



# The Resident Choice Option: Reasons Why Residents Change from Project-Based Vouchers to Portable Housing Vouchers

*Policy Memo*

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## Overview

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Transformation of Rental Assistance (TRA) Initiative proposes to expand housing choice for residents in several ways. Most significantly, TRA would allow residents living in public housing the option to move after two years when a portable voucher becomes available; the property-based rental assistance would remain with the unit.<sup>1</sup> This change could significantly expand housing choices and increase neighborhood mobility for HUD-assisted residents as well as put "market like" pressures on housing agencies to ensure that they are maintaining their properties so residents want to remain in public housing buildings. As Secretary Donovan notes, "TRA reflects the Department's commitment to enhancing tenant mobility—providing more tenants in HUD-assisted housing the option to 'vote with their feet' if their current housing is poorly operated or they have the chance to move to a neighborhood of greater opportunity...."<sup>2</sup>

Many housing industry groups and public housing agencies (PHAs) have voiced concerns about the implementation of this policy, raising questions about the potential demand for portable vouchers, how this demand will affect turnover in public housing, and how it will affect the operation of the voucher waiting list. While this change is significant, the policy—to allow residents to change from project-based units to portable vouchers—is not unprecedented. Currently, under HUD policies, a household living in a project-based voucher unit can change from a project-based unit to a portable, tenant-based voucher, after one year of living in the unit and as soon as a voucher becomes available. How households living in project-based vouchers units currently use this "resident choice option" can inform the implementation of the proposed changes in TRA.

To understand the policy implications of the TRA proposal, HUD examined data on how many residents choose to switch from project-based voucher units to portable vouchers. They found that only a small share of project-based voucher residents converted to portable vouchers: 13 to 20 percent of tenants living in project-based voucher units opted to move during an 18-month period.<sup>3</sup> To supplement this analysis, the Urban Institute conducted a quick turnaround study, conducting interviews with staff at public housing agencies. The interviews with housing agency staff focused on *why* households living in project-based voucher units may exercise their "resident choice option" and move with a portable voucher.

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<sup>1</sup> About one out of three "turnover vouchers" that become available, as households leave the Housing Choice Voucher Program, would be available to public housing residents who want to move. According to HUD, about 11 percent of voucher households leave the program each year, making about 240,000 vouchers available for reissuance.

<sup>2</sup> See Investing in People and Places, FY 2011 Budget, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [http://portal.hud.gov/portal/page/portal/HUD/press/press\\_releases\\_media\\_advisories/2010/HUDNo.10-026](http://portal.hud.gov/portal/page/portal/HUD/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2010/HUDNo.10-026)

<sup>3</sup> See HUD Memo Re: "PBV Turnover and Attrition," January 2010.

We found that in addition to structural reasons related to the local housing market and local programmatic policies, households move for several reasons, including finding a better unit; moving closer to family, services, or schools; or, for some programs that required services or additional tenancy rules, transitioning toward more independent housing. Housing authority staff also reported that some households moved because of poor quality housing and unsafe neighborhoods. Importantly, as HUD's quantitative data indicate, not all residents move. Some residents, particularly elderly and disabled ones, are more likely to opt to stay in a project-based voucher unit so that they can remain close to their support networks. In addition, some participants may opt to stay in their project-based voucher unit because it offers higher-quality housing than they could find in the private market. There are two limitations to these findings: first, our interviews only capture the perspective of housing agency staff and their observations on why residents may move; second, housing agencies in our sample are not representative of housing agencies nationally. Nevertheless, this study provides helpful data to help policymakers shape the TRA proposal.

This policy memo provides background information on the study, describes the methodology, key findings, study limitations, and policy implications. Funding from the What Works Collaborative, a foundation-supported research partnership that conducts timely research and analysis to help inform an evidence-based housing and urban policy agenda, supported this study and the development of this policy memo.

## Introduction

HUD permits housing authorities to convert up to 20 percent of their housing choice vouchers from tenant-based assistance to project-based assistance. Under program guidelines, tenant-based vouchers are fully portable and the subsidy follows the tenant, whereas with project-based vouchers, the subsidy remains with the housing unit. However, after a year of assistance, a family living in a project-based voucher unit can switch and receive a tenant-based voucher instead, as soon as one becomes available. It is unclear how many tenants in project-based voucher units have opted for tenant-based vouchers. It is also unclear how many housing authorities have exercised their option to convert tenant-based vouchers to project-based vouchers.

