homelessness in San Francisco by 50 percent by the end of 2022. Tipping Point has developed a three-pronged strategy: create more housing, prevent chronic homelessness, and help strengthen the public sector’s response to chronic homelessness.<sup>1</sup> MOI is one of Tipping Point’s investments to create more housing, by facilitating positive exits from PSH and making units available to people currently experiencing chronic homelessness.

As of August 2019, 947 single adults had applied to participate in MOI, and 262 had successfully moved out of PSH and into their own housing. In addition to moves into private housing through the voucher program, some MOI participants moved into public housing or Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) units. Our report focuses on the 193 single adults who were housed with a tenant-based Housing Choice Voucher because that was the component that Tipping Point helped fund as part of CHI.

The relatively low yield for the program thus far (28 percent; 262 placements from 947 referrals) was caused by the halt in vouchers from SFHA. In October 2018, a financial audit found that SFHA had overspent its housing assistance payment budget by nearly \$30 million.<sup>2</sup> The City and County of San Francisco (CCSF) and HUD stepped in to ensure that existing voucher holders would not lose assistance, and the Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development took over SFHA.<sup>3</sup> However, CCSF is not issuing any new vouchers through the general Housing Choice Voucher Program until CCSF has repaid SFHA's debts, which may take several years.<sup>4</sup> Staff report that several hundred MOI applications were submitted after the voucher freeze began. CCSF reports that 239 households have been screened into MOI and are eligible for a voucher when MOI resumes.

## Research Questions and Methods

This evaluation's goals are to document MOI, identify implementation challenges and how they were addressed, and assess the initiative's contribution to the overall success or failure of CHI. It also attempts to capture the experiences of MOI participants, including their motivations for applying to the program; their experiences finding and moving into their own apartments; and the long-term effects of the program on their housing stability, connection to services, and overall well-being.

This is a preliminary report on the implementation of MOI. It is our second report on MOI. The first report found that while the moving process was often confusing and stressful, every participant who successfully moved on preferred their new housing to living in PSH. Most participants also reported that the move gave them pride, "normalcy," and greater hope for the future, although a few reported feeling isolated without the social networks they had developed in PSH (Feiss, Bamberger, and Leopold 2019).

This report draws from the following data sources:

- BC-collected program data on the number and characteristics of participants who were issued a voucher, their housing location, and the amount of the rental subsidy they received

- HSH data on the number of single adults who submitted MOI applications
- Interviews with HSH and BC frontline and management staff members
- Interviews with case managers in PSH buildings that had the highest number of MOI participants
- Interviews with MOI participants

In June 2019, BC invited all single adults who had been issued vouchers to participate in the evaluation. Participants were asked to contact UCSF, which led to 77 requests for interviews. UCSF then selected a sample of 37 interviewees (48 percent of the requests). In screening potential interviewees, UCSF intentionally tried to include participants who were not included in the first report. Specifically, they tried to include adequate representation from participants who were unsuccessful in using their voucher as well as participants who were housed but had graduated from housing retention services because they had lived in their new housing for more than a year. Ultimately, UCSF interviewed 10 participants who had not been successful in using their voucher and therefore remained in PSH; 15 participants who had “moved on” within the previous year and continued to receive housing retention services; and 12 participants who had moved on more than a year earlier and graduated from retention services. Compared with all MOI participants, the interview sample had a similar proportion of those who had successfully used their vouchers. As shown in table 1, interviewed participants had similar demographic characteristics to the group of 193 total MOI participants who found housing through a tenant-based Housing Choice Voucher.

**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics of MOI Interviewees Versus All MOI Participants Who Were Housed with a Voucher**

	Interviewees (n=37)	All MOI participants (n=193)
Average age	59	56
Percentage male	61	66
Percentage black	49	51
Percentage white, non-Hispanic	27	37
Percentage other race/ethnicity <sup>a</sup>	24	12

**Sources:** Interviewee characteristics are from the University of California San Francisco research team. Information on all MOI participants housed with a voucher is from the Brilliant Corners quarterly report to Tipping Point Community for April–June 2019.

**Notes:** Interviewees include some participants who received a voucher but were unable to use it, but MOI participant characteristics are only for those who successfully leased up. MOI = Moving On Initiative.

<sup>a</sup> Includes people who identified as Latinx, Native American, or multiracial and people who declined to provide race/ethnicity information.

