

Understanding Rapid Re-housing through Participants' Experiences



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Foreword

As homelessness remains a major concern in our communities, practitioners and homeless services providers as well as researchers and academics are in search of stronger evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of interventions that assist households to exit homelessness and obtain stable housing. One of the fastest-growing approaches to moving people out of homelessness is rapid re-housing (RRH), a program model that provides temporary assistance to people experiencing homelessness, to move them quickly into permanent housing and allow them to stabilize there¹.

The *Understanding Rapid Re-housing* study is a four-year project with five reports plus a data repository representing the first comprehensive documentation of RRH programs nationwide. The reports include a review of RRH outcomes literature; a supplemental analysis of data from the *Family Options Study* about differences in the use of RRH in the study communities; a report using data from surveys administered to Continuums of Care and RRH programs along with interviews with 20 RRH programs to describe features and program models; a report that describes findings from in-depth interviews with 30 RRH participants in two communities at different stages of RRH; and finally, this paper, which presents findings from 16 months of qualitative research with 16 households in two communities during and after their time in RRH.

RRH is not a one-size-fits-all strategy—it has proven to be an effective way for some, but not all, formerly homeless households to stabilize in permanent housing. Like any solution to a complicated problem, it has strengths and weaknesses. This report, which presents a window into the experiences of 16 households who agreed to meet regularly with a researcher over a 16-month period to discuss their lives, highlights some areas where RRH functioned as it was meant to for these participants, as well as some areas where it did not. It also underscores some places where we need to ask more questions in order to understand the best way to utilize a short-term assistance model most effectively.



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¹ National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2014. *Core Components of Rapid Re-housing: Fact Sheet*.
<https://endhomelessness.org/ending-homelessness/solutions/rapid-re-housing/>

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1. Introduction

Rapid re-housing (RRH) programs provide temporary assistance to people experiencing homelessness to move quickly into permanent housing and stabilize there (NAEH, 2014). Though RRH is considered a single approach to addressing homelessness and has a common set of core components—housing identification, financial assistance, and case management—the design and implementation of programs vary considerably nationwide. Over the last decade, RRH programs have expanded across the country. Between 2016 and 2019, the beds dedicated to RRH increased by about 50 percent, from 77,141 to 112,961 (HUD, 2020). Research to date has focused on short-term housing outcomes for participants in RRH programs, especially their rate of return to shelter (Gubits et al., 2018; Cunningham, Gillespie, and Anderson, 2015), but there has been limited research on participants’ experiences both during their time in RRH and after their exit.

To learn more about participant experiences in RRH, Abt Associates conducted qualitative research under the *Understanding Rapid Re-housing* study for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Office of Policy Development and Research². This report presents the findings from that qualitative research with 16 households conducted during their time in RRH and after exit from the program, from late 2018 through early 2020. Findings from this research are intended to help policymakers and practitioners better understand how RRH programs assist people experiencing homelessness and contribute to their overall housing stability.

1.1. Research Approach

Our research used an ethnographic approach to develop a deep understanding of the 16 households’ experiences during and after RRH to better understand the role RRH plays in their lives. Data collection consisted of:

- Three in-depth interviews (at baseline, 6 to 9 months after study entry, and 12 to 15 months after study entry).
- Observations (including home visits and observations of case management).
- Review of housing-related documents provided by the participant.
- Ongoing, unstructured communication by phone and text (weekly–quarterly) with the 16 households over the 15-month study period.³

This research is also informed by interviews with program staff at the three RRH programs serving the research participants. Given the small number of people in our sample, this research cannot make conclusions about the efficacy of RRH programs overall. (For more information on the study’s methodology, see appendix A.)

The interviews focused on study participants’ most recent experience of homelessness, participation in an RRH program, and housing stability following program exit. However, we also explored a wide variety of contextual factors. This allows us to present fuller glimpses into these individuals’ lives, rather than defining their experience by their current episode of homelessness or their participation in a specific intervention.⁴

² Other components of that study include research centered on the design and outcomes of RRH programs (Dunton and Brown 2019; Gubits et al. 2018; Walton et al. 2018) and one-time interviews with 30 households in various stages of RRH assistance (Jefferson et al. 2019).

³ At the conclusion of the 15-month study period, we remained in contact with nine participants.

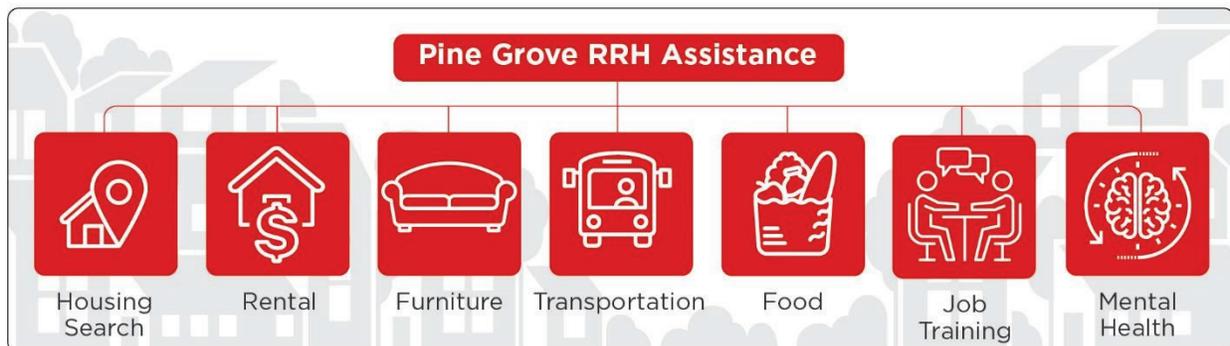
⁴ Names of people, communities, and programs are pseudonyms. Pictures are stock photos.

1.2. Study Communities and Research Participants

Our study participants lived in two communities—each a city and its surrounding area. In consultation with HUD, we chose these two communities based on a combination of convenience—so primary researchers could meet with participants regularly—and contrasting housing markets. One community had a typical rental housing market with costs and vacancy rates near the national average, and the other had high housing costs and a low rental vacancy rate. At the outset of our study, both communities had recently implemented coordinated entry systems that prioritized people with significant barriers to housing for RRH assistance.

The implementation of RRH varied between the two communities:

- Pine Grove**, a mid-sized southern city, had two RRH programs—one funded by HUD’s Continuum of Care (CoC) program and one funded by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs’ Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. A local community action agency located in a historically Black and low-income neighborhood operated both RRH programs. Based on interviews with the program staff, Pine Grove RRH participants received housing search assistance and financial assistance for housing, typically several months of partial rental assistance in addition to move-in costs. Program participants also received gift cards for groceries, transportation assistance (bus passes, rides from staff, referrals to purchase refurbished cars, and car repairs and fees), and referrals for other services (e.g., job training, furniture, food bank, mental health services). One of the program managers reported that, by the time of the study, households seeking assistance had become more vulnerable, with great psychosocial challenges. Program staff reported that RRH rental assistance sometimes was used as a bridge to permanent housing subsidies such as permanent supportive housing, although that did not appear to be the case for any of the participants in the ethnographic study.⁵ Pine Grove’s CoC-funded program also had seen an increase in the number of large families seeking services. Three families with children in the ethnographic study were placed into subsidized housing owned by the RRH program.