In January 2010, HUD analysts examined the extent of “project-basing” among PHAs and identified a sample of housing agencies that had exercised the option to project-base vouchers.<sup>4</sup> Among the nearly 12,000 project-based voucher households in HUD’s sample, HUD found that between 13 and 20 percent of project-based voucher households will move to tenant-based vouchers after 18 months.<sup>5</sup> While HUD’s analysis provides a quantitative picture of housing agencies that are project-basing and the number of participants moving from project-based vouchers to tenant-based vouchers, it does not describe *why* participants may opt to move. Understanding how this “resident choice option” is working, including the circumstances that cause participants to move out of project-based voucher units, is critical, as this information can help policymakers at HUD consider the implications of the TRA proposal to transform HUD’s rental assistance programs.

## Methodology

We designed this research project to examine *why* tenants are moving from project-based voucher assistance to portable, tenant-based vouchers. To capture this information, we developed a semi-structured interview guide to standardize the types of information we wanted to collect from housing authorities. The first section of the interview guide served to put the project-based voucher program in context by learning more about the housing authority itself, the kinds of programs it administers (e.g., housing choice vouchers, public housing, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, mobility assistance, etc.), and the local housing market. The next section of the guide explored how the housing authority uses and administers project-based vouchers. Then we solicited respondents’ descriptions of their units and neighborhoods. Finally, we asked respondents to reflect on why residents might want to change to a tenant-based voucher, probing about how the characteristics of individual tenants, households, units, the complex, and the neighborhood, among other reasons, might affect their decision.

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<sup>4</sup> See HUD Memo Re: “PBV Turnover and Attrition,” January 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

We constructed our sampling frame using a two-stage process. Initially, we listed *high-turnover* housing authorities by combining the top 10 PHAs from the 2006 and 2008 cohorts examined in the HUD analysis on rates of leaving project-based voucher units. After eliminating duplicates, we contacted the 17 housing authorities on the list. Fourteen chose to participate in the study and were interviewed by phone between February 17 and March 5, 2010. Of the remaining three housing authorities from the sampling frame, one refused, one said it no longer used project-based vouchers, and another was unable to schedule an interview before the drafting of this policy memo.

To better understand how housing authorities with high turnover in their project-based units might differ from other housing authorities, we chose to interview an additional six housing authorities. Three of these had extremely *low turnover*—close to zero—and the other three had *moderate turnover* among project-based voucher holders. When choosing these additional housing authorities, we took care that the number of project-based vouchers in their portfolios was comparable to the number we found in the initial sample. We also made an effort to select housing authorities that would geographically diversify our sample.

To make sure we were talking with the right respondents, we screened housing agency staff to locate people who could answer (1) overarching questions about the administration of the project-based voucher program, program goals, partnerships with service agencies, and the properties themselves and (2) questions about program participants' characteristics and preferences. For most housing authorities, we only had to interview one individual for both types of questions. However, in some cases, we needed to interview two people: the chief administrator of the voucher program and a housing specialist who had day-to-day contact with residents.

The housing authorities that participated were diverse (table 1). In the *high-turnover* sample, housing authorities serving incorporated cities predominated, though we did talk to a substantial number of county housing authorities as well as a sample of regional agencies and one that administered housing choice vouchers for the entire state of Georgia. In contrast, most housing authorities in the *low-to-moderate turnover* group served entire counties.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Participating Housing Authorities**

Housing Authority	Jurisdiction	Number of project-based vouchers	Percent of all vouchers
Fort Wayne, IN	county	34	1.4
Isothermal, NC	regional	58	4.3
Madison, WI	city	64	4.1
Montgomery County, PA	county	68	2.5
San Diego, CA	city	79	0.6
Georgia DCA	state	103	0.6
Grand Forks, ND	county	103	8.4
Portland, ME	city	133	7.3
Fort Collins, CO	city	148	15.7
Indianapolis, IN	county	149	1.9
Cincinnati, OH	county	169	1.6
Akron, OH	county	195	4.0
Lake County, IL	county	198	7.5
Fairfax, VA	county	222	6.8
Snohomish, WA	county	227	7.0
Rhode Island	state	244	17.1
Everett, WA	city	318	12.2
Metropolitan Council, MN	regional	364	5.8
Sacramento, CA	county	367	3.2
St Paul, MN	city	394	8.9
Rochester, NY	regional	437	6.1

Sources: PIC RCR Queries for Project-Based Vouchers and All Voucher Programs, May 2010.