# The Moving On Process

MOI's early implementation did not happen at a steady pace. In the first seven months, before BC had fully staffed up or established an inventory of apartments, BC was flooded with applicants from SFHA. By July 2017, MOI received fewer referrals from SFHA, and BC had increased its capacity. However, new referrals abruptly stopped in 2018 after the aforementioned financial audit led to an indefinite halt on issuing Housing Choice Vouchers. This section draws from interviews with staff members and MOI participants to describe MOI's operation, from the application stage to the move to new housing.

## Application and Screening

MOI represented a change in thinking for San Francisco, which had long considered PSH as the “permanent” residence for formerly homeless people with disabilities. The most difficult part of program design was setting clear parameters for referrals. HSH set the eligibility criteria for MOI as PSH tenants with no lease violations in the previous 12 months, no late rent payments, no aggressive behavioral issues, and tenants whose case manager and property manager (as well as those two managers' supervisors) would confirm that the candidate did not need on-site case management. PSH staff members were responsible for identifying tenants who met those criteria and helping them apply for the program.

PSH staff varied in how they applied HSH's eligibility criteria. Some staff members described an exhaustive screening process designed to ensure that only the “best” residents were referred because MOI was a pilot program and they wanted it to be successful. Others referred all residents who expressed interest, assuming that HSH would screen out those who did not qualify. Participants also reported varied experiences of learning about and applying to MOI. Although some participants completed the application on their own and found the process to be simple and straightforward, many participants reported receiving different levels of support from PSH case managers. A few applicants were unaware that they had applied to the program and assumed that PSH staff had applied for them.

Once the application process began, many PSH tenants applied, and HSH became overwhelmed. Word of the program spread across PSH properties and tapped into a strong desire among tenants to move into independent housing. Staff members reported that residents perceived a voucher as a “golden ticket.”

Some participants said they were motivated to join the program to move out of the Tenderloin, a downtown neighborhood with high rates of violent crime, drug use, and sex work and where nearly all

of San Francisco's PSH is. Other participants spoke about their desire to get away from other tenants who used substances, as that environment interfered with their recovery efforts. Some participants wanted to move to a nicer building with more living space and their own kitchens and bathrooms. Some participants said they wanted to live without PSH building rules that they considered strict and at times invasive. In particular, several MOI participants cited the PSH rule against having a guest for more than 14 days a month. One participant said her son stayed with her for the maximum time allowed and then spent the rest of each month on the streets. "It was like a jail to me," she said. "And now [in my new apartment], my son can come and go as he pleases. He doesn't have to sign rosters or show ID." Another participant said, "It boils down to having somebody else have a say in who comes to visit me."

Referrals from PSH providers triggered a multipart process of screenings, appointments, and paperwork that, if successful, led to SFHA's issuing a voucher. First, HSH reviewed applications from PSH providers and determined whether applicants met the eligibility requirements. Those who did were referred to SFHA, which conducted another round of eligibility screening. Those who moved forward in the process were invited by SFHA to attend an intake meeting, where they received the forms required to receive a voucher. Once applicants submitted the forms, SFHA reviewed them and conducted a background check on the applicants. After applicants cleared the background check, SFHA scheduled an orientation briefing where the applicant was issued a voucher.

Many participants found this part of the process confusing. Some found that contacting SFHA employees to schedule appointments or to ask questions was difficult. Participants also struggled to learn when and where their intake appointments were taking place. The appointments were generally done in a group setting with up to 30 people, and participants sometimes had a hard time following the conversation or did not feel comfortable asking questions. Many participants had difficulty understanding the different roles that BC and SFHA played and therefore were unsure where to turn for help.

Participants reported widely varying lengths of time between the submission of an application and the issuance of a voucher, ranging from months to more than a year. Some viewed the process as unacceptably long, while others said it was fast compared with their past attempts to apply for a Housing Choice Voucher. The experiences varied according to the individual's capacity to handle paperwork and the amount of support that PSH staff members provided. Participants mentioned that some PSH case managers were more proactive than others in helping participants with applications.

Of the 947 single adults who submitted a MOI application, 271 (29 percent) were issued a voucher. Data are not currently available on what percentage of the applicants who did not receive a voucher

were screened out by HSH and what percentage were referred on to SFHA but did not successfully complete the voucher application process. Staff noted that “there is a lot of room to create efficiencies and create a more client-centered and user friendly approach” to the application process. If the program is expanded, additional analysis could determine which aspects of the application process are most challenging for participants to help increase the percentage of eligible applicants who receive a voucher.