- In high-cost **Easterly**, the RRH program was located in a historically Black and low-income—but rapidly gentrifying—neighborhood wedged next to the highway and close to downtown. In addition to the RRH program, the lead organization also operated emergency shelter and permanent supportive housing programs. According to program interviews, RRH participants typically received housing search assistance and move-in costs (first month’s rent, last month’s rent, and a security deposit) from

⁵ The program supported by the HUD CoC program reported in an interview that, in its 2017–2018 grant year, 4 out of 33 households served transitioned into permanent supportive housing after an initial period of support through RRH.

their program. They also received transportation assistance (such as subway passes, vouchers for car-sharing services), gift cards for groceries or household supplies, furniture, and referrals for other services, including mental health care. Study participants in this high-rent, low-vacancy market reported having access to low-quality housing units—often shared with others—in less desirable neighborhoods. Some Easterly study participants were placed directly into housing assistance programs run by the local public housing agency (which we call the Easterly Housing Authority or EHA), which was prioritizing RRH participants for access to vouchers, and some study participants moved into privately owned affordable housing units. RRH provided housing search assistance and move-in costs (security deposits and the tenant’s portion of first and last month’s rent) to help participants access these longer-term housing subsidies.



The study’s 16 participating households consisted of 12 individuals and four families.⁶ Ten of the 12 individuals were men, and two were women. Seven of the individuals identified as Black (one as biracial, Black and Native American), two as Hispanic, and the remaining three identified as White. Eight of the individuals were in Easterly, and four in Pine Grove. The family households were all in Pine Grove, and all household members identified as Black. Two parents were present in one of the families, and in the others, only the mother was present.⁷ Study participants ranged in age from 22 to 63. Six study participants had experienced prior episodes of homelessness while 10 had not.

⁶ “Family” is defined as a household with at least one adult 18 or older and one minor child.

⁷ For the household with two parents, we designated a primary study participant of record (Jay) but her partner (Luke) also participated in all interviews.

Exhibit 1-1. Study Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Months in Study	Household Type	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Age	Any Prior Homelessness
Easterly						
Bunny	8	Individual	F	Black and Native American	52	N
Drake	1	Individual	M	Black	25	N
Javier	9	Individual	M	Hispanic	43	N
Jude	16	Individual	M	White	55	N
Moses	6	Individual	M	Black	55	Y
Ricardo	16	Individual	M	Hispanic	49	N
Tania	14	Individual	F	Black	48	N
Victor	11	Individual	M	White	52	N
Pine Grove						
Bethany	14	Family	F	Black	39	Y
Brandon	1	Individual	M	Black	49	Y
Holly	9	Family	F	Black	22	N
Jay	14	Family	F	Black	47	N
Jermaine	16	Individual	M	Black	36	Y
Joel	16	Individual	M	White	63	N
Michelle	9	Family	F	Black	30	Y
Robert	14	Individual	M	Black	32	Y

Source: Participant interviews

1.3. Report Organization

Chapter 2 summarizes the housing trajectories of the study participants, from their housing situation before entering RRH through the 15-month study period, including, for most, some period after they exited the program. Chapter 3 details the housing assistance and case management provided to the study participants. Chapter 4 describes the housing situations of study participants as well as their satisfaction with the neighborhoods they moved to. Chapter 5 explores the ongoing challenges that study participants faced after exiting the RRH program, including employment; mental, behavioral, and physical health issues; and coping strategies to maintain housing stability. The report concludes by describing study participants' satisfaction with their RRH programs and discusses potential modifications to the RRH program design.

2. Housing Trajectories of Study Participants

For most of the households participating in the study, RRH granted a temporary reprieve amid an ongoing struggle with housing stability. For many, housing instability had begun well before they entered the RRH program, and it continued after program exit. Some study participants had experienced childhood challenges such as homelessness as a child or teen, separation from parents, economic hardship, and neighborhood or family violence.⁸ Study participants' experiences as adults reduced their resilience and included precarious employment, high housing costs, lack of access to financial resources, substance use disorders, mental health challenges, limited social support networks, and incarceration.

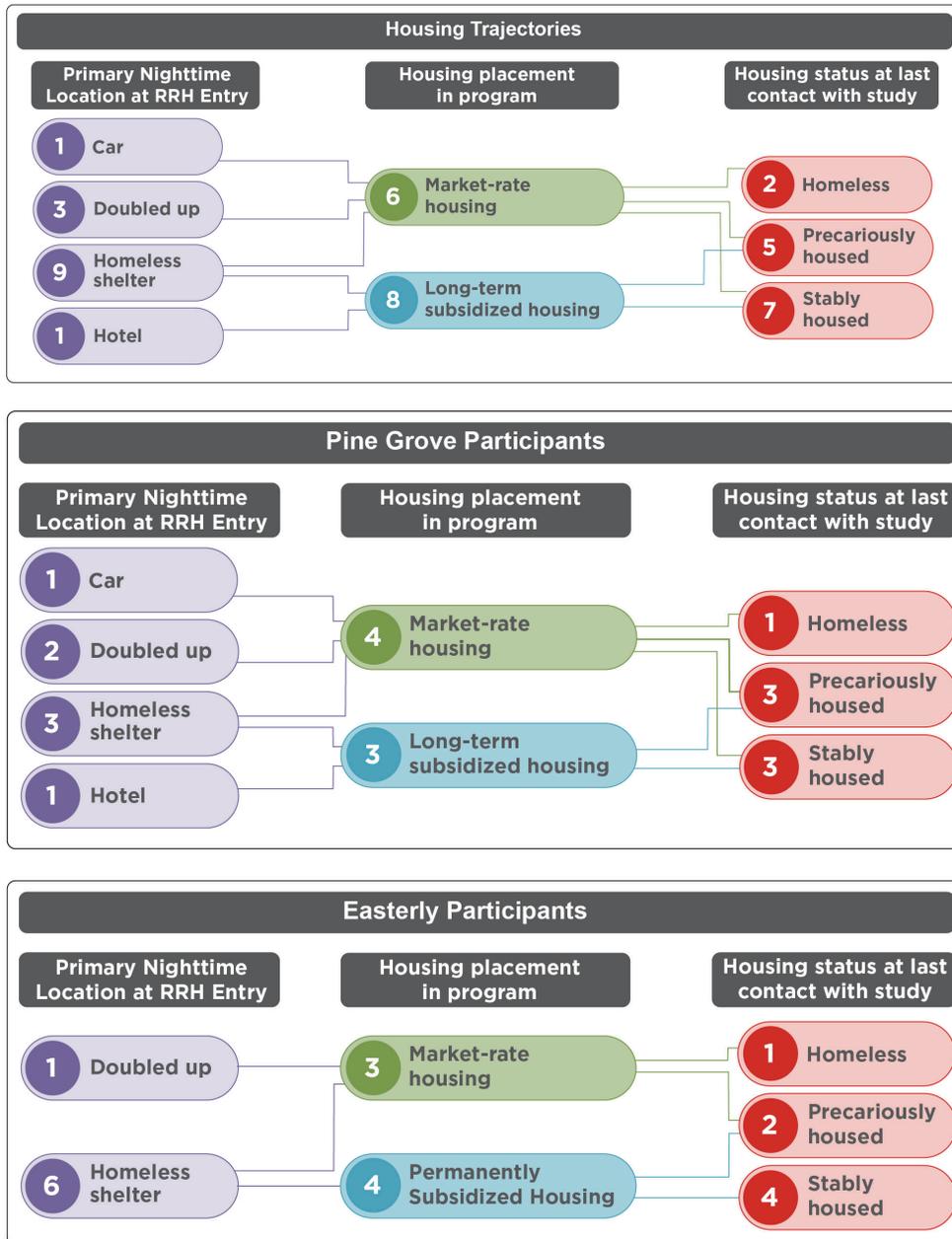
Study participants had traveled a variety of pathways into their current episodes of homelessness. The specific precipitating event was sometimes unemployment or insufficient income (five people), sometimes the dissolution of a relationship with a romantic partner or with family members who had been providing housing (four people). Other causes included incarceration (two people), conflicts with landlords (two people), mental health crises (two people, one the study participant and one a family member), and a physical medical crisis (one person). A substance-use disorder directly precipitated only one study participant's episode of homelessness, although several had ongoing struggles with substance use.⁹