The housing authorities varied widely both in the absolute number of project-based vouchers committed as well as the percentage of housing choice vouchers that they represented. For example, Indianapolis and Fort Collins committed roughly the same total number of vouchers, but this commitment represented a much larger part of Fort Collins' total housing choice voucher portfolio (a 16 percent vs. 2 percent allocation).

## **Key Findings**

As noted previously, HUD allows housing agencies to convert up to 20 percent of their tenant-based, portable vouchers to project-based vouchers. The housing agencies in our sample reported several reasons for choosing to convert portable vouchers to project-based vouchers. Some use project-basing to further programmatic goals, choosing to serve special needs populations, including chronically homeless single adults with disabilities, homeless families, disabled adults, and elderly households. Among the 21 housing agencies we interviewed, 14 served special needs populations with project-based vouchers (seven low-to-moderate turnover; seven high turnover). Project-based vouchers allow the housing agency to bypass the housing search process in the private market and provide less stable populations with immediate access to a housing unit. Housing agencies also use project-based vouchers to serve voucher holders from the waiting list. Of the housing agencies in our sample, 14 use project-based vouchers to serve participants from the waiting list.<sup>6</sup> These housing agencies chose to convert portable vouchers to project-based vouchers because of tenant difficulty finding housing from private-market landlords or their desire to improve their own utilization and lease-up rates. Some also reported using project-based vouchers as part of housing and neighborhood revitalization strategies.

### ***Program Structure Varies***

The housing agencies in our sample mainly use project-based vouchers to bolster local affordable housing development or to increase utilization rates among vouchers where housing markets are tighter. In these cases, housing authorities often apply the same preferences as they do for their regular housing choice voucher list when selecting eligible residents. Therefore, in addition to the general low-income population, many disabled households and veterans also live in these types of project-based units, though no supportive services are available on site. To qualify for a tenant-based voucher after a year, residents have to be in good standing with the housing agency and their landlord.

Although housing agencies structure project-based voucher programs differently, most housing agencies that use project-based vouchers to serve special needs populations include a service component. As noted, several housing agencies use project-based vouchers to provide permanent supportive housing to chronically homeless adults, and others provided transitional housing to formerly homeless families. Some housing authorities use project-based vouchers to provide the housing subsidy to formerly homeless families participating in transitional housing programs. Under these programs, many families move after one year, though, families are sometimes encouraged to “transition in place.” Either

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<sup>6</sup> These do not sum to 14 because some housing agencies use project-based vouchers to serve both general program participants and special needs populations.

way, their housing subsidy converts from a project-based voucher to a portable, tenant-based voucher.

Housing agencies also use project-based vouchers to provide housing assistance to elderly households. Unlike formerly homeless households living in transitional or permanent supportive housing, housing agencies do not necessarily provide supportive services to elderly households. However, many elderly households with project-based vouchers locate in elderly-only buildings where community-based organizations provide meals and sponsor recreational activities. Seniors living in elderly-only buildings may also find support networks and share interests with other residents in their demographic group. Housing agency staff reported that elderly households often opt for project-based units so they can remain in a neighborhood where they have lived for a long time.

### ***“The “Golden Ticket”***

How residents access a project-based voucher unit is connected to how the housing agency structures the program. As noted, some come through the housing agency waiting list, while others, specifically formerly homeless, disabled, or elderly households, may be referred to the housing agency by a nonprofit organization or other community stakeholder. For households coming to the top of the waiting list, one common report we heard from housing agency staff is that the project-based vouchers are viewed as a fast way to obtain the “golden ticket”—a tenant-based voucher. Some residents opt to take a project-based voucher instead of waiting longer for a tenant-based voucher. The reality is that all waiting lists for tenant-based vouchers were closed at the time of our interviews, and many had been closed for years making project-based vouchers the only alternative to public housing.

### ***Structural Factors May Influence Moving***

The primary focus of our interviews with housing agency staff was to examine why participants living in project-based voucher units may move when a portable voucher becomes available. A number of broad reasons surfaced that influence how program participants move through the program and if they decide to move after one year.