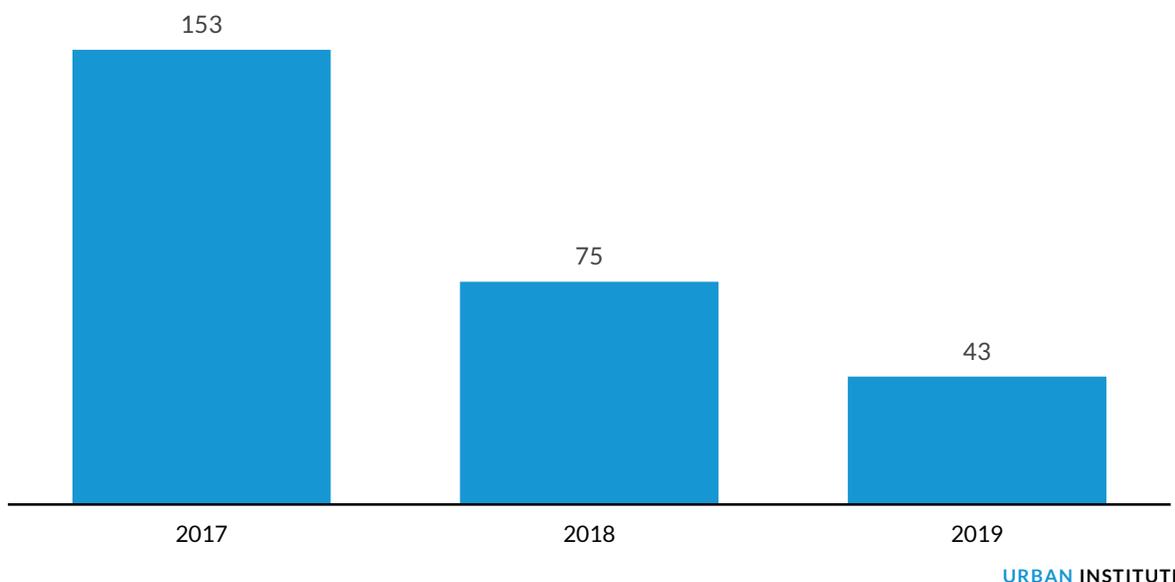
## Housing Search

Applicants who successfully made it through the screening process were invited by SFHA to attend an orientation meeting where they received their vouchers. Several participants attended a group orientation, and some found that this method failed to ensure that everyone had a proper understanding of the program’s expectations and requirements. Once BC was fully staffed, its housing coordinators began attending briefings with participants to help explain the process. BC also began holding informational sessions with participants to supplement the information provided by SFHA.

The housing search process was stressful for most MOI participants. Once participants received their vouchers, they had to lease an apartment within six months. If participants could not find an acceptable unit within this time frame, as required by SFHA, they had to relinquish their vouchers to people on the waiting list. Participants who did not think they could successfully use their voucher within six months could apply for an extension from SFHA.

Once they were issued a voucher, participants were assigned a BC housing coordinator. The coordinator was responsible for guiding participants through the housing search process and helping them find an available unit that satisfied their preferences. In addition to housing coordinators, BC employed housing specialists, real estate experts, who worked with San Francisco landlords and property managers to secure units for the program. In the first seven months of the program (December 2016–June 2017), SFHA issued 153 vouchers to MOI participants (figure 1). As documented in our first annual report, BC was not prepared for this volume of referrals, and some early participants were not assigned a housing coordinator or received incomplete or inconsistent services (Feiss, Bamberger, and Leopold 2019). By July 2017, BC was adequately staffed to handle 60 to 75 referrals per quarter, but by this time, the pace of referrals from SFHA had slowed. SFHA has not issued any vouchers to MOI participants since November 2018.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Moving On Initiative Vouchers Issued by Program Year**