Exhibit 2-1 illustrates the housing trajectories of the 14 study participants for whom we have sufficient information, in the first panel for all participants across the two sites, and in the second and third panels by site.¹⁰ Left to right, it shows their housing situations before entering RRH, then their housing placement with RRH assistance, and finally, their housing status at their last contact with the study team. The remainder of this section explores the trajectories of study participants during and after their time in RRH. Pine Grove participants entered their RRH programs from a wider variety of housing situations. Participants' trajectories once in their RRH programs were similar across sites.

⁸ For more in-depth discussion of experiences prior to entering the RRH program, see Jefferson et al. (2019).

⁹ For more detail about precipitating events, see Jefferson et al. (2019).

¹⁰ Two study participants only participated in data collection for the first month of the study.

Exhibit 2-1. Study Participant Housing Trajectories by Program Stage

Notes: "Housing status at last contact with study" was the end of the full 15-month study period for nine participants. For the other five in this graphic, their last contact with the study varied. "Precariously housed" means doubled up with friends or family or living in their own unit but facing imminent eviction. "Stably housed" mean living in their own housing unit with or without RRH assistance, sometimes with a long-term housing subsidy. This graphic excludes two participants who only participated in the first month of data collection.
 Source: Interviews with RRH study participants and confirmation with case managers.

Primary nighttime residence status at RRH entry. Most study participants entered their RRH program from an emergency shelter. Participants viewed the shelters as challenging places to stay, perceiving them as unsafe and unpleasant living environments that exacerbated their existing mental or physical health conditions. Some participants also struggled to maintain employment while abiding by their shelter's strict schedule, including curfews and designated mealtimes. Some study participants had entered a

shelter as a condition of applying for RRH but then doubled up with friends while waiting to be accepted to the program.

Housing placement in the program (with RRH assistance). RRH program staff helped study participants move into a variety of housing situations. Seven of the 16 used their RRH rental assistance in market-rate housing. The other nine used security deposits and other move-in assistance from the RRH program to help them move into housing supported by a long-term subsidy—sometimes a housing choice voucher provided by the local housing authority and sometimes privately owned housing with rent restrictions (in that case, an RRH rental subsidy sometimes covered part of the below-market rent).¹¹ Of the 16 study participants, eight lived in a shared housing situation when they were in the RRH program.¹²

Housing at last contact with the study. Study participants remained in RRH programs for varying amounts of time during the study period. Some participants in Easterly received only move-in assistance (first and last month’s rent, security deposits) and exited the program immediately after that rental assistance ended or after a few more months of case management, while others were still in the program months later.¹³ Study participants in Pine Grove typically remained in the RRH programs for many months, apparently receiving rental assistance from the program that decreased over time.

Twelve of the study participants had left the RRH program as of their last contact with the study. Seven of them had moved from their RRH unit primarily because they could no longer afford the rent on their own, even if their unit was supported by a long-term housing subsidy and had a restricted rent.¹⁴ Two participants were still receiving RRH rent assistance and case management at the end of the study. One participant, Jay, was living in long-term affordable housing and had been told to plan for her family’s support to end soon. The other, Jude, was living in market-rate housing. He had been anticipating exiting the RRH program, but his case manager extended his assistance when he was laid off due to the coronavirus pandemic shutdowns.

After the conclusion of RRH assistance, participants struggled to maintain their housing stability. At our last contact with the study participants (which varied for each participant), only four remained *stably housed* in the same unit in which they had used RRH assistance, and one was stably housed but in a different housing unit. Three of these participants, all in Easterly, were living in the subsidized units they moved into with RRH assistance. One participant who was stably housed moved from her subsidized unit into market-rate housing after receiving HUD Uniform Relocation Assistance (URA). The other stably housed participant was stable in market-rate housing with no subsidy or financial assistance.

Five participants were *precariously housed* (either doubled up with friends or family or living in the unit in which they had received RRH assistance but facing imminent eviction). Two of these precariously housed participants lived in subsidized housing but could not afford their below-market rent; Michelle in Pine Grove had already been evicted and was doubled up with a friend while Bunny in Easterly had received eviction prevention assistance from a different housing advocacy program. The other three precariously housed participants—one in Easterly and two in Pine Grove—were living in market-rate

¹¹ Easterly had begun prioritizing homeless households, including RRH participants, for permanent housing choice vouchers.

¹² Bunny was initially offered a room in a shared unit, but she refused it.

¹³ Study participants sometimes did not know whether they were considered by their RRH program to have “exited.” Two participants remained actively supported by the program at the end of the study period; for one participant, Jude, this was more than 2 years after he entered.

¹⁴ Three participants who lived in subsidized units could not afford their below-market rent.

housing. Two study participants had returned to homelessness, both of whom had been placed in market-rate housing.

Exhibit 2-2 summarizes each participant's housing trajectory, specifically their type of housing placement with RRH assistance, the structure of their RRH rental assistance, whether they moved during the study period, and their housing status and ability to pay rent at last contact with the study team.

Exhibit 2-2. Study Participant Housing Trajectories

Pseudonym	Housing Placement with RRH Assistance	Structure of RRH Rental Assistance	Moved During Study Period	Housing Status at Last Study Contact	Ability to Pay Rent at Last Study Contact
Easterly					
Bunny	Subsidized apartment	Ongoing**	Y	Precariously housed	Behind on rent
Drake¹	Subsidized shared apartment	Ongoing	-	Stably housed	Receiving RRH rental assistance
Javier	Subsidized apartment	Episodic	Y	Stably housed	Able to pay rent
Jude	Private market apartment	Ongoing	N	Stably housed	Receiving RRH rental assistance
Moses	Private market shared apartment	Ongoing	Y	Homeless	N/A
Ricardo	Subsidized shared apartment	Ongoing	Y	Stably housed	Able to pay rent
Tania	Market rate shared apartment	Episodic	Y	Precariously housed	Behind on rent
Victor	Subsidized shared apartment, then subsidized apartment	One-time (security deposit)	Y	Stably housed	Able to pay rent
Pine Grove					
Bethany	Subsidized apartment, then market-rate house	Tapered	Y	Stably housed	Able to pay rent
Brandon¹	Subsidized shared apartment	Tapered	-	Stably housed	Receiving RRH rental assistance
Holly	Private market apartment	Tapered	N	Precariously housed	Behind on rent
Jay	Subsidized house	Tapered	N	Stably housed	Receiving RRH rental assistance
Jermaine	Private market apartment	Tapered; episodic	N	Precariously housed	Behind on rent
Joel	Private market shared house	Tapered	N	Stably housed	Able to pay rent
Michelle	Subsidized apartment	Tapered; episodic	Y	Precariously housed	Doubled up after eviction
Robert	Private market shared apartment	Tapered	Y	Homeless	N/A

RRH = rapid re-housing.

