**RESEARCH REPORT**

# Rapid Re-housing

## What the Research Says

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In recent years, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have identified rapid re-housing as a critical strategy to meeting the national goal of ending family homelessness by 2020 (USICH 2013). As noted in a recent update of *Opening Doors*, the federal plan to end homelessness, "[US Department of Health and Human Services], HUD, [the US Department of Veterans Affairs], and USICH have joined forces to promote expansion of rapid re-housing as a part of community coordinated systems…" (USICH 2013). Rapid re-housing, an intervention that helps homeless families exit shelters and get back into permanent housing quickly, provides short-term help with housing expenses (e.g., rent arrears, ongoing rent assistance, moving costs) and case management focused on housing stability. Rapid re-housing is a relatively new but, as early evidence shows, promising strategy that communities across the country are adopting. The emphasis on rapid re-housing represents a significant shift in the response to family homelessness toward a Housing First philosophy. Increased attention on rapid re-housing, accompanied by an influx of resources, and expansion of programs, elicits urgent need for more rigorous evaluation, some of which is already underway.

There is a small, but growing, body of evidence on the efficacy of rapid re-housing. Drawing on program data and early findings from evaluations in progress, this brief describes rapid re-housing and lessons from its recent expansion. It finds that most of the evidence points toward rapid re-housing as successful in helping families exit homeless shelters. The intervention has low barriers to entry, high placement rates, and low rates of return to shelter. Rapid re-housing, does not, however, solve long-term housing affordability problems. After families exit rapid re-housing, they experience high rates of residential instability. Many move again or double up within a year and face challenges paying for rent and household necessities. These problems are common among low-income households in general, however. The cost of the program varies widely and its effect on shortening lengths of stay in shelter and reducing family homelessness within communities is unknown. Further, no clear model has emerged. Rapid re-housing, with all its local variations, is more of an approach then a specific model, which makes replication and scaling difficult, as it is most certain that implementation matters. Further, it is not clear which components of rapid re-housing are critical to achieving success. Policymakers need more research on the effectiveness and cost of rapid re-housing compared with other interventions

offered by the homeless assistance system (e.g., emergency shelter and transitional housing), its effects over time, its success in tight rental markets where affordable housing is in short supply, and, most importantly, its impact on ending homelessness among families.

# Overview of Efforts to End Family Homelessness

## Homelessness among Families Peaked in 2010, but Is Trending Downward

According to HUD's *Annual Homeless Assessment Report*, 156,540 families (495,714 people) were homeless in 2013, a 9 percent increase since 2007 (figure 1) (HUD 2014). Levels of homelessness among families increased during the recession, peaking in 2011 at 172,767 homeless families, and began to decrease in 2012. Families accounted for 35 percent of the total sheltered population in 2013 (HUD 2014). These data do not provide information on unsheltered families. Point-in-time counts, conducted by communities across the country, indicate that on a single night in January 2013, approximately 10,000 families were unsheltered (i.e., sleeping in the street, in cars, or other places not meant for habitation).

## One-Year Estimates of Sheltered Families, 2007–13

*Number of sheltered people in families and family households*
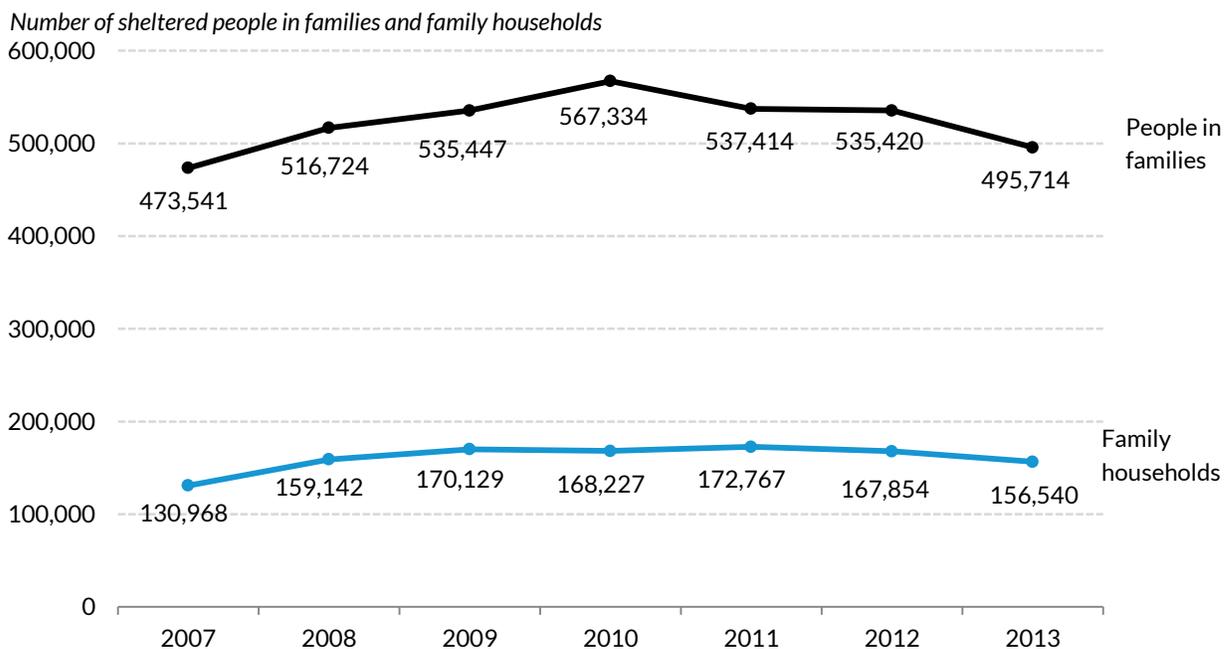


**Source:** HUD, 2014.

## Lack of Affordable Housing Is the Primary Driver of Homelessness among Families

Research identifies the lack of affordable housing as the primary driver of homelessness among families (Quigley and Raphael 2000). This housing issue stems from both an inadequate supply of affordable housing and family incomes far below the cost of available housing. Nationwide, that affordable housing shortage is significant: for every 100 extremely low income renter households in the country, there are only 29 affordable and available rental units.[1] In housing markets with shortages of affordable options, low-income families have to either compete for scarce affordable units or housing subsidies, or stretch themselves beyond their capacity to pay for housing, which makes it more difficult to afford other necessities and puts the family at higher risk for eviction and future housing instability. Approximately 20 million households in the United States are paying too much (more than 30 percent of their incomes) for housing (Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University 2013).