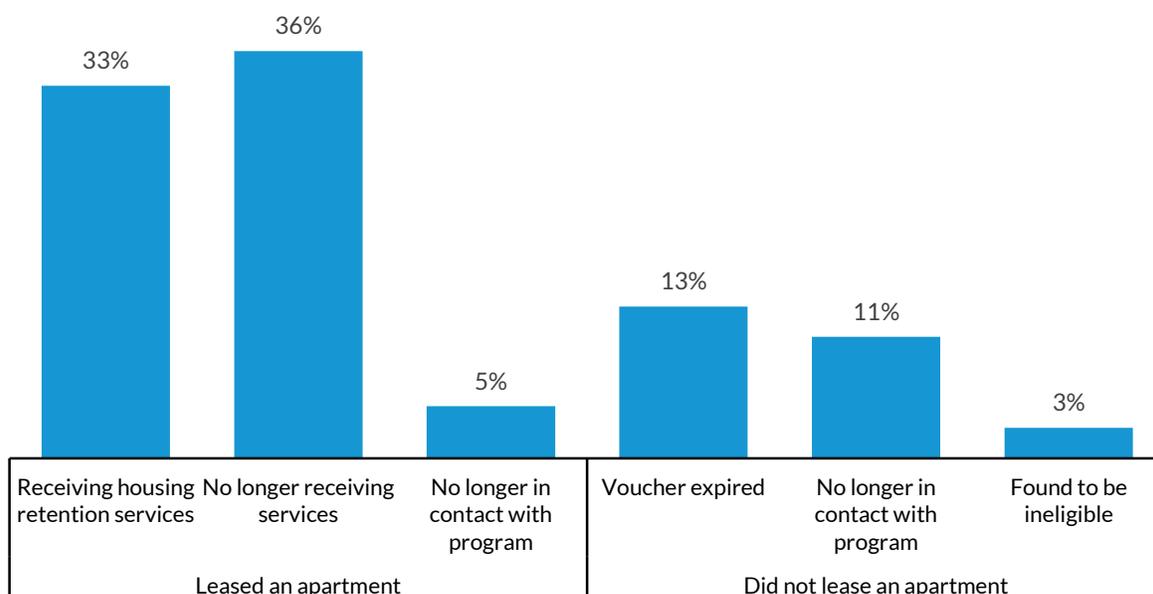
**Source:** Program data in quarterly reports from Brilliant Corners to Tipping Point Community.

**Notes:** The program year runs from July to June; for example, the 2019 program year was from July 2018 to June 2019. The San Francisco Housing Authority began issuing vouchers to Moving On Initiative participants in December 2016.

Seventy-three percent of participants who were issued vouchers through MOI and referred to BC successfully leased an apartment (figure 2). Despite working with a highly vulnerable population in the most expensive housing market in the country, that figure compares favorably to the national success rate for the voucher program in large cities, which is estimated to be 69 percent (Finkel and Buron 2001). As of July 2019, 33 percent were still receiving housing retention services from BC, and 36 percent had “graduated” from the program, meaning that they had been housed for at least 12 months and were no longer receiving housing retention services.

Of all MOI participants who received a voucher and were referred to BC, 27 percent were not successful in finding housing and ended up remaining in PSH. This includes participants whose vouchers expired before they could lease up (13 percent) and participants who lost contact with the program and never leased up (11 percent). An additional 3 percent were found to be ineligible for MOI after they had initially been referred to BC.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Program Status of Moving On Initiative Participants**



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**Source:** Brilliant Corners quarterly report to Tipping Point Community for April–June 2019.

**Notes:** Sample is 262 participants who were issued vouchers and referred to Brilliant Corners. Does not include nine participants whose status was listed as deceased, program violation, still actively looking for housing with a voucher, or program transfer. Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

In interviews, MOI participants who succeeded in using their vouchers generally reported positive experiences with BC and the MOI process. In successful cases, participants noted that the BC housing coordinator assessed their needs and preferences, identified suitable units, accompanied them to view units, advocated on their behalf with landlords, helped them with the application process, and paid the application fee. Participants who experienced successful moves often reported that their BC housing coordinator paid the first month’s rent and security deposit, arranged for a moving service, provided a furniture voucher, and provided ongoing assistance to help ameliorate any issues the participant or property owner might encounter after the move. Many MOI participants reported receiving most of these programmatic elements and felt as though they had been assisted in every way possible. These participants overwhelmingly described their experiences as “perfect.”

Participants who reported negative housing search experiences, including those who did not successfully use their vouchers, generally did not receive the full complement of services from BC. Most of the negative experiences happened early in the process, resulting from a shortage of qualified staff

and the lack of a complete housing portfolio. Some participants who joined later in the process experienced some disappointment, but in general, they were more likely to have a good experience than those who joined earlier.

Some early participants who did not move on reported attempting and failing to find a unit without ever hearing from BC. Other MOI participants reported having to actively pursue BC staff members to get help with the MOI process. In interviews, BC staff members acknowledged that at the outset of the program, they received more referrals than they could provide services for. This meant that some MOI participants entered the program without receiving complete BC services in a timely manner. Other MOI participants chose not to engage with their assigned BC housing specialist and instead worked with their PSH case manager to find housing or searched on their own.

BC's policy was to show a participant three available units, and if the participant declined all three, the participant then needed to locate housing on their own. Although some MOI participants understood this, some believed that other, more suitable housing options would be available if they refused the units that BC staff members presented. In some cases, they were correct, and BC staff members continued to show units until participants found one that they liked.