¹ Drake and Brandon only participated in data collection for the first month. As a result, we do not have information about their mobility.

****Notes:** While rapid re-housing is always structured as a time-limited intervention, “ongoing” assistance refers to rental assistance that was provided on a monthly basis, but with a structure that was unclear, until the participant’s exit from the RRH program. “Tapered” assistance is when the participant received rent assistance that declined at regular intervals. “Episodic” assistance is when a participant had multiple discrete periods of rent assistance.

Source: Participant interviews

The following chapters explore in more depth the rental assistance and case management that study participants received through their RRH programs; the type and location of housing they secured with RRH assistance and the surrounding neighborhoods; and their ongoing challenges to maintaining their housing stability after their participation in the RRH program ended.



Contrasting Housing Experiences in RRH Programs



<p>Jude, a 55-year old white man, was laid off from his job in early 2016. A college graduate, he struggled to find employment and could no longer afford rent for his shared housing in Easterly. While working with a local job training program to find employment, Jude applied for RRH while still living in an Easterly shelter. Once he found a job, his RRH case manager helped him search for housing. Jude moved into a studio apartment. The RRH program provided a security deposit, rental assistance, help paying for transportation to his job, and gift cards for food and household supplies. During his time in RRH, Jude continued to work and received assistance with managing his budget from his RRH case manager. By the end of the study, Jude had been laid off from his job. He was planning to live on the savings he had accumulated during his time in the RRH program while he looked for another job.</p>	<p>Michelle was a 29-year old African American woman newly pregnant with her fourth child when she enrolled in the study. She was living in a 2-bedroom apartment in a subsidized apartment complex owned by the RRH lead agency. Michelle had experienced episodes of homelessness since the birth of her first child approximately eight years prior, due to her inability to earn sufficient income or amass savings to cover move-in costs. Her family had been living in hotels for about 18 months prior to her acceptance in an RRH program. At the time of study enrollment, she had already been in the RRH program nearly two years, having had rental assistance extended during a period when she lost a job and, separately, when she entered a job training program offered through the RRH lead agency. Michelle left her job during the study period due to a combination of life stresses. She fell behind on her rent, was ineligible for another extension, and was evicted from her subsidized apartment. At her last contact with the study, she and her children were doubled up with a friend and friend’s children.</p>
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RRH = rapid re-housing.

3. Rapid Re-housing Program Assistance

Exhibit 3-1. Chapter 3 Key Findings

- Most study participants received support in their housing search, with the case managers often taking the lead in identifying units.
- Case managers created relationships with landlords that they used to help people find housing. Case managers also sometimes provided coaching on how to talk to a landlord, an important skill for people whose confidence was low.
- Study participants valued the housing search support they received from their case managers, not just for the help locating housing but also for the emotional support in navigating interactions with landlords.
- Some RRH case managers helped people use RRH as a bridge to housing with a long-term subsidy, including housing in Pine Grove managed by the RRH lead agency.
- The amount of RRH rental assistance varied both within and across programs, with recipients in Pine Grove articulating a clearer understanding for how much assistance they would receive than those in Easterly. Some study participants received additional assistance after the initial period ended, at the discretion of the case manager.
- Several study participants had ongoing relationships with their case managers and valued the

Typically, RRH participants receive help from RRH program staff in searching for and identifying potential housing units and in negotiating relationships with landlords. Participants then receive a period of rental assistance accompanied by case management. This section describes study participant experiences with these core components of RRH, as well as other direct support provided by the program and referrals to other community resources that may help people maintain their housing stability after RRH assistance ends.

3.1. Housing Search and Identification

The study's participants began meeting with RRH case managers while still staying in emergency shelters or other temporary places. This early involvement of case managers often established positive relationships. Several participants reported that their case manager's willingness to meet them at the shelter, and the case manager's show of personal warmth, was critical in making them feel cared for as a person. Joel said:

The helpful thing that [RRH staff] did was, they came to me when I was at the shelter. They came to the shelter to talk to me. And they let me know that they were interested in helping me, and there wasn't anything in it for them. They were just there to help me. And on four different occasions, I talked to them there at the shelter.

RRH programs help people move into rental properties in the community. When identifying potential units, program participants and case managers must balance multiple priorities and considerations. The considerations include the individual or family's preferences for housing type and location and the landlord's willingness to rent to RRH participants. Landlords may prefer not to rent to someone receiving

housing assistance, or they may reject tenants with criminal backgrounds, prior evictions, felony histories, or lack of history as a leaseholder. Even if a landlord is willing to rent to someone who receives housing assistance and does not have a positive rental history, an owner of private rental housing may prefer a tenant with long-term rental assistance rather than an RRH subsidy of short duration.

Housing Search Process

The level of housing-search assistance and who took the lead in looking for a rental unit (case manager or program participant) varied. Only three study participants—Bunny and Victor in Easterly and Joel in Pine Grove—reported finding their units entirely on their own.¹⁵

Exhibit 3-2. Responsibilities in the Rapid Re-housing Housing Search Process

Role	Number of participants (n=16)
Participant received some assistance from RRH program in identifying unit	13
Housing search process was joint effort between participant and RRH staff	7
Housing search process conducted by the RRH staff	6
Participant received no assistance from RRH program	3

Source: Participant interviews

Of the 13 people who reported that they received some degree of assistance from their RRH case manager in looking for a rental unit, 7 said the search process was a joint effort, while 6 reported that the case manager took the lead. Case managers may capitalize on the network of landlord relationships maintained by the RRH program.¹⁶ Participants who moved to a different housing unit while still receiving assistance from the RRH program usually relied on the RRH staff for help finding and securing a new unit and reported either neutral or positive experiences.

Because Jude worked during the day and was not as available to research housing options, his case manager set up appointments for him, arranged his transportation to the appointments via ride-share services, and visited the units with him. Tania had been looking online for units, but her case manager found the unit she ultimately moved into. Other study participants led their search for housing with periodic guidance from their case manager. Victor was assigned a unit by EHA, but his case manager provided him advice on looking for units, both online and by networking with friends, and how to present himself to landlords.

The role of the case manager in the search process varied across the two study sites, with a quarter of study participants in Pine Grove and half of those in Easterly saying that their RRH case manager conducted the search. Bethany, a mother in Pine Grove, said that her case manager “handled all of it.” In Easterly, all the study participants for whom the case manager conducted the search moved into shared housing. Javier’s case manager connected him to a sober house where the RRH program had a preexisting relationship with a landlord who would not ask questions about his criminal record or substance use. Ricardo’s case manager set up the housing meeting for him and told him what paperwork to sign to secure the unit. Two Easterly participants felt pressured to take the housing situation identified by RRH program staff. Moses worried that the shared housing situation he was encouraged to move into would exacerbate his substance use disorder. Tania reported that her RRH program required her to accept a shared unit she

¹⁵ Bunny, who has severe mental illness, may not be a reliable informant. Joel found a unit in a house shared with other ex-offenders, which he saw advertised on a bulletin board at the shelter.