A large body of evidence showing that housing subsidies protect families from homelessness and are effective means of ending homelessness further substantiates the claim that housing affordability is the primary cause of homelessness (Mills 2007; Rog and Buckner 2007; Shinn 2009; Khadduri 2010). Though it is clear from the evidence that increasing housing subsidy would reduce homelessness, there are not enough housing subsidies to go around: only one in four households who are eligible actually receives them (Turner and Kingsley 2008; Khadduri 2010).

## As Affordable Housing Has Decreased, the Homeless System Has Grown

When family homelessness first attracted national attention in the late 1980s, Congress responded by passing the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which funded emergency shelters, transitional, and permanent supportive housing. In the following decades, the availability of affordable housing continued to decline. In 1987, about 14 percent of unassisted very low Income renters had worst-case housing needs (severe rent burden or in inadequate housing); by 2009, the share increased to 20 percent (Collinson 2011). Rather than address the root causes of homelessness by increasing the affordable housing options, Congress funded increases in the homeless system: since 1987, federal funding for homelessness assistance has increased from $350.2 million to $2.1 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2014, the highest level in history (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014b; National Coalition for the Homeless 2006). In 2013, the nation's homeless systems, as organized by Continuums of Care (CoC), included 118,107 emergency-shelter beds, 101,843 transitional-housing beds, 108,065 permanent supportive-housing beds, and 15,703 rapid re-housing beds for people in families (HUD 2013a).

## Emergency Shelter Is Critical for Crisis Response, but It Should Be Temporary

Emergency shelter, often the entry point into the homeless system, is a critical service for families who lose their housing. However, shelters, defined as temporary spaces, are not healthy for family stability and child well-being. Shelters often have shared living spaces and are overcrowded, with limited spaces for children to do homework or play. Many shelters limit how long a family can stay. In addition to poor conditions, emergency shelter is not always the least expensive option. A HUD-funded study of six communities found that the cost of emergency shelter ranges between $46 and $123 a night, or about $1,380 and $3,690 a month (Spellman et al. 2010). These costs are higher than local fair market rents in some communities. Shelter stays should be rare, prevented when possible, and brief when they cannot be prevented. Though most families quickly leave shelter for permanent housing, some enter transitional housing for longer stays, and others remain in the homeless system. According to national data collected through Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS), the median stay in shelter is about 28 days, with about one-quarter of people in families staying less than a week, 53 percent staying one month or less, 37 percent staying one to six months, and 10 percent staying more than six months (HUD 2013a).

## Transitional Housing: Weak Results and Costly Intervention

Transitional housing offers a housing subsidy, plus supportive services, for up to two years in a residential setting, ranging from scattered site apartments or project-based apartments to congregate living facilities. By design, transitional housing stays are intended to be longer than stays in emergency shelter. Implicit in this program is the assumption that families are not yet "housing ready" and that the skills they obtain from using their program's services focused on employment and self-sufficiency will help them become ready to maintain independent housing. According to national data collected through HMIS, the median length of stay in transitional housing is 157 nights, with 13 percent of people in families staying one month or less, 42 percent staying one to six months, and 45 percent staying more than six months during the 12 month reporting period (HUD 2013a).

Evidence shows that transitional housing has high barriers to entry: many programs screen for motivation, conduct drug tests, and require demonstrated willingness to work with the program through engagement in services (Burt 2010; Burt 2006). Even after screening out higher-need families, the evidence on transitional housing shows weak results. The most recent study found that, among the 53 transitional housing programs in the sample, on average 23 percent of families do not "graduate" successfully from transitional housing programs (Burt 2010); this means they leave before completing the program, which the programs usually defined as getting permanent housing, getting a job, or both.

Usually, failure to graduate occurs because families do not follow program requirements. On average, 70 percent of those who graduate leave transitional housing for permanent housing (Burt 2010). However, only a small share can afford housing on their own after leaving: about 35 percent of exiting families find unsubsidized permanent housing (Burt 2010). Burt's evaluation found that more families were working post program, but they are not self-sufficient and still struggle to pay for housing. Many more families who exit transitional housing to permanent housing are able to do so because they receive a housing subsidy (housing choice voucher) or enter permanent supportive housing. A small share of families, about 6 percent, is directly discharged from transitional housing to emergency shelter or other forms of homelessness (Burt 2010).

For such weak results, transitional housing is costly: about $40 to $149 a night, depending on the city, which roughly translates to $1,200 to $4,470, a month (Spellman et al. 2010). Given the high rate of families who exit to other subsidized housing, transitional housing has become an inefficient and costly waiting room—holding families in temporary housing while they complete a series of service requirements that do not increase success rates.

## Redesigning the Crisis-Response System Is Critical to Ending Family Homelessness

Redesigning the homelessness assistance system will not solve the housing affordability crisis, but it may help use system resources more efficiently and help families exit the homeless system more quickly. USICH's plan to end family homelessness by 2020 moves away from systems that rely too heavily on shelter and "housing readiness" programs like transitional housing (figure 2), toward Housing First approaches, like rapid re-housing, that help families exit homelessness more rapidly (figure 3). Specifically, the plan's goals are to ensure that no families are unsheltered, shorten families' shelter stays through rapid re-housing, link families to community-based services, and provide supportive housing for families needing intensive intervention. The plan recognizes that not every family needs the same response when they experience homelessness and that may mean adjusting how communities allocate homelessness resources. HUD has recommended that communities think strategically about how to use different interventions. HUD has not advocated for "the wholesale removal of one type of homeless resource in a community (like emergency shelter or transitional housing) with the replacement of another (like rapid re-housing)" (Oliva 2015). HUD does recommend reserving transitional housing for people in families who may be at a critical transitional point in their lives, such as parents leaving prison, youth aging out of foster care, and women fleeing domestic violence, and using rapid re-housing as a central role in the homeless system to help lower barrier families previously served by transitional housing (Oliva 2015).

