



## **What Does It Take to Help Families Move to Better Neighborhoods?**

*The Housing Mobility Demonstration Proposed in the Preservation, Enhancement and Transformation of Rental Assistance Act (PETRA) Is Long Overdue*

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Research from the past decade shows that helping low-income families move to neighborhoods that are rich in opportunity—places with safe streets, high-performing schools, supermarkets, parks, and proximity to jobs—can vastly improve their lives.

It's common sense too: neighborhood location matters. Middle class families search for housing based on the old real estate adage “location, location, location.” That's because location drives exposure to crime, the quality of the schools, the daily commute, proximity to friends and family, and the quality of the housing stock. Poor families choose housing for the same reasons. But, unfortunately, even with a housing voucher, which theoretically families can use anywhere in the United States with an administering authority, their housing choices are severely constrained. In practice, poor families face many challenges when searching for housing with a voucher, including finding an apartment that meets their needs, with rent below the voucher payment ceiling and a landlord willing to participate in the program. These challenges limit their housing options and many end up in distressed neighborhoods. Indeed, the data show that families that receive vouchers are not accessing city and suburban neighborhoods with high-quality schools and other amenities.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) needs to do a better job helping low-income families access opportunity neighborhoods.

Many families need assistance navigating the private market and finding housing. Across the country, a handful of public housing agencies and nonprofits are providing services to participants in the voucher program to help them move to opportunity neighborhoods. These programs, collectively referred to as housing mobility programs, have different origins—some came out of desegregation lawsuits, some are remnants of earlier programs like the Regional Opportunity Counseling Program or the Moving to Opportunity Demonstration, and a few are the initiative of the housing agency. The type of services and their intensity vary significantly by agency and can include pre-move counseling, direct housing search assistance, financial assistance, landlord outreach and engagement, and post-move follow-up.

While practitioners point to promising models across the country, there is a paucity of empirical evidence on the impact and cost of housing mobility services. We know little about how housing mobility programs operate, what makes them effective, which components need strengthening, and, importantly, what they cost.

Under the Preservation, Enhancement, and Transformation of Rental Assistance Act (PETRA), HUD proposes a demonstration that will test the efficacy of housing mobility service strategies that help families move to opportunity neighborhoods with housing vouchers.

This demonstration is long overdue.

To ensure that the demonstration returns conclusive findings on the impact of housing mobility services, HUD should use the gold standard in social science research: experimental design. A social experiment randomly assigns families to a treatment group that receives mobility services and a control group that receives “services as usual.” Because it ensures that the treatment and control groups are essentially equivalent at baseline, a social experiment removes selection bias and establishes causation between the program services and outcomes. This demonstration should include a strong implementation study—so that practitioners and policymakers can understand the findings in context. A cost-effectiveness analysis that shows how much the services cost and their return on investment is also critical.

Some advocates and industry stakeholders have voiced concerns over funding a demonstration or mobility assistance programs. Money spent on mobility assistance is less money for housing subsidies, they say, and today, in a severely constrained budget environment, only one in four low-income households eligible for housing assistance actually receives it. Shouldn’t policymakers just fund more housing subsidies?

Are mobility programs worth it? What does it take to help poor families move to better neighborhoods? What types of services make a difference? What do they cost? What are the trade-offs in choosing between housing subsidies or mobility services?

These are the questions policymakers need to answer before they bring a housing mobility program to scale.

If designed correctly, the demonstration HUD proposes in PETRA can provide those answers.