# The Network for Public Health Law

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# Community-Based Measures to Promote Housing Stability

## The Problem

Housing is a social determinant of health; it is a key condition "in the places where people live, learn, work, and play" that affects their health and quality of life.[1] Therefore, housing and health are co-extensive—they influence one another. People's experiences with medical conditions may contribute to their homelessness, and homelessness may exacerbate existing chronic health conditions while creating new health problems.

People who experience homelessness report overall poorer health, including higher rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attack, hepatitis C, HIV, substance use disorders, intimate partner violence, and premature mortality.[2] Homelessness itself also makes it more difficult for people to secure medical treatment, manage medications, access consistent or healthy food sources, and protect themselves from weather extremes and communicable diseases.[3] People who experience housing instability similarly experience a range of negative health impacts.[4]

Health risks were even greater during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened the eviction and homelessness crisis in the U.S. and added a particularly dangerous combination as it pertains to health: a lack of opportunity for physical distancing and financial hardship. People experiencing homelessness were more likely to contact COVID-19[5] and were at least twice as likely to be hospitalized, to require treatment in the ICU, and to die.[6] Further, after most states' eviction moratoria ended in late 2020, COVID-19 incidence doubled, and mortality increased five-fold.[7]

Housing instability is also a health equity crisis, with disproportionate impacts on communities of color. Black people make up 13% of the general population but 40% of the unhoused population in the US.[8] Homelessness affects many other communities at disproportionate rates, including single mothers, domestic violence victims, LGBTQ youth and young adults, people who have been incarcerated, and veterans.[9] These numbers show that housing instability is as much a crisis in equity as in public health.

Knowing the negative relationship between housing instability and health, communities can choose to invest in infrastructure and resources to better respond to homelessness. Such efforts will start to address the long-term impacts of housing instability on health and to build a more resilient and healthy community.

## Possible Measures to Support Housing Stability in the Community

Local and community-based resources can play a significant role in addressing the impact of homelessness and housing instability. Communities that want to reduce homelessness and promote housing stability may adopt three specific measures that have proven effective: a centralized community response, access to immediate housing and support services, and housing voucher programs. These measures are discussed at length below.

**Organize a Centralized Community Response**

Communities can start by organizing and adopting a community-wide centralized response to address the needs of community members who are experiencing homelessness or at immediate risk of homelessness.[10] Creating and funding an office to oversee these efforts is a strong and effective response for multiple reasons. First, the office can act as a coordinated entry point to screen individuals for eligibility for available resources. Such screening allows the office to identify prevention strategies and resources that can increase housing stability for both individuals and the community more broadly. The office is also able to collect data on homelessness to identify needs and inform a greater community response. These strategies are shown to be effective in homelessness prevention and rehousing; they enhance the quality of screening, assessment, and identifying effective assistance.[11] A centralized response is better situated to identify the needs of people at risk for homelessness and to connect them with needed services. For instance, service providers can assist people with mental illness in paying their rent on time, help senior citizens to stay independent longer, and ensure that people with chronic illnesses receive proper medical care.

**Provide Access to Immediate Housing and Support Services**

Communities can also organize to eliminate homelessness and promote housing stability by working to quickly re-house individuals and families experiencing or at immediate risk of homelessness. Two specific types of housing programs can help to meet these goals: rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing. These programs provide significant resources to help promote stability in housing while reducing the amount of time someone experiences homelessness. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") offers funding for these types of programs through their Community of Care Program, which is available to nonprofits, state and local governments, and public health agencies.[12]

> Rapid Re-Housing
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> Rapid re-housing is a resource designed to quickly move people who are experiencing homelessness into permanent housing.[13] It is a short-term resource that supports people to identify housing options by providing short-term financial assistance for rent and moving costs, as well as case management services to help people navigate barriers to maintaining stable housing.[14] The fundamental goal of a rapid re-housing program is to reduce the amount of time someone is homeless or eliminate the period of homelessness altogether.
>
> Research shows that rapid re-housing is an effective intervention to prevent homelessness.[15] Providing a stable address and case-management support facilitates other factors that improve long-term stability, such as the ability to find a job. People who received rapid re-housing experienced shorter periods of homelessness and were less likely to return to a shelter once their financial support ended. Most people who access rapid re-housing support do not become unhoused again. The quick transition out of homelessness also positively impacts health: it reduces the risk of hospitalization, poor overall health, and infant developmental delays.
> In addition to its positive impact on housing stability and health, rapid re-housing is cost-effective compared to other housing support measures. It is short term in nature, requires limited financial investment, and results in positive outcomes for families even after the financial support ends. It also frees up resources to be expended for

others who are struggling with homelessness but may not be able to access rapid re-housing. Overall, rapid re-housing is an important and immediate option that will help reduce the incidence of homelessness in our communities while promoting positive outcomes in the process.

<u>Permanent Supportive Housing</u>

Permanent supportive housing is another important community-based housing resource. Unlike rapid rehousing, permanent supportive housing is specifically designed to move people who have experienced chronic homelessness into permanent housing with support resources that are designed to help them maintain stable housing.[16] HUD developed the Housing First Approach to Permanent Supportive Housing with specific core components to include in a permanent supportive housing program.[17] These components emphasize ease of access and include:

- Minimal barriers or prerequisites to entering and qualifying for housing;
- Quick and easy entry into housing;
- Accessible yet voluntary support services;
- The full range of rights and protections in place for tenants;
- Efforts to prevent risk of lease violations and evictions; and
- Versatility to provide housing support in a variety of housing models.