FIGURE 2

## Linear Homelessness Assistance Approach

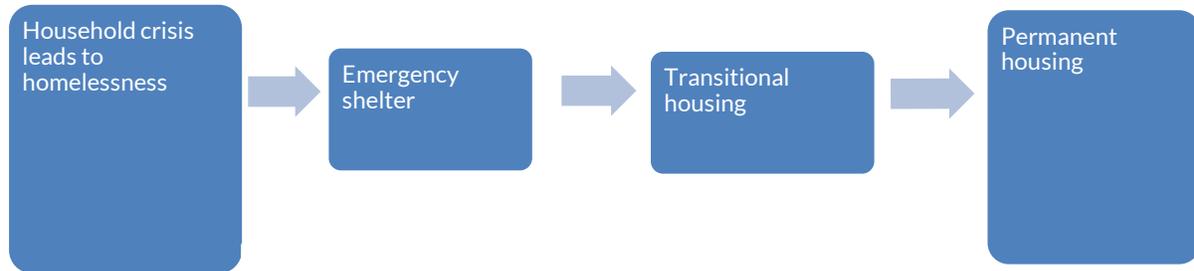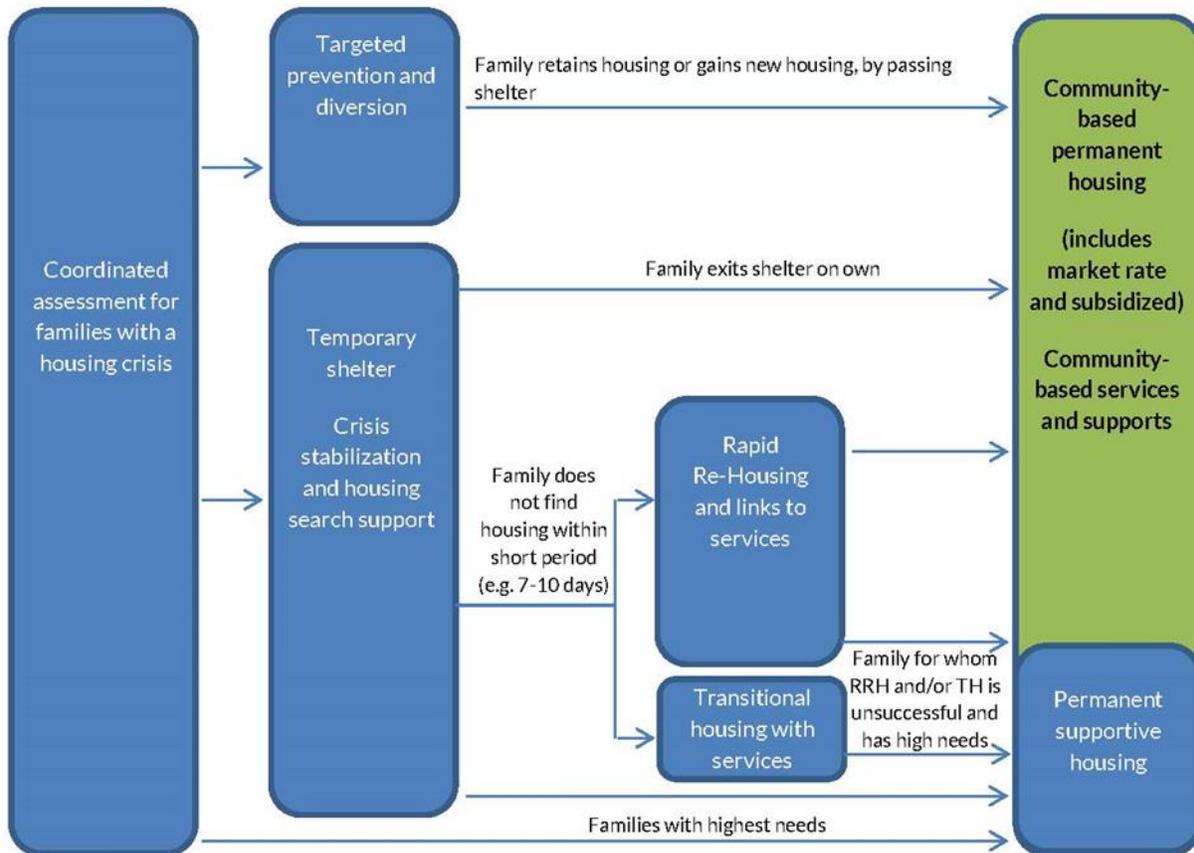| Household crisis leads to homelessness | → | Emergency shelter | → | Transitional housing | → | Permanent housing |

FIGURE 3

## Coordinated Crisis-Response System for Families



**Source:** US Interagency Council on Homelessness, n. d.
**Notes:** RRH = rapid re-housing; TH = transitional housing.

# What Is Rapid Re-housing?

## Rapid Re-housing Seeks to Help Families Exit Homeless Shelters Quickly

Rapid re-housing is an intervention designed to move homeless families into permanent housing as quickly as possible. Rapid re-housing was developed by local service providers attempting to address a specific problem in their communities. These providers noticed that many homeless families were stuck in shelters, transitional housing, and other temporary housing situations because they could not afford permanent, affordable housing. This left too many families in stressful, temporary shelter conditions for many months, which made it more difficult to find space for additional families as they became homeless and needed shelter. Rapid re-housing programs focus on eliminating barriers to moving families quickly into permanent housing by providing housing location services and financial assistance for housing related expenses (e.g., rent arrears, ongoing rent assistance, moving costs). Rather than providing services to get families ready for housing before permanent placement, a philosophy many transitional housing programs use, rapid re-housing services are designed with a housing first approach to get families in permanent housing and keep them stable once they are there.[2]

## Rapid Re-housing Combines Short-Term Services and Financial Support

Rapid re-housing programs are designed to serve families experiencing homelessness.[3] Under HUD requirements, communities can provide rapid re-housing services for short-term (less than 3 months) or medium-term assistance (up to 24 month). Program structure is largely left to the discretion of communities and looks different from place to place. The National Alliance to End Homelessness (2014a) along with the USICH, VA, and HUD has identified three core components that every rapid re-housing program should contain:

- **Housing identification services.** Households are matched to appropriate and affordable housing in the community. An important part of this work involves helping participants with housing location and recruiting landlords willing to provide opportunities to renters with histories of homelessness, poor credit, and past evictions.