¹⁶ A Pine Grove case manager reported that their program usually takes the lead in the housing search process, but that it was desirable for RRH participants to be more proactive.

did not want because she thought it was out of her price range. She said her case manager threatened to drop her from the program if she did not agree.

Emotional support through the housing search process was important for some people. These participants were all vulnerable, with varying levels of self-esteem and knowledge of navigating the private or subsidized rental market. For those with low self-esteem and confidence as they come into the program, navigating the private housing market or public housing bureaucracies might be intimidating. Participants were often at a low point in their lives.

In his baseline interview, Moses described the emotional ups and downs of searching for housing and being rejected. Struggling with depression and low self-esteem, along with trying to stay sober, he said: “She’s trying, but my hopes get up, and then they get shot down.” Moses knew that his case manager was trying to find housing for him; she tried to stay upbeat, but it was hard, he reported. Bunny also was very anxious during the housing search, but this led her to take a very active role in the process and choose her own unit with limited access to public transportation. She later found another unit on her own in a more central location. By contrast, Javier, another Easterly study participant with a different case manager, felt taken care of and let his caseworker assist him.

Building and Navigating Relationships with Landlords

RRH programs, including the three in this study, build relationships with local landlords. Prior research found that landlords in tight and high-cost rental markets are less willing to participate in RRH programs because they can easily find other tenants with no or few housing barriers who want to rent their units. In high-cost markets, it also can be difficult to locate rental units where the rent is within federal rent standards (Dunton and Brown, 2019). In addition to increasing the chances that landlords will accept households who have existing barriers to housing, cultivating relationships with landlords can expedite the approval and move-in process. The Pine Grove SSVF program developed a network of 20–25 landlords that regularly accepted SSVF participants into their units. Three of the Pine Grove study participants, all individuals, moved into such units.¹⁷

Case managers also can play an important role in mediating landlord/tenant relationships after move-in. RRH programs have a vested interest in their participants being successful tenants, so landlords will accept other program participants. RRH program staff can help participants resolve landlord complaints or cleaning and maintenance issues. A case manager can also offer advice on how to budget and prioritize paying the rent.

In some instances, the RRH program staff coached participants in their interactions with landlords. For example, Gary, an RRH staff member who visited an apartment with Moses while our study team was present, encouraged Moses to take the lead with the landlord while Gary took notes on whether the apartment met HUD habitability standards.¹⁸ Gary seemed to have an existing relationship with the landlord. Despite voicing his concerns to the researcher about the state of the kitchen, Moses initially did not say anything to Gary or the landlord. In a later interview, Moses told the researcher that his relationship with the landlord was good. He now ran errands for the landlord, finding him to be a supportive person. The kitchen remained dirty, but Moses accepted this as part of his current living situation.

¹⁷ The Pine Grove CoC program and Easterly program also had networks of landlord relationships.

¹⁸ All program staff names are pseudonyms.

Rapid Re-housing as Bridge to Other Housing Subsidies

RRH programs typically provide rental assistance for households to move into a unit in the private housing market, subsidized only temporarily by RRH rental assistance. However, some of the CoCs that manage local homeless service systems use RRH as a bridge to other types of housing subsidies, including long-term housing choice vouchers (sometimes for permanent supportive housing or PSH), units in public housing and Section 8 projects, and other types of privately owned, subsidized rental housing (Dunton and Brown, 2019). A rent subsidy that limits a tenant's rent payment to no more than 30 percent of income can mean that the RRH subsidy can end or be limited to move-in costs. For subsidized rental housing with below-market rents not tied directly to income, the RRH subsidy can help a household with little or no income to afford the rent.

Placing RRH participants directly into housing with a long-term subsidy, with no "bridge" period of a rent subsidy provided by RRH, was possible in high-cost Easterly, because of the new set-aside of housing choice vouchers from EHA for people leaving homelessness. Two Easterly study participants used tenant-based housing choice vouchers; one of these participants moved into an affordable unit supported by the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program (Bunny). Another study participant moved into a unit in a Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation project and then a Section 8 multifamily project for disabled individuals (Victor).

When a study participant in RRH was placed into housing supported by a long-term subsidy in Easterly, RRH typically provided the security deposit and 1 month of rental assistance as well as several months of case management. In some instances, the ongoing case management from RRH creates additional support for the participant in a permanent subsidized unit; this combination of subsidized housing and RRH case management is similar in some ways to PSH but without the intensive psycho-social services often made available to PSH residents and with case management lasting only a few months.

In Pine Grove, three study participants moved into housing units where the lead organization for the RRH program was their direct landlord. This housing appeared to have below-market rents (subsidized through a variety of funding streams) but not rents affordable to the study participants without a further subsidy from the RRH program, according to program staff. The program director explained that the housing units their organization manages are not only more affordable than private market units but also more easily accessible for high needs people leaving homelessness because of their greater flexibility on barriers to housing, such as eviction records.

For example, Jay (with partner Luke and their children) used her RRH assistance in an affordable single-family house owned and recently renovated by the same agency using Community Development Block Grant funds. According to the program director, the proximity of the house to the agency facilitated close communication between their unit's property manager and Jay and Luke's RRH case manager.

Exhibit 3-3. Assisting Participants with a Criminal Record in Securing Housing

Landlords often decline to rent to people with criminal records. RRH staff assist participants in overcoming this barrier.

Javier, an Easterly participant, received assistance and guidance from his case manager, Jessica, on how to approach landlords about his criminal history.

Drawing on her network of real estate brokers, Jessica found a landlord who did not ask questions about Javier's criminal history, and Jessica coached Javier not to mention his criminal record to the landlord.

Javier was able to successfully lease this new apartment.

3.2. Rental and Move-In Assistance

Study participants received different types and amounts of rental assistance during their time in the RRH program. The duration of rental assistance varied from 1 month to more than 2 years. The amount of rental assistance received even in our small sample varied notably, reinforcing prior research showing that there is no “standard” package of RRH assistance (Dunton and Brown, 2019). Some participants received one-time rental assistance, such as the security deposit or first and last month’s rent for their unit; others received ongoing rental assistance that decreased over a period of months. In both cities, RRH participants received assistance that varied during their tenure in the program.

The amount and duration of rental assistance provided by the RRH programs varied between the two sites: a shorter duration and less structured amount of assistance in Easterly; a longer duration and more structured, and more predictable, amount of assistance in Pine Grove. Accordingly, Pine Grove participants seemed to have a clearer understanding of how much rental assistance they would receive, both in amount and duration.