- **The local housing market influences if the household decides to move with a portable voucher.** Most areas served by the housing authorities in our sample were already relatively affordable before the drop in the real estate market began. However, all housing authorities reported that vacancy rates were up and rental prices were down, opening up rental options for tenant-based voucher holders that just a few years ago did not exist. The loosening of the market may lead more residents to seek housing with a portable voucher. For example, many respondents said that families were looking to change from an apartment-style, project-based unit to a single family

home, especially in areas hit hard by foreclosures. Other respondents pointed out that some landlords, who had previously been uninterested in working with the housing agency, now viewed voucher holders as desirable because the vouchers provide a predictable source of revenue. This means more choice in the housing market for households that are searching with portable vouchers. On the other hand, PHA staff reported that project-based voucher holders living in tight and relatively expensive housing markets tended to want to stay on; they found they got the most “bang for the buck” with their project-based unit.

- **Programmatic structure influences program participant decisions and choices.** Formerly homeless populations or special needs populations may move when the service package ends because the service agencies have an incentive to “graduate” their participants in order to serve new families or individuals. Many housing authorities said that service agencies structure their programs to last for 12 months to achieve this goal and to be consistent with the project-based voucher time frame. At the end of the twelve months, many residents “graduate” from a project-based voucher and several housing authorities reported that many of these families change to a tenant-based voucher and then move into a different unit within the same complex to “transition in place” and continue receiving support.

### ***Participants Move for Positive and Negative Reasons***

In addition to structural reasons, housing agency staff reported several personal reasons—both positive and negative—why participants might move:

- **Participants can escape distressed, poorly maintained housing by accessing a “bigger and better” unit with a tenant-based voucher.** A small number of housing authorities reported that the buildings where their project-based voucher units were located had chronic problems like rat infestation or recurring flooding, prompting tenants to “vote with their feet” and move with portable vouchers. However, dissatisfaction with project-based units often had to do with space. For some residents, lack of parking or adequate storage was a concern. Other residents opted to move out because of the size of their units. For example, one housing agency strategically chose to use project-based vouchers only for studio and one-bedroom apartments since the open market had an oversupply of two-bedroom units. Yet many of the project-based voucher holders were “underhoused” single mothers with children and these residents jumped at the chance to move with a tenant-based voucher. We also heard from one housing agency that, in a building housing young mothers and their children, the units only had kitchenettes, making the residents depend on a larger communal kitchen for their meals. Most of these residents chose to move out quickly after a year. Similarly, one staffer shared that elderly disabled

residents sometimes moved out because they needed a live-in caregiver, but there were no project-based units available with two or more bedrooms.

- **Neighborhood conditions may push households to search for a safer community.** Staff at 5 of the 21 different housing authorities interviewed mentioned that crime caused some families to look for a different place to live once their year was up. In one case, where the project-based vouchers were part of the creative financing for the rehab of a run-down complex in a high-crime area, initial turnover was high but stabilized once other revitalization projects nearby finished. For other developments with project-based units, problems with crime were endemic. One housing agency shared that problems were so severe that they had only been able to lease a small share of the project-based units available. Even so, one respondent also pointed out that the safety issues that drive people away from their project-based units were not limited to problems with crime and policing. The apartments that his housing agency had partnered to revitalize were located in an area cut off from nearby businesses by the main highway that ran right in front of it. Tragically, the 20-year-old son of one of the residents there was killed trying to cross the highway.
- **Some participants, who are living in buildings with on-site managers and services, want to be free from the oversight of project-based housing.** Housing agencies reported that some project-based voucher holders who concurrently had to commit to service plans wanted to transition to a portable voucher to be free of program rules and regulations. This was most often mentioned in reference to formerly homeless families in self-sufficiency programs. These families might not have been interested in the service component of project-based housing but saw it as the fast track to exiting homelessness and, in the long run, getting a tenant-based voucher. However, we also heard echoes of this theme from a housing agency that only administered project-based vouchers to participants from the waiting list. The respondent shared that many residents want to move out because management is always monitoring if they are working, when they are coming or going, and who is living with them. With a portable voucher, residents can rent from a private market landlord, which may mean less oversight than a building dedicated to subsidized housing that has an on-site manager.
- **Some participants opt for a tenant-based voucher because it will allow them to move closer to family, services, or schools.** Most housing agency staff mentioned that these factors affected residents' decisions. For example, one housing agency found that refugees wanted a portable voucher to relocate to a neighboring county where they could be closer to a mosque and culturally and linguistically appropriate social services. Another respondent shared that residents often moved out because they were frustrated with the lack of a nearby grocery store; the city had tried to attract