Overall, these components support an accessible program that works to screen people into housing, as opposed to out of housing, and are linked to increased housing stability, improved physical and behavioral health, and reduced use of crisis services.[18] Like rapid re-housing, permanent supportive housing has proven to be an important resource in ending homelessness. One study showed that it reduced the population of chronically homeless individuals by 20% and is linked to reduced costs expended in other areas, like shelters, hospitals, and the criminal justice system.[19] Numerous studies have found that placement in supportive housing is associated with improved quality of life and mental health, fewer emergency department visits, fewer days spent unhoused, higher income, and decreases in substance use and justice system involvement.[20]

**Promote Long-Term Housing Stability through Vouchers**

Finally, communities can make great strides toward longer-term housing stability by managing and funding housing voucher programs. Voucher programs help families locate and stay in their housing. Vouchers promote housing stability among community members at risk for instability or homelessness, and they are

linked to reduced rates of hospitalization, food insecurity, intimate partner violence, and child separation.[21] These programs help families meet their basic needs and reduce the negative health risks associated with homelessness and housing instability.

<u>Types of Vouchers</u>

There are generally two types of vouchers: tenant-based vouchers and project-based vouchers. Tenant-based vouchers attach to the specific tenants who qualify, and therefore the voucher follows them to the dwelling they choose to rent. Conversely, project-based vouchers attach to the specific dwelling as opposed to the tenant.

<u>Sources of Vouchers</u>

Most vouchers, like a Section 8 Voucher, are federally funded through HUD's Housing Choice Voucher Program.[22] Housing Choice Vouchers ("HCVs") are administered by local public housing authorities that receive

federal funding from HUD to administer the program. The majority of HCVs are tenant-based vouchers.[23] This reflects the program's emphasis on ensuring the resource can assist the family regardless of where they live. However, this program does permit a small percentage of funds to go to project-based vouchers.

HUD has specific voucher programs within the HCV Program like HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers. HUD-VASH vouchers are a coordinated effort between HUD and the Veterans Administration ("VA") to provide Housing Choice assistance and supportive services to veterans who are homeless.[24] These services are provided by the VA at medical centers, in outreach clinics, and through VA contractors and entities.

HCVs have an undeniably broad impact on housing stability in the United States. Around 2.2 million households use an HCV to rent privately owned housing.[25] However, one of the main limitations of HCVs is that there is a significant waiting list of families who qualify. And as a result of the backlog and insufficient funding, many families who qualify for HCVs do not actually receive assistance.

In light of the strong benefits of voucher programs and limited availability of HCVs, states and municipalities may find it beneficial to create and fund programs to invest in housing vouchers for community members, separate from and in addition to HCVs. HUD detailed this practice as a possible support in its Moving On Program.[26] Hundreds of these kinds of programs currently exist in cities and states across the U.S.[27] For example, New Jersey developed its own program, the State Rental Assistance Program, which provides tenant- and project-based vouchers to community members in need.[28] These vouchers are separate from HCV funding, and therefore help to ensure more families qualify for this resource. While federally funded vouchers provide the most substantial resource for housing vouchers, states can supplement these efforts in important ways through state or municipality-funded voucher programs.

# Conclusion

These community-based measures have proven to be effective at decreasing the incidence of homelessness and housing instability. However, beyond the impact on families, they also support positive outcomes for our communities more broadly. Investing in housing resources reduces the costs expended in other public services and the criminal justice system.[29] Investment in these measures—a centralized community response, rehousing resources, and housing vouchers—will help to ensure community-wide success and stability that is accessible to all members.

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9 Kaya Lurie et al., Discrimination at the Margins: the Intersectionality of Homelessness & Other Marginalized Groups, HOMELESS RIGHTS ADVOCACY PROJECT (2015), https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=hrap

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11 Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program, *Centralized Intake for Helping People Experiencing Homelessness: Overview, Community Profiles, and Resources* (last accessed Apr. 16, 2024), https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HPRP_CentralizedIntake.pdf.

12 A number of other federal agencies also provide funding for rapid re-housing. Mary Cunningham & Samantha Batko, Rapid Rehousing's Role in Responding to Homelessness: What Evidence Says (2018), https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99153/rapid_re-housings_role_in_responding_to_homelessness_3.pdf.

13 NAT'L ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS, Rapid Re-housing Works: What the Evidence Says (2018), https://endhomelessness.org/rapid-re-housing-works-evidence-says/.

14 Cunningham & Batko, supra note 12.

15 *Id.*

16 Nat'l Alliance to End Homelessness, *Permanent Supportive Housing* (last updated Apr. 2023), https://endhomelessness.org/endinghomelessness/solutions/permanent-supportive-housing/; U.S. Dep't of Housing & Urban Dev., *Continuum of Care (CoC) Program Eligibility Requirements* (last accessed Apr. 16, 2024), https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/coc-program-eligibility-requirements/.

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[19] NAT'L ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS, supra note 16.

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[22] Bailey, *supra* note 3; HUD Family Options Study, *supra* note 2; Nat'l Health Care for the Homeless Council, *supra* note 2.

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[28] U.S. Dep't of Housing & Urban Dev., *supra* note 27, at 11

[29] Nat'l Alliance to End Homelessness, *supra* note 13.