Participants often sought one-bedroom units, units that had pleasing amenities (spaciousness or a yard, for example), and units in specific neighborhoods. In addition, many participants had disabilities that required units to have accessibility features like handrails and elevators or to be on the ground floor.

BC generally tried to honor participants' preferences for location and amenities but faced several constraints. First, San Francisco is one of the most expensive rental markets in the country with one of the lowest rental vacancy rates. Second, many San Francisco property owners were reluctant to rent to voucher holders. Third, many participants had poor credit or rental histories and struggled to pay for housing-related expenses like application fees, moving costs, and security deposits, which were supposed to be included as part of the process but were not always offered in a timely manner.

As evidenced by its high voucher success rate, MOI was largely successful in helping participants overcome these obstacles. SFHA's payment standards, which subsidized rents of up to \$2,652 for a one-bedroom apartment and \$2,106 for a studio, helped expand the range of units available to voucher holders. Also, BC paid property owners to hold available rentals during the housing search and inspection process and offered other incentives to encourage participation in the program.

BC also had some success overcoming property owners' reluctance to accept vouchers. Before moves, BC communicated to property owners that it had vetted the MOI participants and that the participants had a history of consistent rent payment and rule compliance. In addition, BC provided property owners with assurances that the rent would be paid on time and that it would provide reimbursement for damages. Participants who attempted to find housing without assistance from BC noted that they often met resistance from property owners who were not familiar with MOI. These participants reported that they could not explain the program and overcome the property owners' concerns.

BC had less success overcoming other barriers to housing for MOI participants, such as criminal records or low credit scores. Because of her credit history, one participant unsuccessfully applied to 16 units. Participants expected BC to intercede on their behalf in matters that involved credit, but BC staff members said that their attempts had mixed success.

Even though BC could pay participants' rental application fees, several participants used their own money to apply for multiple units, a decision that was costly and eventually caused them to abandon their housing search. Some participants who paid their own fees joined the program early and had difficulty engaging with their BC housing coordinators. At least one participant joined later but had heard through word of mouth that BC did not pay for application fees. One participant reported trying to get BC to pay the fees but BC could not set up the digital payment to the landlord. A few participants reported receiving help from BC with paying fees during their initial move out of PSH, but not for subsequent moves.

The new housing that MOI participants moved to generally offered improvements (sometimes dramatic ones) over PSH. Many participants thought of their new residences as "dream home[s]" and expressed that "the differences were immense." When participants were asked to compare their new housing with their old, many responded positively with phrases like "it does not compare" or "it is like night and day." One participant said that in PSH, he had lived in a room that "was no bigger than a nice-sized closet." His new apartment was a source of pride. Even though many participants moved to studio apartments, all had attached kitchens and bathrooms, amenities that are uncommon in PSH. These amenities were cited as the most important housing features in a survey of San Franciscans experiencing homelessness (Tipping Point Community 2019).

Participants who were less satisfied with their new housing often reported that they felt rushed to find an apartment before their voucher expired. Most of the participants interviewed reported receiving one or more extensions before finding a suitable place to move. Others, however, reported

being denied an extension and dropped from the program. Both MOI participants and BC staff members were unsure how many times SFHA could extend a voucher or why some extensions were granted and others were denied. Uncertainty about whether their voucher search period would be extended was a major source of stress for participants. Some participants reported settling for studios when they wanted one-bedroom apartments or choosing apartments with undesirable neighbors or landlords to avoid having their vouchers expire. In addition, some MOI participants who conducted a housing search on their own experienced challenges with their landlord or a housemate that put them at risk of eviction.

Many participants reported that neighborhood was the most important factor in their housing search. Although most wished to leave the Tenderloin, some preferred to be nearby in familiar areas. Table 2 shows the zip codes where MOI participants most frequently used their vouchers. Eighty-eight percent of participants who successfully used their vouchers found an apartment in San Francisco, while 12 percent used their vouchers to move to other parts of the Bay Area.<sup>5</sup> The Lake Merced neighborhood, which is in southwestern San Francisco adjacent to San Francisco State University, housed the most MOI participants. In Lake Merced, many resided in Parkmerced, a planned, single-owner neighborhood of high-rise and low-rise apartments. Polk Gulch/Russian Hill and Bayview also housed relatively large shares of participants. Overall, participants resided in more than 20 zip codes across the city.