one to the neighborhood but had been unsuccessful. In addition, four different housing authorities reported that some buildings where their project-based units were located had no access to public transportation. Residents without cars in these locations often preferred to take a tenant-based voucher and move to a more accessible location. On the other hand, staff at one housing agency reported that many families moved because they wanted to exercise the free choice afforded them by the local schools' open enrollment policy.

***Other reasons for leaving that we heard less frequently included the following:***

- **Domestic violence:** Some residents may want to leave their project-based voucher unit because an abusive spouse or partner has found out where they live.
- **Conflicts with other residents:** Residents sometimes move out even if they like the building because they don't get along with their neighbors. This can be a particular issue in project-based voucher developments for mentally disabled adults who often make spontaneous decisions.

***Participants' Reasons for Staying Reflect Population Characteristics and the Quality of the Housing***

As the HUD quantitative data indicate, most program participants do not move from project-based voucher units. Indeed, many remain in their unit for various reasons:

- **Some elderly and disabled single adults may opt to stay in the project-based voucher unit because the building provides service supports and they are comfortable in the neighborhood.** Almost all respondents whose programs served elderly clients said that they are more likely than other project-based voucher holders to not switch to a tenant-based voucher after their year is up. Housing agency staff generally noted that seniors were more adverse to change and more attached to their neighborhoods. Other respondents reported that elderly clients in project-based units with services realize that they could never afford to pay market rate for all the amenities (i.e., shuttle service, meals, recreational classes, etc.) available to them. Disabled individuals requiring intensive support services and many chronically homeless single adults are also less likely to move with a tenant-based voucher than others. The consensus was that these populations were positive about the stability that project-based vouchers provided them.
- **Some participants may opt to stay because the unit is their best option.** We often heard this from housing authorities where project-based voucher units were found in buildings that were newly constructed, of hard to find size, or in tight, relatively expensive neighborhoods with good schools and services that would have otherwise

have been inaccessible to voucher families. In one such case, a respondent reported that participants in a loosely structured self-sufficiency program liked their housing so much that they chose to keep setting different goals for themselves with the service agency every year so that they could continue living there. For other residents of project-based voucher units, affordability is the bottom line. Staff at one housing agency said that some of their residents stayed in project-based voucher units despite chronic problems with crime in and around the complex because they could not find more affordable housing anywhere else.

### ***Participants Make Diverse Decisions about Where to Move with a Voucher***

About half of the housing agency staff with whom we spoke said that their residents moved out of the neighborhoods where their project-based voucher units were located; the other half thought those transitioning out rented another property in the same neighborhood or another unit within the same complex. It is unclear if their neighborhood conditions improved or declined, but it is likely a mix. Regardless of where participants might have wanted to move, they received only minimal housing search assistance from most housing authorities. The most common type of assistance was to provide lists, either online or in hardcopy, of landlords open to renting to tenant-based voucher holders. Sometimes these lists were classified by low- and high-poverty areas or mapped into neighborhoods to help participants determine if the locations were close to programs and services. We heard of more structured “housing mobility” programs infrequently, and then only in the context of providing assistance to special populations that were already receiving case management and supportive services in conjunction with their project-based housing vouchers.

### ***Low- and High-Turnover Housing Authorities Differ in Important Ways***

When examining how low- and high-turnover agencies compared, several themes emerged. First, the overall composition of housing authorities’ project-based portfolio mattered. Many agencies with *low turnover* rates focused on serving the needs of the special populations least likely to move: the elderly and the disabled. In contrast, many *high-turnover* agencies tended to allocate a large percentage of their vouchers to populations more likely to move quickly. For example, most self-sufficiency or domestic violence programs aim to have their clients transition to permanent housing at the end of a fixed time.

We also saw that the dominant type and quality of the project-based voucher units in agencies’ portfolios made a difference, especially for agencies serving the general low-income population. Housing authorities that administered project-based vouchers in primarily newly constructed buildings or units more comparable to a single family home, like townhouses, had better retention of voucher holders. Many of these agencies used project-basing strategically to further goals like new affordable housing development and de-concentration of poverty. On the other hand, some housing authorities with the *highest*

*turnover* started using project-based vouchers to address problems with leasing up either their own languishing properties or those of local landlords.