Pine Grove’s two programs also varied. The SSVF program reevaluated the need for assistance every month, with households receiving a median of 6 months of RRH rental assistance barring extenuating circumstances. The CoC-funded program had a typical package of assistance tailored to a client’s needs.¹⁹ This standard CoC-funded package paid the security deposit and the full rent for the first 3 to 4 months after move-in. Then the program would taper the rental assistance, with the client paying one-half for the next 2 to 3 months, before rental assistance ended in the sixth or seventh month. However, extensions were possible if a household’s circumstances changed or they did not reach anticipated goals like finding employment. As study participants understood it, the program budgeted a set amount of financial assistance for each household for their time in the program (what Jay called her family’s “grant”). If the household needed other types of financial assistance (e.g., transportation or childcare), this could reduce the amount of their rental assistance during their time in the program.²⁰

Easterly had less of a formula for providing rental assistance, and study participants were less clear about how much rental assistance they could receive during their tenure in RRH.²¹ Participants Victor and Javier were not initially offered rental assistance because they had long-term housing assistance from EHA, but the RRH program stepped in and paid their rent when they were not able to. Such temporary support protected them from being evicted by their landlord or dropped from the Housing Choice Voucher program, but it left some other participants confused: “We’re not clear when [RRH rental assistance] begins [or] when it ends.” Because the process was opaque, most Easterly RRH participants also could not identify whether or when they had been formally exited from the RRH program or which funding source was currently helping with their housing.

¹⁹ RRH programs in both Easterly and Pine Grove reported that they used a “progressive engagement” approach to providing rental assistance. Under progressive engagement, the amount and duration of assistance is not determined up front but instead is reassessed at regular intervals to reflect the changing needs of the participant.

²⁰ The CoC-funded program’s director explained that the program offers an average of 9 to 12 months of financial assistance, aiming to step down assistance from 100 percent for the first 3 months, to 50 percent for months 4 to 6, and 0-to-25 percent for months 7 to 9. The program kept a client’s case open for 3 months after financial assistance ended, so it could offer additional assistance if a new need arose. She reported that the program has outliers on both ends for the duration of assistance.

²¹ Interview answers from Easterly participants about their rental assistance were not as clear as those of Pine Grove participants, and their understanding of which organization provided assistance was less clear. This may be in part because many Easterly participants were involved in Easterly’s more complex ecosystem of housing subsidies and assistance, so it was not always clear to them where the funding for their housing assistance came from or what the rules were.

Periods of Additional Rental Assistance

For seven participants across the two sites, the program provided additional assistance after their first period of assistance ended. Job loss was a common reason, but not the only one.

- Two Pine Grove study participants, Michelle and Jermaine, received additional rental assistance upon enrolling in a job training program to ensure they could maintain their housing while they sought to improve their employment prospects.
- Tania initially received RRH assistance in Easterly in the form of a security deposit and first and last month's rent. Three months later, she was doing so well paying her rent and other expenses that the RRH program decided to pay an additional three months of her rent, which she characterized as a "bonus."
- After paying his rent for several months, Easterly participant Javier said he "messed up" twice and needed to enter detox programs to address his substance use. When this happened, the RRH program stepped in and covered his rent for 2 months, ensuring he would not be evicted and lose his voucher while in detox.

Other Direct Assistance

In addition to rental assistance, participating households also received other types of assistance from the RRH program, sometimes funded by the agency's other programs or revenue streams). They also received referrals to other organizations for their immediate needs in their new housing.

Help with these immediate needs seemed to help study participants get settled and stabilized in their new housing units. However, some participants still struggled for basic necessities. Jude resorted to stealing toilet paper from the local library because none of the assistance he received, including the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), would cover this essential item. Similarly, Jermaine's partner provided him with toilet paper, for which he felt grateful but also ashamed that he could not provide this basic need for himself.

Move-in and Other Assistance

In addition to rental assistance, participating households received other types of assistance from the RRH program (sometimes funded by the agency's other funding streams/ programs) as well as referrals to other organizations for a variety of other immediate needs:



Furniture and move-in supplies.

Participants received assistance in obtaining furniture, other household supplies, and retail gift cards to offset household purchases when they moved into their RRH-assisted units.



Transportation assistance.

RRH participants also obtained transportation assistance in the form of rides from staff, metro or bus passes, and Uber vouchers. One Pine Grove participant received \$1,300 to pay for a car repair, whereas another received financial assistance to cover the costs of her car insurance and license reinstatement so she could continue her employment.



Food assistance. Several RRH participants received grocery cards or referrals to local food bank to help them stock up on food for their new unit.



Utility assistance. RRH participants received help connecting utilities and making monthly utility payments.



Personal care. Participants also received referrals for personal needs such as clothing and haircuts.

3.3. Case Management

Case management was an important part of the RRH program, helping with housing search and landlord relationships, as well as referrals to other resources. Case managers were also an important source of emotional support, coaching participants through intense anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, and other mental health conditions. While two participants explicitly discussed the community mental health services their RRH case managers referred them to, the role case managers played in referrals to mental health services and services related to substance use disorders more broadly is not clear. Some study participants were already connected to those services before entering the RRH program.

RRH case managers also connected participants with services and assistance related to their incomes or their ability to pay their rent. Participation in services to which clients were referred was not required as a condition of the RRH program. Many participants did use the referrals and sought additional assistance, however.

Relationships with Case Managers

Case managers continued to be a critical support for study participants throughout their time in RRH, providing valued emotional support during and after their time in the program. Most participants reported positive experiences with their case managers. Seven study participants described their case manager's support as the most important aspect of their RRH program. For several, their case management relationship was the most stable and reliable connection in their lives. More than the rent, participants really appreciated how much personal support RRH provided them. They appreciated that their case managers followed up regularly to check on them; they felt genuinely cared about.

- Jermaine described the support and care of his case manager as invaluable: “Tammy stayed on me as if I was her child.... I’m not saying she treated me like a child, I’m saying I received that love as if I was her own child.... I want to show Tammy, ‘I’m still living here; thank you for everything you did.’”
- Javier reflected, “I’m 43, and that shit was all new to me. I mean, I never had my own place. I was there in jail, or I lived with one of my kid’s mothers. Like I never really lived a normal life, to tell you the truth. So, it helps to have someone like Sarah because sometimes I’ll take three steps forward and five back. But it’s always good to have Sarah to catch me when I’m two and a half steps back before I hit the five.”
- At the end of the study period, Bethany described her case manager as “the bomb” for not only helping her family obtain temporary housing stability but connecting them to HUD’s URA, which offered them the opportunity for even longer-term housing stability. Bethany had a very strong

Exhibit 3-4. Ongoing Support from Case Managers

Ricardo, an immigrant from Puerto Rico to Easterly, had difficulty finding work and struggled with depression as a result of being unable to support himself. While working hard to find odd-jobs and part-time employment, he was arrested by the police after a brief argument with a stranger. The police asked for his ID and then took him to jail for the night.

While in jail, it became clear that someone had committed a crime using Ricardo's identity. Ricardo was beside himself with anxiety and was regularly in touch with his case manager, Gabriella. He knew that an arrest could mean losing his housing. After a hearing where Ricardo lost his voucher, Gabriella worked to transfer Ricardo into PSH operated by the same organization as his RRH program.

Ricardo found a job. About to start work as the COVID-19 restrictions began, he ultimately did not get hired. Gabriella contacted him and listened to Ricardo as he recounted his situation. Gabriella was an important source of support and helped Ricardo navigate available

emotional connection to her case manager, who, she said, filled a mother-like role, as Bethany had lost her own mother to a degenerative disease when Bethany was 19.

Among participants who valued their ongoing relationships with their case managers, some common features were apparent:

- Case managers got to know the participants personally.
- Case managers balanced direct suggestions by offering participants choices and coaching to set goals relevant to their priorities.
- Case managers visited a participant's home or workplace when needed and stayed in communication between formal appointments.
- Case managers found ways to extend RRH assistance under program constraints and to connect participants to other opportunities.