**TABLE 2**  
**Zip Codes Where Moving On Initiative Participants Used Their Vouchers**

<b>Zip code (neighborhood)</b>	<b># of leased-up participants</b>	<b>% of leased-up participants</b>
94132 (Lake Merced)	41	21.2
94109 (Polk Gulch/Russian Hill)	25	13.0
94124 (Bayview)	18	9.3
94121 (Outer Richmond)	15	7.8
Other San Francisco zip codes	70	36.3
Zip codes outside San Francisco	24	12.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Source:** Brilliant Corners quarterly report to Tipping Point Community for April–June 2019.

**Note:** Leased-up participants are those who successfully used their Housing Choice Voucher to move into independent housing.

## Outcomes

Participants who successfully moved on generally reported minimal disruptions associated with the move and significant benefits to their state of mind and quality of life. PSH staff also reported minimal

challenges with the additional turnover in clients created by MOI. The major unintended consequence of MOI was resentment among PSH tenants who did not get an opportunity to move on.

## **Successful Transitions to Independent Living**

After the move to independent living, participants received up to 12 months of housing retention services. These services played a vital role in acclimating participants to their new homes and lives and helped participants remain stably housed.

BC housing coordinators typically met with participants within three weeks of their move to independent housing to develop a service plan tailored to participant needs. Those needs and participants' preferences determined the frequency with which subsequent encounters took place. Housing coordinators helped participants with move-related paperwork, including SFHA program recertification forms for continued voucher assistance and applications related to benefit claims. They also helped tenants adhere to regulations, including by counseling participants about noise complaints and smoking indoors.

BC also helped participants avoid financial or interpersonal problems that could lead to eviction. Although BC could not act as a payee for participants, it did provide referrals to money management services for ongoing support. In several instances, BC loaned money to and set up repayment plans for MOI participants who temporarily could not pay their rent. BC also worked to mitigate issues that arose from the SFHA's nonpayment or late payment of rent. When issues between a MOI tenant and property owner could not be resolved, BC provided relocation assistance. This prevented housing instability for participants and increased property owners' trust in the program.

Although the standard services offered by BC are limited to one year, BC continued them (or restarted them) after a year when necessary.

BC's services were, by design, less comprehensive and intensive than the case management provided in PSH buildings. No formal handoff of clients from the PSH case manager to the BC housing coordinator took place. Both PSH and BC staff members reported that more coordination and information sharing would have been useful, particularly around participants' behavioral health issues and need for payee services. While in PSH, many participants had an individual or organization that acted as their payee—receiving their disability benefits and managing their money to make sure that bills were paid on time. BC could not provide this service, and some participants struggled to pay their monthly rent contribution without a payee.

Most participants reported that the move to independent housing was not disruptive to their access to benefits, employment, or social networks. Some participants reported fewer food pantries and meal programs in their new neighborhoods compared with the Tenderloin. Housing coordinators tried to help participants access these services in their new neighborhoods. After moving, some participants lost access to transportation vouchers they had received from their PSH provider and struggled to pay for public transportation.

Few participants changed their health care providers after moving, and those who did saw the change as positive. Many felt the burden of changing health care providers was greater than the burden of a longer travel time. Health care access was a major factor for several MOI participants as they were choosing a unit. Those participants tended to be high users of care and considered only homes that would not disrupt their care.

Although some MOI participants changed residences one or more times after leasing up, all retained their vouchers and remained stably housed.

## **Improved Quality of Life**

Although participants had diverse experiences, successful movers said they felt safer, had an improved sense of self-worth, and were more independent in their new housing. Almost every MOI participant who was interviewed said they had witnessed or experienced violence while living in PSH. MOI participants reported feeling safer after moving into independent housing. Several MOI participants also spoke about an increased sense of self-worth or pride because of their move. When asked about how participation in MOI had changed his life, one participant stated: “I wanted to know myself again and be myself....You feel like you’re human again.” Many participants said that “having my own keys so I can come and go as I want” was the most gratifying consequence of independent living. One stated: “It was time for me to have my own key. I [had] to ring a buzzer to get upstairs to my room.” Another stated that her favorite thing about living in her own home was “the freedom to have a key to my own door from the street....It is independence. It is back to the life that I was used to before I became homeless.”

In PSH, many MOI participants felt stuck, unable to see a path to exit. “I stayed because I didn’t know anything different,” one participant said. “I was scared to get up out of the box.” Some MOI participants in recovery from substance use were grateful to be in an environment with less drug activity.