Another key factor distinguishing *high-* and *low-turnover* agencies was the type of housing market in which the housing authorities were located. We noticed that most *high-turnover* agencies served predominantly loose and relatively affordable housing markets, where voucher holders had more options to choose from. Jurisdictions where fair market rent was often insufficient tended to have low turnover, regardless of the project-based units' quality or location.

### **Methodological Limitations**

We conducted this study to provide a quick examination of why residents living in project-based voucher units may opt to move with a tenant-based voucher after living in their unit for a year. The study has a number of limitations that we should note:

- 1. The sample is not representative of all housing agencies. The housing agencies we spoke with may differ from other housing agencies.** The housing authorities with which we interviewed were not randomly chosen. In addition, because our initial study design focused exclusively on *high-turnover* housing authorities, they are overrepresented in our sample. Our inclusion of *low-to-moderate* turnover agencies in our supplemental sample, as well as housing authorities that ranked in the top 10 for turnover in the 2006 cohort but stabilized over time, helps round out the sample but gives only a cursory look at these types of agencies.
- 2. Insight on why tenants might move was provided by housing agency staff rather than residents.** Consequently, their perspectives may not accurately reflect resident opinions. Focus groups or in-depth interviews would be a better way to obtain these data. However, direct interviews with residents are unlikely to reveal dramatically different themes on why residents are moving, except that residents may have additional thoughts on the quality of their project-based voucher units and the neighborhoods where the units are located. On the other hand, focus groups with residents may help facilitate a deeper discussion of the challenges of moving from a project-based voucher unit and finding an affordable housing unit in a safe neighborhood that provides access to high-performing schools and access to transportation and jobs.
- 3. Large, diverse, and geographically dispersed portfolios of project-based units made it challenging for housing agency staff to completely and accurately reflect residents' preferences.** The respondents who had regular contact with tenants often interacted

with residents at a subset of their housing agency's project-based developments. This meant they were only able to provide insight into participant behavior at those properties, which may or may not have reflected larger trends within the housing agency.

## Policy Implications

In the fiscal year 2011 budget, the administration outlines TRA, an ambitious effort to transform HUD's rental assistance programs. Among other things, this reform proposal aims to provide "tenants with greater flexibility to move" and to "access a broader range of neighborhoods."<sup>7</sup> This study has several implications for this reform effort. First, the study supports the widely held notion that most low-income households prefer tenant-based housing vouchers because the program provides them the flexibility and independence to choose to move to housing in neighborhoods that are right for them and their families. With a portable voucher, many of these households can move to higher quality housing in a better neighborhood. At the same time, the study also suggests that some tenants – notably elderly and disabled households – may prefer to remain in a unit-based subsidy, so that they have the security and stability to remain in neighborhoods they have lived in for long periods and receive supportive services they need and value. Further, project-based units may offer the "best option" for housing in some housing markets and residents living in high quality housing in safe neighborhoods are more likely to stay in their project-based voucher unit.

Second, the study finds that if households do choose to move from a project-based voucher unit to a tenant-based voucher unit, housing agencies do not currently offer much to help participants move to "opportunity neighborhoods"—those that are low in poverty, offer access to high-performing schools, good jobs, and other neighborhood amenities, such as grocery stores, parks, and public libraries. Past evidence on the Housing Choice Voucher Program clearly shows that housing voucher participants will take advantage of moves to opportunity areas if they receive extra assistance in the form of housing search, security deposit loans, and information about opportunity neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> Further, second movers are more likely to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup> Offering housing mobility assistance to households moving from project-based to tenant-based vouchers is a key opportunity to help improve neighborhood location among assisted housing residents and could help HUD meet its goals of expanding housing choices.

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<sup>7</sup> See "Investing in People and In Places HUD 2011 Budget" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development), <http://portal.hud.gov/portal/page/portal/HUD/documents/fy2011budget.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> See Margery Austin Turner and Xavier de Souza Briggs, "Assisted Housing Mobility and the Success of Low-Income Minority Families: Lessons for Policy, Practice, and Future Research" (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2008), <http://www.urban.org/publications/411638.html>.