Brandon's experience in Pine Grove highlights these characteristics (see the text box).

Exhibit 3-5. “I Don’t Want to Set You Up for Failure”: Brandon’s Case Management

A researcher observed one of Brandon’s case management appointments during his fifth month of rental assistance.

During the appointment, Brandon focuses on his immediate need for car repair or a new car, as he was having to get up at 5:00 am to catch the bus for the start of his shift at 8:00 am. In contrast, his case manager, Chandra, focuses on job training options. She is concerned that his finances are unstable, because the program does not typically extend rental assistance beyond six months.

The appointment is scheduled for 3:00 pm. At 3:05, Brandon calls to say he is about five minutes away. As Chandra leads him upstairs to her cubicle, they are already deep in conversation about his car. It is a very hot summer day and sweat beads up around his face and he is breathing a little hard. “Catching the bus and walking is killing me right now.” His 1997 mini-van has broken down and they discuss replacing a belt. She asks him about a local non-profit that sells refurbished cars for \$600.

When they sit down Chandra asks immediately, “How’s everything with the unit? The job is going good?” Brandon replies, “It’s slowing down now, about 30 hours a week. I go to [a temp agency] on my days off or if we have no work.” Chandra offers in response that their agency offers a construction training course for credentials such as a flagger license. “I’ve got a flagger license,” he counters. She continues, “They do other stuff, you get certifications. “I have a meeting with my manager this week so I’m going to see about extending you in the program a few months.... [Enrolling in the job training] would be an extra three months [of rental assistance] and the class is also three months so that’s perfect. I don’t want to set you up for failure” by ending his RRH assistance too soon.

Brandon returns to his car issue. “I wanted to ask you about [the car program] because I know you need a referral.... I went online for a car loan and I got one. But I said, ‘let me slow down.’” “I’m glad you did,” Chandra responds. She tells Brandon she’s going to find out whether she can get him a referral so he can get a car. “I think it’s \$608 that you have to pay.” He already had to draw down the savings he accumulated during the program to pay for the car repair and will need the remainder for the new car. His lack of savings is another reason she’d like to keep him in the program longer.

Chandra hands over a form, simply saying, “Here’s a budget form,” indicating this is a familiar exercise. She asks for copies of his paystubs. He opens the top zipper on his backpack, starting to move papers around then tightens up and slumps with disappointment. He had taken the paystubs out of his backpack before the appointment. Chandra tells him she’d hate for him to have to catch the bus again. She offers to pick them up at his house tomorrow—it’s his day off—make copies, and mail back the originals. He fills out the budget form, taking some pauses, apparently to think through the costs of some categories.

Chandra says suddenly, “Where are your glasses? You usually wear glasses,” implicitly asking whether they’d been lost, damaged, or needed to be replaced. “Oh, I’ve got them here in my bag. You know, when it’s so hot outside they get steamed up.”

He wants to amend his budget sheet: “Oh, I forgot about another expense. I have to add \$200 for my daughter’s rent. She was about to get evicted.” Chandra looks at him squarely: “And she has no other support? You’re not really in a place to help out right now.... I can’t tell you what to do, I can only make suggestions.” She reiterates that this doesn’t mean that he won’t be in a position to help at some point, but right now he’s got to take care of himself. He responds that his aunt paid \$400 to help, too. “[My daughter]’s one that would take advantage,” so hearing from his aunt, too, that she was about to get evicted and that his aunt had pitched in had convinced him it was a real emergency. His daughter has an eight-month-old baby. “If it weren’t for the baby, I wouldn’t have did it.”

Chandra turns to his goals. He has two goals currently: finding permanent housing and cleaning up his credit. After discussing these, she asks, “Do you want to add another goal?” “Like what?” he asks. “Maybe getting your car?” He replies, “That’s a [priority].” They add it as a third goal on his plan.

Brandon’s rapport with his case manager illustrated how Chandra had gotten to know him personally, for example, asking about his glasses. She balanced direct suggestions, like enrolling in the job training, with coaching him toward setting a personally meaningful goal of obtaining a car. She offered to come to his home for his convenience when he forgot his paystubs. She sought to find a way to extend his assistance under program constraints, even though he did not appear enthusiastic about the training itself.

4. Rapid Re-housing Program Housing and Neighborhood Experiences

Exhibit 4-1. Chapter 4 Key Findings

- Study participants in shared housing felt their privacy and autonomy were compromised, but not as much as in emergency shelter.
- Households placed in units owned by the program in Pine Grove had difficulty getting maintenance issues resolved, while study participants who used RRH assistance in private market units generally reported good relationships with landlords.
- Some study participants wanted to live in familiar locations, while others wanted to avoid neighborhoods they knew were unsafe or where they had negative histories.
- Common features sought in neighborhoods were safety and access to transportation, especially the ability to get to a job. Several people were uncomfortable in their neighborhoods and desired to move to locations that were safer, had less drug activity, and better access to transportation and services.

Study participants' experiences while in an RRH program were affected by the type of housing in which they lived, relationships with the landlords and providers of housing assistance, and the features of their neighborhood. This section describes those factors.

4.1. Housing Units

Most study participants identified the most desirable features of their housing units as autonomy and privacy. They wanted to live in units by themselves where they could cook at their leisure, fully relax in their own homes, and keep to themselves. Some were able to attain that. Others were not, especially in high-cost Easterly, where RRH staff encouraged participants to live in shared housing to better afford the rent with their RRH or other housing subsidies.

Those who did not have roommates reiterated to researchers how much they treasured having their own place because of the autonomy and privacy it provided. Jermaine, in Pine Grove, deeply valued living alone. With assistance from his RRH case manager, he found and moved into what he considered a two-bedroom apartment—a one-bedroom unit with a closet big enough to serve as a second bedroom. He said that he loved his place and thought it was peaceful: “This is exactly what I’ve been looking for.” He liked that he could come home and walk around as he pleased without having to worry about anyone else. Having come from situations where people regularly knocked at his door or wanted things from him, he appreciated the privacy his new unit offered him.



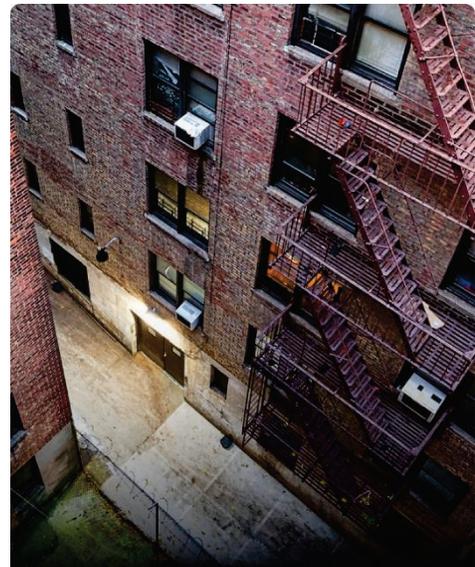
Bunny's Easterly Studio Apartment

Bunny's studio was small but brand new. Located on the third floor of a 40-50-unit development, with elevator access, the unit had a combined kitchen and entryway with room for a small two-person table. The living space was large enough for a queen-sized bed, a chest of drawers, an armchair, loveseat, and a TV. Large windows looked out over trees and a residential street. The bathroom was large and designed for a person with a disability—no bathtub, a walk-in shower, and a toilet with handrails. Bunny kept the lights off to lower her electric bill, but with the blinds open the space had ample sunlight.