Many MOI participants also reported feeling healthier because of the move, both physically and mentally. They said that the shared bathrooms and kitchens in many PSH buildings made hygiene and healthy eating a challenge and that the move to independent living made self-care easier. With their own kitchens, participants could cook their own food and follow dietary guidelines for medical conditions. In addition to these physical benefits, participants cited psychological benefits. One participant who lived in a community very close to other MOI participants said those he knew from his life in PSH “did not talk [while living in PSH] and since the move they have opened up.” Many participants who were interviewed expressed appreciation for MOI’s broader purpose. “By giving someone like me a chance to move forward, it is opening that space now for someone on the sidewalk,” one participant said. “That matters to me.”

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*It is back to the life that I was used to before I became homeless.*

*—Moving On Initiative participant*

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## **Social Connections and Isolation**

Moving out of PSH increased social isolation for a few participants. Most MOI participants interviewed were seniors or had physical disabilities, which may have made them more vulnerable to isolation. Some MOI participants were also active contributors to their PSH communities as volunteer members of advocacy groups and community organizations. They missed these social activities and hoped to find analogous positions in their new neighborhoods. One participant who felt socially isolated after his move missed the PSH staff because they provided him with a constant source of positive social interaction. Several MOI participants perceived the lack of social interaction as a positive, preferring the peace and quiet of their new homes to the sometimes chaotic environment of PSH and the Tenderloin. One participant said he would not invite his old acquaintances to his new home because he did not “want that life” anymore. “I am getting to be a home person,” he noted.

MOI participants moved to diverse neighborhoods and environments. Some felt they hardly saw people in their day-to-day lives after their move, while others found themselves in vibrant communities. The Parkmerced community, which housed about 15 participants (six of whom were interviewed), seemed especially inviting and supportive of MOI participants. There, residents have access to

community gyms and exercise classes, community computer rooms, and community events such as street fairs and neighborhood-wide holiday celebrations.

A few participants reported positive interactions with neighbors, such as forming friendships or attending holiday meals. After their move, several participants retained volunteer positions, obtained new jobs, or pursued education, all of which contributed to feelings of connectedness and positivity. Some participants also frequently returned to the Tenderloin to visit friends.

Many MOI participants moved to be nearer to family. These participants noted that their new homes provided greater opportunities for family members and friends to visit without the strict PSH visitor rules, the fear of bringing family into the PSH environment, or the stigma of living in PSH. These participants felt that this ability to host family members and friends was pivotal to regaining the sense of self-worth and normalcy that they had lost while they were homeless and living in PSH. Several participants took supportive roles in their families that they could not sustain while living in PSH. Two participants gained custody of dependent minors (a child and a grandchild) who otherwise would have been in the child welfare system. One participant who is a part-time caregiver to his daughter moved near his daughter's elementary school in Oakland. Many participants cited their new ability to engage and support their children and grandchildren as the primary benefit of moving to their new housing.

### **Remaining PSH Tenants More Affected by MOI Than Staff**

By helping move more stable tenants out of PSH to be replaced by clients with higher service needs, MOI may have put additional strain on PSH staff and been disruptive for tenants who remained in PSH.

According to PSH caseworkers who were interviewed, MOI did not lead to noticeable shifts in their caseloads. Caseworkers experienced some challenges helping new tenants acclimate to life in PSH, but those challenges were typical. On the other hand, PSH caseworkers reported that MOI increased their workload because of the time they spent helping tenants with the application process and searching for housing, particularly in the program's early phases when BC was still staffing up.

The program appeared to have a larger impact on the residents that remained in PSH. Among PSH tenants who received a voucher through MOI but did not move to independent housing, a few reported that they voluntarily withdrew after realizing they liked the routine and comfort of PSH. For others, the failure to use their voucher taught them to be more assertive about advocating for themselves. Other unsuccessful participants reported that MOI was a "big letdown" that created lingering hard feelings and erosion of trust. Several unsuccessful participants reported that the experience jeopardized their

recovery efforts. A PSH case manager reported that one of her clients was hospitalized after learning the program had stopped and that others would “go to her office and scream” out of frustration with the housing search process. She said, “You have to understand, a program like this was a first in a lifetime for these folks. And they have learned not to trust any of the systems, and they had been promised a lot and not had it pan out....The effect that it had on a lot of my clients was really, really bad and intense.”

PSH staff noted that hard feelings were not limited to PSH tenants who applied to participate in MOI. One staff member said that seeing a person exit PSH could help other residents realize that moving on was possible. However, when a MOI participant struggled or failed to move on, other PSH residents could become demoralized. It is unclear from this evaluation how widespread these feelings were among PSH residents who did not apply for MOI.