- **Financial assistance for housing-related expenses.** Time-limited financial assistance is provided to get individuals and families back on their feet. This assistance can include funds to help cover move-in costs, deposits, rent, and utility costs. The amount and duration of assistance varies from community to community and family to family depending on need and program structure.

- **Case management services.** Case management services are provided to help households address barriers that prevent access to or stability in housing. Services can include addressing credit history or debt issues and helping households negotiate and understand lease agreements, transportation issues, and family conflicts. Once in housing, individuals and families may need assistance accessing other services, including public benefits, health care, and employment and job training.

Although distinct from Housing First supportive housing programs that generally target chronically homeless people with disabilities, rapid re-housing programs are similar in their focus on getting participants into permanent housing as quickly as possible, with case management services designed to address barriers affecting housing stability. Unlike most Housing First supportive housing programs, however, rapid re-housing is time limited, creating a bridge that is intended to allow households to move quickly out of homelessness and back into the community, where broader mainstream resources are available. Connecting participants to mainstream services to address ongoing needs is critical to the long-term success of formerly homeless families.

## The Federal Government Plays a Critical Role in Expanding Rapid Re-housing

In 2008, HUD expanded rapid re-housing through the Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration (RRHD), which provided $25 million to fund pilot programs in 23 communities across the country. The program received a huge boost in federal funding through the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP), a $1.5 billion federal investment funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. A majority of these funds, however, went toward homelessness-prevention services, with less than a quarter going toward rapid re-housing. In recent years, HUD has placed more emphasis on providing rapid re-housing rather than prevention services because it is difficult to predict who will become homeless and need prevention services and who will not and thus not need prevention services. It is clear, however, who is currently homeless and needs immediate crisis assistance from the homeless assistance system. After the second year, approximately 250,000 people had received rapid re-housing services through HPRP (HUD 2013b). As intended, funding for HPRP ended after three years.

In 2009, Congress enacted the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act that reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, established rapid re-housing as an eligible activity for Emergency Shelter Grants program funds (now Emergency Solutions Grants), created a federal goal to "ensure that individuals and families that become homeless return to permanent housing within 30 days," and created financial incentives to reduce average length of stay in

shelter (by 10 percent a year) (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2014a). Since then, HUD has capped the amount of Emergency Solutions Grant funding that communities can use for emergency shelter and encouraged communities to prioritize rapid re-housing programs.

Federal investment in rapid re-housing expanded further in 2012 when the VA created the Supportive Services for Veteran Families Program (SSVF). SSVF initially provided $60 million in funding to 85 grantees in FY 2012—growing to $300 million for 319 grantees in all 50 states in FY 2014—to provide prevention and rapid re-housing services to veteran households (Byrne 2014). In January, the VA announced the availability of up to $600 million for SSVF beginning in October 2014. The VA's priority is to serve veterans who are homeless in an approach consistent with the goals of the HEARTH Act (US Department of Veterans Affairs 2014). As a result of evaluations the National Center for Homelessness Among Veterans conducted, this investment is leading to a greater understanding of rapid re-housing programs.

## Rapid Re-housing Makes Up a Small Share of Homeless System, but Is Growing Fast

Despite recent expansion, rapid re-housing is a relatively small component of the homeless system. In 2014, 29,506 beds (funded by multiple sources) were committed to rapid re-housing for families across the country, representing 8 percent of all beds dedicated to homeless families, an increase from 5 percent in 2013 (figure 4). In the FY2014 Continuum of Care program competition, HUD awarded $99 million for rapid re-housing, a significant increase from the FY2013 competition (HUD 2015).

FIGURE 4
## Crisis-Response Beds for Households with Children, 2014
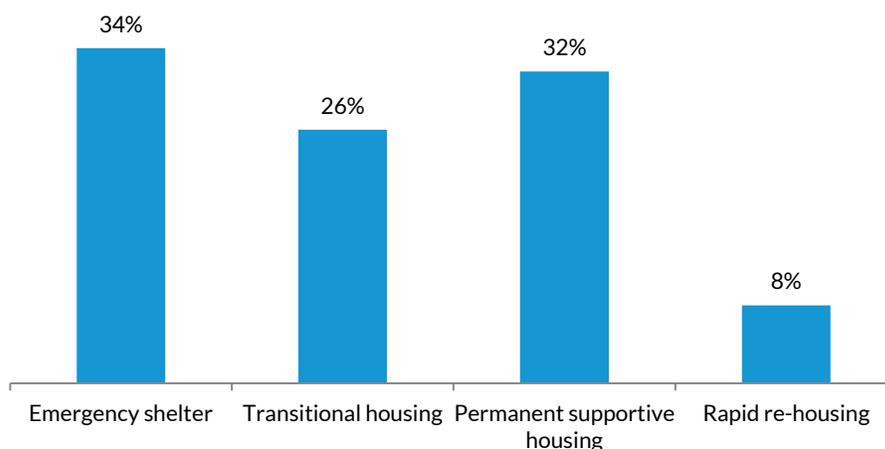


**Source**: National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015.

Across all states in January 2014, Virginia had the highest share of beds dedicated to rapid re-housing (17.3 percent). Though 4 states reported no rapid re-housing beds within their homeless-assistance systems in 2014, a decrease from 11 states with no rapid re-housing beds in 2013 (figure 5). Current trends in McKinney-Vento funded housing inventory (the primary source of federal funding for homelessness assistance) show that, since 2012, funding for transitional housing has decreased nearly a fifth while funding for permanent housing through rapid re-housing has more than doubled in size (figure 6).