<sup>9</sup> See Mary Cunningham and Noah Sawyer, "Moving to Better Neighborhoods with Mobility Counseling" (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2005), <http://www.urban.org/publications/311146.html>.

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### “Resident Choice Option” in the Project-Based Voucher Program

#### Interview Guide

##### Screening

Hello, I’m calling from the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. The Urban Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization. We are working on a research project that examines project-based vouchers and are talking to housing authorities that have chosen to participate in this program. Specifically, we would like to understand why residents might opt to move from a project-based voucher to a tenant-based voucher. This research project is part of the What Works Collaborative, a foundation sponsored collaborative that focuses on responding to HUD’s research needs.

We will summarize data from all the interviews we conduct for this project in a research brief, which will inform HUD’s Rental Assistance Transformation Initiative. It’s important that you know that nothing you say will ever be associated with your name or your Housing Agency. So, please share your opinions and insights freely.

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

- Can you tell me a little bit about your role at the Housing Agency?  
[Probe: Director of Rental Assistance, PBV Coordinator]
- How long have you been in this position? Working for the Housing Agency?
- Are you the staff person who would best be able to answer overarching questions about how your housing agency’s project-based voucher program works? If not, can you refer me to the staff person who would be best able to answer these types of questions?
- Are you the staff person who assists residents in the process of moving from a project-based voucher to a tenant-based voucher? If not, can you refer me to a staff person who does this job?

- When would be a good time to schedule a call to talk more about project and tenant-based vouchers? [with 1 or possibly 2 different key informants, depending on the answers to the 2 above questions]

## 1. Housing Choice Voucher Program, PHA Characteristics, and Housing Market

- How many Housing Choice Vouchers does the housing agency administer?
- What geographic area do you serve (county, city, state)?
- How many public housing units does the housing agency manage?
- What types of special programs does the housing agency administer [Probe: shelter plus care, permanent supportive housing, transitional housing,]
- Does the housing agency offer any assistance for helping voucher holders move to low-poverty or opportunity neighborhoods? [i.e., “mobility programs” with housing search, lists of units in desirable neighborhoods, etc.]
- Describe the local housing market.
- What is the vacancy rate in the private rental market?
- What is the PHA utilization rate [number & percentage of vouchers allocated] for Housing Choice Vouchers? [If unsure, probe: in the last year]
- What is the lease-up rate? [success rate in finding housing for voucher holders—also aim for number and percentage]
- Are there challenges for voucher holders in finding units? [Probe: tight rental market, housing discrimination against vouchers holders, fair market rents, rent reasonableness]

## 2. Project-Based Voucher (PBV) Policies

- Why did the housing agency choose to convert some of its tenant-based vouchers to project based vouchers?

[Probe: want to target elderly or formerly homeless, and disabled, concern about affordable housing in tight market]

- Does the housing agency target PBV units to special populations?

[Probe: permanent supportive housing for homeless, disabilities, etc.]

- Do project-based voucher units come with resident supportive services?

- For whom? [Probe: people with disabilities? formerly homeless?]
- What types of services?
- Who (i.e., nonprofit, housing agency) provides them?

- Describe for me a typical household living in one of your PBV units.

- Are PBV more likely to serve families or single adults?

[Probe: single adult v. family; employed v. public assistance; people with disabilities, formerly homeless, elderly, veterans]

- What percentage of Housing Choice Vouchers has your housing agency chosen to convert to project-based vouchers (i.e., 10percent 20 percent)?

- What is the demand for project-based vouchers like? [Probe: getting housing faster, versus people who don't want to be trapped in a unit]

- Do you have a separate waiting list for project-based vouchers?

[REMEMBER TO ASK FOR BOTH PBV AND TBV LISTS IF SEPARATE]

- Is the waiting list still open? If closed, when was it last open? How many households are on the waitlist? How long is a typical wait?

- Does the housing agency have any preferences that prioritize different residents for project-based vouchers? [Probe: persons with disabilities, homeless, veterans, other non-income related criteria]
- Where are PBV units located? [Probe: dispersed? clustered? which neighborhoods?]
- What is the condition of the neighborhood(s) where PBV units are located?

[Probe: safety, proximity to transportation, access to resources or services, poverty rate]

- Describe for me the physical condition of the buildings where the project-based voucher units are located.