## Limitations of the Evaluation

This report is based largely on interviews with MOI participants and staff members. Although we tried to be inclusive, we do not claim that interview participants were necessarily representative of all participants or staff members. To be part of the interview group, MOI participants had to read the recruitment letter and call the UCSF team, and this requirement may have screened out participants who were not motivated or able to reach out. In addition, to learn about ways to improve the program, we intentionally oversampled those who did not move. This may have led to an exaggeration of any negative (or even positive) aspects of the program. Also, because we relied on BC to inform participants about the evaluation, we focused on those who made it through the application process and received a voucher. However, most MOI applicants never made it to this step. We also do not have the perspectives of those on the waiting list.

In future reports, we plan to incorporate data from HSH and the San Francisco Department of Public Health to better understand how MOI has affected participant housing stability, health, income, and access to benefits and countywide efforts to reduce chronic homelessness.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

MOI provided an excellent opportunity for participants who could leave the restrictive environment of PSH, and the move to independent housing allowed them to be more independent, feel safer, and avoid a neighborhood that contained many triggers. Their exits, in turn, freed up PSH spots for people who

need the extra support. Everyone who moved through the program was glad that they did and remains housed. Many felt as though the program had an immeasurable positive impact on their lives. One participant stated: “I would have to say that it changed my life a whole lot. I never thought that I would get what I wanted. I only thought that I would live in some raggedy hotel....I am very blessed that I got that voucher.”

Those who could not move, however, often reported lingering feelings of resentment and disappointment about the process. The MOI application and lease-up process was long and complicated and involved coordination between multiple public agencies and nonprofits. Most participants were referred to the program before all these pieces had been put together. During the program’s launch and initial period, BC accepted participants while it was still developing its housing portfolio, resources, and best practices. BC staff members, MOI participants, and PSH case managers agreed that participants who entered the program during this start-up period had less positive experiences than those who entered later. Despite the program’s initial challenges, the combination of a voucher from SFHA and BC’s retention services proved effective for most participants.

MOI is currently not accepting referrals because of the SFHA freeze on vouchers, but 239 households are on the waiting list. Our analysis suggests that expansion of MOI is well merited and that the program can be improved. Our recommendations for improvement are the following:

- Provide adequate training for PSH case managers. This should include how to choose residents appropriate for MOI and prepare them for leaving the supportive environment of PSH.
- Communicate clearly to all PSH tenants at the start of the process the eligibility criteria for MOI. This includes providing guidance to tenants who may not be eligible about how they could become eligible in the future.
- Provide training to PSH and BC staff on how to manage participant expectations of the housing market.
- Start referrals slowly to allow for adequate staffing ratios, staff training, and supply of potential housing.
- Improve coordination and information sharing between PSH case managers and BC housing specialists.
- Provide clear guidance to participants about timelines, the rules around turning down housing, and the length of vouchers and extensions.

- Have flexibility in the availability and duration of support services. Some participants required additional support after 12 months in independent housing.
- Consider providing transportation assistance (in the form of bus passes or transportation subsidies) to lessen the impact of moving from the Tenderloin to distant neighborhoods.
- Partner with agencies that can act as payees for participants who would benefit from this service.
- Provide linkages and orientations to available services (such as low-cost meals, senior centers, libraries, and community centers) in new neighborhoods. This can mitigate barriers to moving.

Our evaluation findings suggest that MOI fulfills a widespread desire among PSH tenants to move on to independent housing while supporting CCSF's goal of increasing the availability of PSH to people experiencing chronic homelessness. If MOI is expanded to serve additional applicants, it could play a crucial role in reducing chronic homelessness.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Tipping Point’s Chronic Homelessness Initiative,” Urban Institute, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/tipping-points-chronic-homelessness-initiative>.
- <sup>2</sup> J.K. Dineen, “SF to Cover Housing Authority Deficit So Poor Families Won’t Lose Homes,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/SF-has-to-cover-Housing-Authority-deficit-so-poor-13309607.php>.
- <sup>3</sup> Dominic Fracassa, “HUD Turning Control of Housing Authority Over to SF after Financial Problems,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/HUD-turning-control-of-Housing-Authority-over-to-13671916.php>.
- <sup>4</sup> The voucher freeze does not apply to special purpose vouchers like those issued through the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program; they are competitively awarded and funded separately from the Housing Choice Voucher Program.
- <sup>5</sup> Federal regulations require households to live in the area where their voucher was issued for one year before porting out (using it in other areas). Therefore, the share of MOI participants porting out may increase over time.

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