## Rapid Re-housing Capacity, 2013–14

*Map shows the proportion of beds used for rapid re-housing in each state*
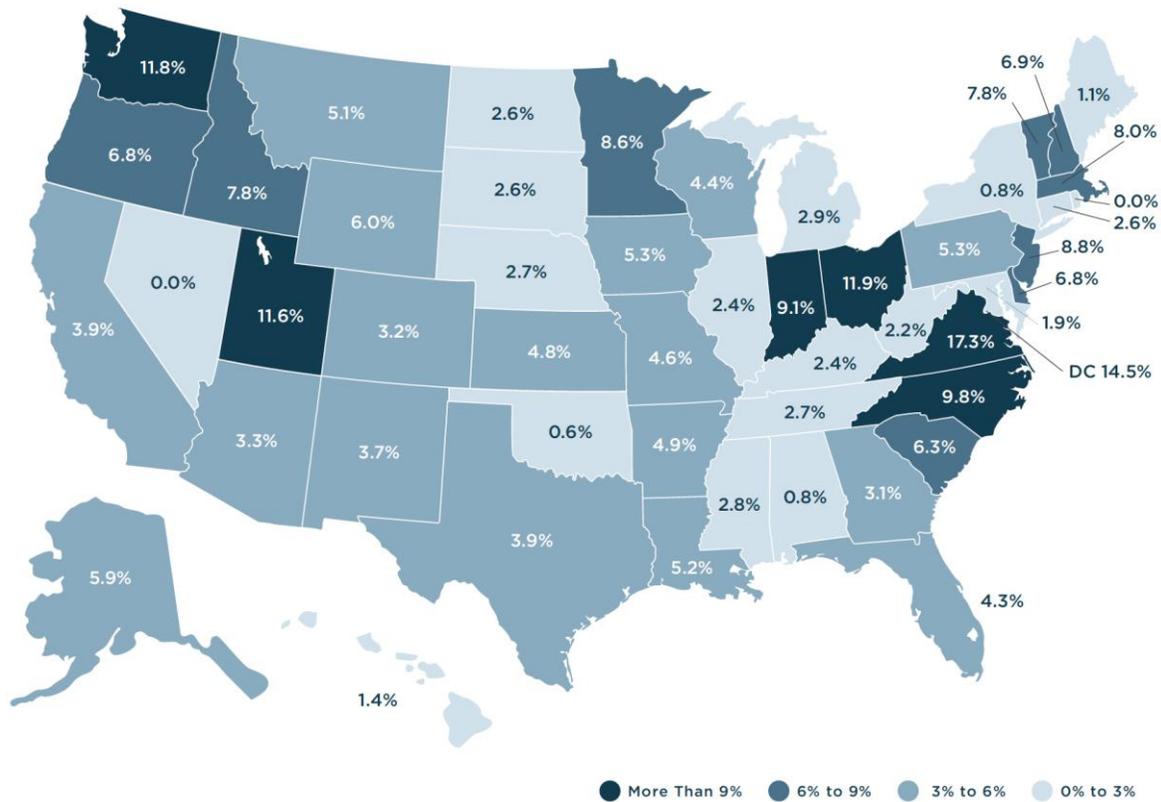


**Source:** National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015.

FIGURE 6

**Changes in McKinney-Vento Funded Housing Inventory, 2010–14**

*Number of beds*



**Source**: Oliva, 2015.
**Notes:** PH-PSH = Permanent Housing- Permanent Supportive Housing; TH = Transitional Housing; PH-RRH = Permanent Housing- Rapid Re-housing.

# What the Research Says about Effectiveness

There is some debate about how communities should measure the success of their rapid re-housing programs. The USICH notes that the "fundamental goal of rapid re-housing is to reduce the amount of time a person is homeless" (USICH and HUD 2014). This suggests that the length of time in the homeless system, either residing in an emergency shelter or transitional housing, should 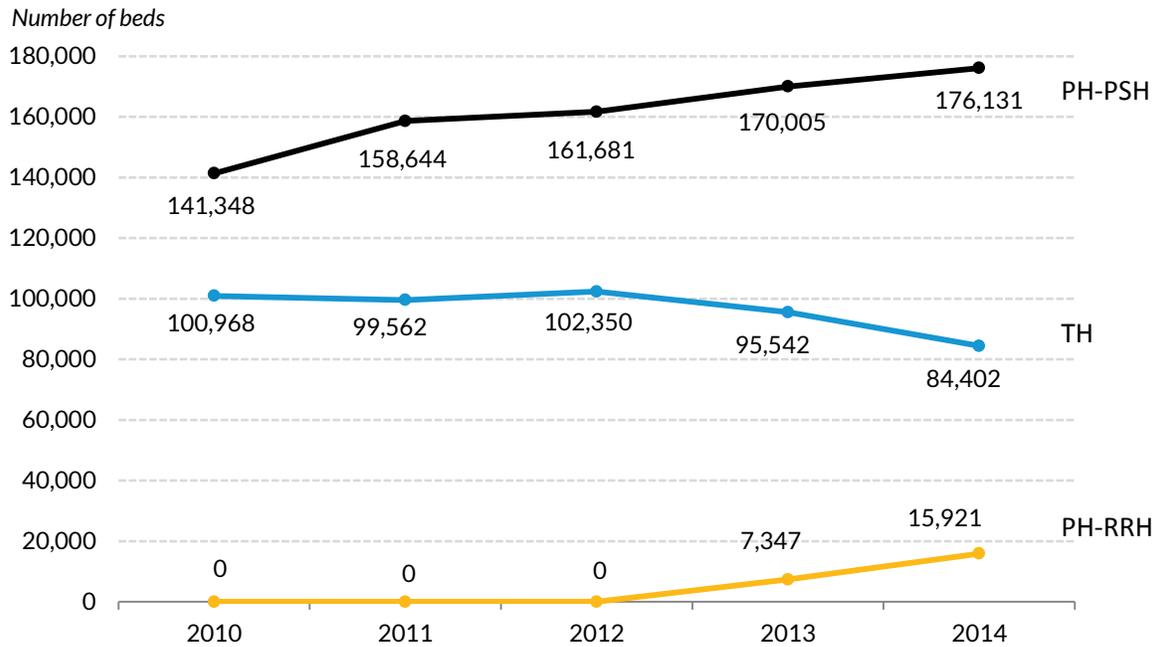be measured, and that the efficacy of rapid re-housing to help families exit homelessness quickly by placing them in housing should be compared with other interventions offered by the homelessness system (e.g., emergency shelter and transitional housing). The question of whether the family comes back into the homeless system and for how long they remain in housing (as compared with results from other interventions) also speaks to the effectiveness of rapid re-housing. The relative cost of different interventions in achieving these goals measures its efficiency. Further, since there is increasing emphasis on rapid re-housing in the effort to end homelessness by 2020, the intervention's impact on the overall number of homeless families in the community is the most important metric of rapid re-housing effectiveness.