[Probe: number of units in building, number of project-based voucher units within building, unit bedroom size, age of building, condition, accessible]

- Have there been any recent changes to the buildings?

[Probe: renovations or demolition]

### 3. **“Resident Choice Option” Changing from Project-Based Vouchers to Tenant-Based Vouchers**

- As you know, after living in a project-based voucher unit for a year, residents can decide to move with a tenant-based voucher when one becomes available. Can you describe for me what that process is like for them? What do they have to do? What steps do they need to take?
- How does the Housing Agency educate residents about their option to change to tenant-based vouchers at the end of one year?

[Probe: outreach, education efforts, briefing when first get their voucher, follow-up after 1 year]

- Last month, how many residents completed a year with their project-based voucher? How many of these decided to sign-up for a tenant-based voucher?

- Does your Housing Agency maintain a separate list for conversions from project to tenant-based vouchers or does it use one regular tenant-based waiting list? [Probe: other preferences they prioritize over these people]
- How many eligible residents are currently waiting to change from a project to tenant-based voucher?
- How many tenant-based vouchers became available last month?
- How long does a resident who wishes to change from a project-based voucher to a tenant-based voucher typically have to wait for one to be available?
- What services if any does the Housing Agency provide to residents who change to a tenant-based voucher? [Probe: “mobility program” with housing search counseling and referrals, free credit reports and budget counseling, transportation for search, security deposit loans, post-move support OR more passive help like database for search]

#### **4. Reasons Residents Choose to Change from PBV to TBV**

- What are the main reasons residents might choose to change from project to tenant-based vouchers?

[Note: want to ask this question first completely open-ended to get their first response without probing/prompting about particular issues.]

- Some residents in particular might be more likely to want to change to a tenant-based voucher than others. Can you tell us more about the types of residents who prefer this option?

[Probe: 1 vs. 2 parent family; families with more children; younger vs. older residents; employed vs. public assistance; people with disabilities]

- Residents who live in certain types of units might be more likely to move to a tenant-based voucher. Is this something that you have noticed?

[Probe: transitional housing units (involuntary program participation), permanent supportive housing (shared bathrooms/kitchens)]

- Some residents might want to move for personal reasons like wanting to be closer to family or friends or work or changes within their household.

[Probe: how often do residents mention these kinds of reasons? what personal reasons do they most often give?]

- Sometimes the services that residents have access to can affect the decisions that they make.
  - [If interviewee mentioned that the PHA has a “mobility program” or supportive services for families switching to a tenant-based voucher] How much do you think that the services that your Housing Agency provides to residents who choose to move influence residents’ decisions to stay or go?
  - [If interviewee mentioned that the PHA offered supportive services to residents of PBV units] How much do you think that the services the Housing Agency provides to residents who choose to stay and keep their project-based voucher influence residents’ decisions to stay or go? [Probe/listen for: Mandatory program participation for those in transitional housing, as well as positives for Shelter Plus Care and Permanent Supportive housing programs]
- Other residents might want to change to a tenant-base voucher because of the neighborhood where their project-based unit is located. How often do you hear about this? What things about the neighborhood influence their choice to stay or go?

[Probe: Safety, proximity to transportation, access to programs/services]

- [If there have been recent renovations or demolitions of PBV units] How much do you think the recent (demolitions/renovations) in the Housing Agency have affected residents’ preferences for project versus tenant-based vouchers?
- How much do you think residents’ satisfaction with their housing unit influences their decision to change to a tenant-based voucher? [Probe: Adequacy of size, age (when built), condition]

- How easy or difficult is it for residents to change to a different unit—i.e. to a newly renovated one or a bigger one—and how do you think this affects residents' decisions to change from a project to a tenant-based voucher?
- Thinking about all the factors we've talked about, which are the reasons that residents most give for wanting to change a project-based voucher to a tenant-based one?
- Is it usually one primary deciding factor or a combination of the things we've talked about? Please explain your answer.
- Where do residents usually move with TBV? [Probe: building and neighborhood condition, independent housing]
- What are the main reasons that those who don't move with a tenant-based voucher choose to stay?

## 5. Closing

- Thank you so much for talking to use today. Your answers were very helpful. Is it all right if we follow-up with you later if there are things that we need to clarify?
- Is this the best number to reach you?
- What days of the week are usually best for you?