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness notes that "rapid re-housing is not designed to comprehensively address a recipients overall service needs or poverty" (USICH and HUD 2014). However, there are questions (and a great amount of disagreement) about whether or not evaluations of rapid re-housing should measure employment rates, income increases, residential stability, household ability to afford the rent, and other measures of well-being. Further, there are questions about if evaluations should measure the quality of the housing and neighborhood location (e.g., safety, proximity to employment and high-quality schools). In designing interventions to help poor homeless families, it is obvious that these outcomes matter, but who delivers and pays for them—the homelessness assistance system, housing programs, or the income safety net—is a question many policymakers and program implementers continue to debate.

One point that all agree on is that policymakers need more rigorous evaluation. A few federal studies are already underway (box 1). In addition, many communities have tracked outcomes and conducted evaluations of their rapid re-housing programs. Though all of these evaluations provide valuable information about the programs, they have a variety of limitations. Most rapid re-housing evaluations do not include a comparison or control group or otherwise attempt to measure change against "services as usual," making it impossible to conclude that rapid re-housing influenced the outcome. The results from many of the evaluations reported on in this report are still underway, are preliminary, and are from early dissemination of the results.

## Rapid Re-housing Has Low Barriers to Entry

Baseline data from HUD's Family Options Study show that rapid re-housing programs have lower barriers to entry and are more desirable to families than project-based transitional housing (HUD 2013c). Project-Based Transitional Housing was the hardest for families to gain entry. Only 10 percent of families screened for rapid re-housing lost access because of eligibility criteria, while 17 percent of families screened for project-based transitional housing lost access because of eligibility criteria (HUD 2013c). Families appear to find rapid re-housing a more desirable program: one-third (32 percent) of families screened for rapid re-housing chose not to enroll in the program, while almost half (49 percent) of families screened for transitional housing chose not to enroll (HUD 2013c). Qualitative data collected for the Family Options Study reveals that families turned down project-based transitional housing for a variety of reasons, including undesirable locations of facilities, rules that excluded men (including fathers of children), and various environmental stressors (e.g., arguments and trouble in the hallways, loitering and cigarette smoking) (Fisher 2014). Qualitative evidence documents that families who experience homelessness prefer housing choice vouchers compared with project-based transitional housing or rapid re-housing (Fisher 2014).

BOX 1

## Rapid Re-housing Evaluations in Progress

Two large-scale evaluations are underway that will provide additional information about the implementation and effectiveness of rapid re-housing:

**Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration (RRHD).** Under contract with HUD, Abt Associates is conducting an evaluation of the 23 sites that received funding for rapid re-housing services as part of the federal demonstration. The evaluators are documenting the intervention as implemented by different communities and tracking housing outcomes for a sample of participating families who have moderate barriers to housing stability. The study uses HMIS data to track outcomes ($N$ = 1,459), along with a participant survey conducted 12 months after program exit ($N$ = 500). HUD is expected to release a report on program outcomes in 2015. Preliminary findings from the report are also included in this review.[1] This study will be valuable in providing descriptions of rapid re-housing programs across the country and for understanding program outcomes. Despite the scale of this evaluation, the scope and methodological approach limits what we can learn about rapid re-housing because it only tracks outcomes for those who participated, with no comparison groups.

**Family Options Study.** This randomized controlled trial (RCT), also conducted by Abt Associates and funded by HUD, will measure the relative impacts and costs of four interventions: (1) rapid re-housing and other temporary rental assistance, (2) project-based transitional housing with intensive supportive services, (3) permanent housing subsidies, and (4) the emergency shelter system (usual care). Researchers randomly assigned 2,282 homeless families (with 5,397 children) in 12 communities to one of these four interventions. Families were enrolled between September 2010 and January 2012. This study will be valuable in terms of understanding the impact and cost effectiveness of rapid re-housing in relation to other interventions. Interim findings are included in this review. HUD is releasing the final report in 2015.[2]

[1] For more information, see http://www.abtassociates.com/projects/2010/evaluation-of-the-rapid -re-housing-for-families-de.aspx.

[2] For more information, see http://www.huduser.org/portal/family_options_study.html.

## Length of Program Participation Is Short to Medium

HUD's summary report on year two of HPRP provides information on the length of participation in the program for exiting rapid re-housing participants. Over one-fifth (22 percent) exit in fewer than 30 days, 11 percent exit in 31 to 60 days, 34 percent exit in 61 to 180 days, 22 percent exit in 181 to 365 days, and 9 percent exit in 366 to 547 days (HUD 2013b). According to the VA, the median length of participation for families who exited SSVF rapid re-housing assistance in FY 2013 was 91 days. Some program evaluations have reported longer stays. Average length of stay for families participating in the rapid re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration was 8 to 10 months (Spellman 2015). An evaluation of Philadelphia's rapid re-housing program found that participating households (households were tracked from 2009 to 2013) received financial assistance an average of 12 months (Taylor 2014).

The effects of time limits and intervening for a short period on families are unclear. Qualitative data collected for the Family Options Study, which includes 12 sites across the country, found that time limits created "considerable anxiety" among participants (Fisher 2014). Further, because rapid re-housing programs commonly provide the minimum amount of services for three months and then recertify a family to see if they still need ongoing assistance, families are often uncertain about how long their assistance will last, how much they will receive, and how those decisions are made (Fisher 2014).

## Housing Placements Are High

Nationally, 82 percent of households exited rapid re-housing programs into permanent housing, according to the summary report on year two of HPRP (HUD 2013b). This finding is consistent with the SSVF program: about 84 percent of SSVF households receiving rapid re-housing or prevention services had permanent housing upon program exit (VA 2014). There are not a lot of data available on how housing-placement rates compare from city to city, and there is a lot of concern about the ability of families to find housing in tight rental markets.

## Rates of Return to the Homeless System Are Low

Several studies have consistently found that rates of return to homelessness are low. Unless otherwise specified, returns to homelessness are defined as returns to emergency shelter or transitional housing within the same CoC as captured by HMIS. It does not include other types of family homelessness that would meet HUD's definition, including those sleeping outside, in cars, or other places not intended for habitation or entering shelter or transitional housing in another CoC jurisdiction.

- Only 10 percent of families exiting the HUD Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration returned to homelessness (i.e., entered emergency shelter or transitional

housing as recorded by HMIS in the CoC they exited) after one year (Oliva 2014; Spellman 2015). No comparisons are available for participants who exit emergency shelter or transitional housing. The Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration sites were located in a range of rental markets: about 25 percent had rental housing vacancy rates below 5 percent, and 75 percent were above 5 percent (Spellman 2015). This study also examined predictors of housing outcomes by modeling household variables (e.g., age, race, presence of children, disabling condition, earned income at entry, income at exit, exiting with a housing subsidy, length of time in program), project variables (e.g., subsidy structure, frequency of case management, presence of central or coordinated assessment), and housing market variables (e.g., vacancy rates, local rental rates) and found vacancy rates greater than 5 percent were associated with lower rates of returns to homelessness (Spellman 2015).

- Results for SSVF show that only 9 percent of veterans in families who exited to permanent housing, had a homeless episode (i.e., were assessed and entered into HOMES, the VA's homeless registry; entered VA specialized homeless programs; or entered SSVF rapid re-housing) within 12 months of rapid re-housing program exit (Byrne et al. 2014). Within two years, returns to homelessness increased to 16 percent of veteran families. The SSVF study found that the odds of experiencing a homeless episode after program exit were significantly higher among those with a history of homelessness and those who used VA healthcare in the previous year (Byrne et al. 2014). Exiting SSVF to HUD-VASH, which provides a permanent, deep housing subsidy, or participating of greater than 90 days decreased the risk of returning to homelessness (Byrne et al. 2014).

- A program evaluation of Philadelphia's HPRP program evaluation found that 14 percent of participating households returned to homelessness (i.e., entered emergency shelter or transitional housing) during the four-year follow-up period compared with 39 percent of a matched comparison group of nonparticipating households (Taylor 2014). The analysis found that being married lowered the risk of returning to homelessness and that previous shelter stays increased the risk of returning to homelessness (Taylor 2014).

- The Georgia Department of Community Affairs conducted an extensive analysis of statewide HMIS data to determine risk and protective factors for homelessness recurrence by different housing interventions. The analysis found that, during a two-year period, 23 percent of those exiting emergency shelter, 10 percent of those exiting transitional housing, and 9 percent of those exiting rapid re-housing returned to shelter (Rodriguez 2015). Previous homelessness, no

income at entry, and nonwhite race were characteristics associated with increased likelihood of returning to shelter (Rodriguez 2015).

- Data averaged from seven CoCs in four states show that, on average, 4 percent of families who exit rapid re-housing return to homelessness compared with 9 percent of families exiting transitional housing and 11 percent of families exiting shelter (Gale 2012).

## Employment and Income Gains Are Modest

Families who enter rapid re-housing programs must be able to afford their rent when they leave the program, and many, though not all, rapid re-housing programs require income for entry or quickly after enrollment (Spellman 2015). A year after participants exited the rapid re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration, families showed employment gains from 34 percent employed at program entry to 45 percent employed at follow-up (Spellman 2015; Oliva 2014). For SSVF households, median monthly income increased from $251 at program entry to $450 at exit (VA 2014). The study of Philadelphia's rapid re-housing program found small but statistically significant effects on income—findings indicate that every additional month of rapid re-housing services increases household income by $15 a month (Taylor 2014). Whether or not these modest increases are adequate to afford rent is unclear and largely depends on the unit affordability and if the family has additional sources of income. Qualitative data collected for the Family Options Study highlighted that the requirement to demonstrate income quickly was "a major concern expressed by families" and that it "created a double bind: they had to find a job quickly to become eligible for assistance, but the kinds of jobs that were available quickly would not sustain them after assistance expired" (Fisher 2014).

## Residential Instability Is Still High

Although rates of return to homelessness after one year were low among families exiting the rapid re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration (RRHD), most families (76 percent) moved at least once in the year after exit (Oliva 2014; Spellman 2015). Only 25 percent of families remained in the same unit they were housed in during the demonstration. Families with young parents and families with three or more children were significantly more likely to move at least once after exit (Oliva 2014; Spellman 2015). Research shows that residential instability is common for low-income families (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009; Crowley 2003), so it is hard to draw conclusions from these findings without comparisons with housing instability outcomes from other interventions (e.g., shelter and transitional housing).

## Family Challenges Remain High

Families who exited the HUD Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration still experienced significant challenges one year after exit (even when housed). In all, 70 percent worried about food security, 57 percent struggled with money for rent, 14 percent had a child expelled or suspended from school within the last year, and 17 percent reported deteriorating health (Oliva 2014; Spellman 2015). Again, it is hard to say how these outcomes compare with other poor families. No comparisons are available for participants who exit emergency shelter or transitional housing.

## Not Enough Data on Quality of Housing and Neighborhood Location

In general, many studies of homelessness that follow family outcomes do not measure housing or neighborhood quality and, as a result, there is not a lot of research on these outcomes. There are several reasons for this. First, measuring housing or neighborhood quality requires collecting additional data in the form of resident surveys, inspections, or geocoding and linking housing destinations to neighborhood-level indicators available from sources like the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Further, housing quality or neighborhood location is not usually a top priority among service providers or residents when they are making choices that are constrained by the goal to leave shelter (which are not often of high housing or neighborhood quality). Qualitative data collected from 80 families who participated in the Family Options Study revealed that some residents reported improvements in their housing compared with shelter; however, some residents who moved with rapid re-housing reported "terrible experiences" in neighborhoods that were plagued by drugs and violence and that they did not feel safe (Fisher 2014). These data are not generalizable to all families who receive rapid re-housing, so it is unclear how widespread these experiences are. There is debate on what outcomes one should include in measuring the success of rapid re-housing, but evidence on the importance of housing and neighborhood quality suggests that these dimensions are important for child health and well-being (Sard and Fisher 2014).

## Cost of Rapid Re-housing Unclear

The theory behind the design of rapid re-housing is the premise that providing short-term assistance is enough to help families exit shelter and that providing this "light intervention" (and thus relatively less expensive) can accomplish similar or better outcomes then more costly interventions (e.g., emergency shelter and transitional housing). Therefore, understanding the cost (and relative cost) of rapid re-housing is critical to understanding the effectiveness of the program. Unfortunately, there are not a lot of data on the cost of the program (and only a limited amount of research on the cost of emergency shelter and transitional housing). The average per-household cost of SSVF was $2,480 in FY 2013 (VA

2014). In Philadelphia's HPRP program, households that received rapid re-housing received $6,000 over an average of twelve months (Taylor 2014). This is a big range, making it difficult to come to conclusions about the cost of the program.

# Research Questions Remain

Though the evidence on rapid re-housing continues to grow, important unanswered research questions remain, and additional research with rigorous methodology is needed to draw firm conclusions. The ongoing federal evaluations focus on family outcomes (box 1); this section highlights some additional questions. It also provides questions on an area that is not being studies: how rapid re-housing affects system-level outcomes, including reductions in family homelessness and reductions in average time in the system among families.

## Which Families Does Rapid Re-housing Help Most?

- Which individuals and families are more likely to succeed with the short-term assistance that the rapid re-housing provides, and which families need a more intense intervention with deeper and longer housing assistance (e.g., permanent supportive housing)?

- Which families will be able to find permanent housing without rapid re-housing assistance?

- What characteristics can be used to identify and properly refer individuals and families at program entry?

## How Does Rapid Re-housing Help Families?

- Does rapid re-housing limit the incidence and duration of homelessness?

- How does rapid re-housing prepare families to maintain housing after program exit?

- Does rapid re-housing increase family income and earnings?

- Does rapid re-housing increase families' access to mainstream services?

- What is the rent burden of families exiting rapid re-housing?

- How do the characteristics of local housing markets affect rapid re-housing outcomes?

- What lessons from the implementation of rapid re-housing programs could guide a broader study on the effectiveness of time-limited or shallow subsidies?

## How Should Rapid Re-housing Be Implemented?

- What are the most common program approaches being implemented under the rubric of a rapid re-housing intervention?

- What are the best practices for landlord recruitment and selection of housing locations?

- How much financial assistance does the average household need to achieve longer-term housing stability? How can temporary financial assistance be best structured to maximize the number of households served while minimizing returns to homelessness when the subsidy is no longer available (e.g., income-based, flat, and declining subsidy models)?

- What is the best way to use progressive-engagement methods—providing a light-touch approach initially and more intensive services later if homelessness or housing instability persists?

- How are providers identifying and addressing service needs? What are the best practices for stabilizing people in housing and attaching them to mainstream services in their communities?

- What is the ideal program length?

- How can program components be adapted for tight rental markets?

## How Does Rapid Re-housing Increase System Effectiveness?

- How does rapid re-housing function within a coordinated system of homeless assistance programs?

- Does rapid re-housing improve homeless-response system performance?[4] In addition to client-level outcomes, do communities with rapid re-housing show improved system-level performance related to the following?

  » length of time people remain homeless
  » rates of return to homelessness
  » number of homeless people
  » homelessness prevention and housing placement
  » successful housing placement

**Is Rapid Re-housing Cost-Effective?**

- Does the value of rapid re-housing outcomes exceed program costs?

- Does rapid re-housing produce better outcomes than other interventions (e.g., emergency shelter or transitional housing)?

# Conclusions

Rapid re-housing was designed to move families quickly from homelessness into permanent housing by helping them locate appropriate housing, providing temporary financial assistance for housing related expenses, and addressing service needs linked directly to housing stability. Though there is limited, but growing, evidence about the effectiveness of the approach, early evaluation and program data indicate that rapid re-housing reduces returns to homelessness. The evaluation of the Rapid Re-housing for Homeless Families Demonstration and the Family Options Study, as well as single site evaluations that researchers are conducting across the country, will provide additional insight. However, to better understand the effectiveness of rapid re-housing in limiting the incidence and duration of homeless spells for different families and with different program approaches and to uncover lessons for the broader use short- to medium-term assistance in preventing and ending homelessness, more research is required.

# Notes

1. Graham MacDonald, and Erika Poethig, "We've mapped America's rental housing crisis," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, March 3, 2014, http://blog.metrotrends.org/2014/03/america-rental-housing-crisis/.

2. For more information, see http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/frequently-asked-questions-about-housing-first-for-individuals-and-families.

3. Under the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program, eligible participants had to be residing in an emergency shelter, living in a place not meant for human habitation, timing out of a transitional housing program, or a victim of domestic violence. The HEARTH Act modified the federal homelessness definition, affecting those eligible for rapid re-housing funding by the Emergency Shelter Grants Program.

4. In July 2014 HUD released required system performance measures for Continuum of Care Program-funded projects. For more information see https://www.hudexchange.info/news/hud-releases-the-system-performance-measures-introductory-guide-and-additional-resources.

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