All Photos are stock images and not actual residences.

For several people in the study, living alone was not feasible financially, or they accepted shared housing because of their desire to move out of shelter quickly. One-half of study participants (8 of 16) lived in some form of shared housing at some point while receiving RRH assistance: five of eight in Easterly and three of eight in Pine Grove. Most of those in shared housing were men, and none were families with children.

Shared housing is a non-traditional approach to making housing affordable for participants in housing assistance programs, although living with roommates is common in the private market. Each resident usually has their own bedroom, but residents share common spaces, including living rooms, bathrooms, and kitchens. There is usually an expectation that all residents take turns completing household chores to keep common spaces clean. Sometimes shared housing units are reserved for residents who have similar circumstances and may benefit from the understanding and social support of living with people in similar situations. For instance, Joel, a Pine Grove RRH participant with a felony record, lived in a rooming house with four to five other people who also had felony records. In high-cost Easterly, a desire to serve more RRH clients with limited funding appeared to be the impetus for case managers to place clients in shared housing. Additionally, without an ongoing rent subsidy from the RRH program, shared housing was more affordable for participants in the long run. However, having roommates infringed on the autonomy and privacy that many desired.



Victor's Easterly RRH Shared Housing

The first room Victor lived in during the study period was at the top of three flights of stairs with no elevator. The shared apartment was brightly lit with white walls. A shared kitchen looked clean, though a burnt pot lingered on the kitchen table, and one of the burners on the stove did not work. He shared the bathroom with a roommate. The bathroom held a sink, toilet, and bathtub with shower. Victor's room was about 300 square feet with one window looking out onto a fire escape and brick wall. The room had enough space for a double bed, a chest of drawers, a small refrigerator, and a TV. The carpet was gray and well-worn. A closet covered half of one wall, and the ventilation system was shared with his neighbor, leading to conflicts about the temperature.

All Photos are stock images and not actual residences.

Tania, in Easterly, lived in shared housing because she could not afford a unit by herself. She yearned for her own place: “I just can’t wait to get my own place again, cook my own food. That’s what motivates me every day.” Moses, also in Easterly, was limited in his housing options by his lack of income, substance use disorder, and a history of incarceration.²² His RRH program initially helped him find a room for \$200 a week in a sober house with 13 other men. The landlord at the sober house would not accept the RRH



Robert’s Pine Grove RRH Shared Housing

Robert lived in a shared unit in a large complex near a university. Each of the many identical vinyl-sided buildings has two stairwells and 2-3 floors, so each building has between 24-48 apartments. Robert’s unit is on the ground floor, at the back of the complex abutting a large wooded area with vine-covered pines towering above the apartment building.

There are four suites, each with its own bedroom and bathroom, secured with a keyed lock. There is a shared living room, kitchen, and patio. The galley kitchen has laminate counters, recent appliances in good repair, and a half wall on one side so it opens visually to the living room. In an alcove off the living room are laundry machines mostly concealed behind a curtain. The living room is appointed with a glass-topped coffee table with an assortment of magazines underneath and a partially-filled bookshelf. There’s a small dining table at the end of the living area, pushed up against a wall with a large window that would look out on the woods if the curtains were open. There’s a single chair on each of the three open sides. The common space is tidy and sparse, appearing infrequently used.

The patio is a concrete slab patio just off the living room and behind Robert’s bedroom. The patio opens up to the woods, which he finds peaceful. He says sometimes it bothers him if his roommates leave the patio light on. He likes the neighborhood for its conveniences, including an affordable grocery store a 10-15 minute walk away, and a library.

All Photos are stock images and not actual residences.

subsidy, and so Moses was unable to afford to stay there. He then moved into shared housing where all the men shared a kitchen, Moses shared a bedroom with one other man, and he had to abide by an 11:00

²² Moses also thought his housing options were limited because he was a single man. He described going to see one apartment which he liked. The landlord told him that she was renting the apartment to a family with children. Moses took from this that families were more likely to get housed than he was. This may have been a covert way for a landlord to discriminate based on other factors.

pm curfew. He reflected on these dynamics, “I’m just getting tired of it. When you’re sitting in there, it reminds you of being in jail with another man. You’re sitting there with another man, and, you know, it’s just not fun.”

4.2. Landlord Relationships

Participants had varied relationships with their landlords. Overall, tenants in subsidized units reported having more challenges with their landlords’ responsiveness or management policies than those using their RRH assistance in private market rentals. Three of the four families in Pine Grove were placed in affordable housing owned and managed by the same organization that administered their RRH program. Two of the units were in an apartment complex (soon to be redeveloped by the agency),²³ and one was a single-family home remodeled with Community Development Block Grant funds. The organization was willing to accept people leaving homelessness, but it appeared not very responsive to tenant needs once they had moved into their new unit. At her baseline interview, Michelle reported she had been washing her dishes in her bathtub for a few months because her landlord would not come to fix her kitchen sink; they later relocated her from that unit due to black mold. Jay and Luke had issues with a bug infestation when they first moved in and reported not sleeping the first week because they were constantly on “bug duty.” Despite these issues, each of these participants reported an overall positive feeling about their landlord and their experience in RRH.

Some study participants in Easterly who lived in housing with a long-term subsidy reported negative experiences with the EHA. They reported feeling pressured into taking units that were less than ideal because they feared EHA would take away their long-term housing assistance and put them back at the end of the waiting list. Victor was in EHA-subsidized housing that was not compatible with his heart condition. “They [EHA] sent me letters saying that I had to take—if they offered me the place, I had to take it. So, I went and looked at it. I knew the steps were going to be too much, but I didn’t know what to do. The steps are better than living in the shelter.” While there, he had several altercations with a combative roommate but believed he could not report the issues because, “You can’t have any problems with EHA. EHA will resolve it by throwing us both out.”

²³ The income-restricted apartment complex was subsidized through multiple funding streams including city and county affordable housing programs.



Jay and Luke’s House

With RRH assistance, Jay, Luke, and their children (ages 4 and 8) moved into a recently-renovated single-family home owned and leased by their RRH program’s lead agency. The three-bedroom ranch house, approximately 1100 square feet, was painted a rich blue and featured a small covered porch. Appropriate to Luke’s disability, the porch did not have steps but was immediately above the ground. The house was adjacent to another newly-renovated house on one side and a small community garden on the other. Inside, the house had an open floor plan and high ceilings in the living room and eat-in kitchen with new appliances and cherry-finished cabinets. Natural light poured in the windows and they rarely needed lights on during the researcher’s daytime visits. The children’s rooms were off a short hallway from the living room and shared a bathroom. The master suite was at the back of the house, adjacent to a mud room with laundry machines and a back entrance the family did not use.

All Photos are stock images and not actual residences.

Those who used their RRH rental assistance in private market rental units in Pine Grove and Easterly reported varying but mostly trouble-free experiences with their landlords. Jermaine spoke fondly of his landlord, noting how quickly the landlord took care of water drainage issues and other problems. Jermaine felt such loyalty that he did not want his case manager to intervene about any apartment issues for fear that his landlord would feel hurt. Tania's landlord helped her find a new apartment when issues with her roommate made her unit unlivable. Robert reported that his landlord granted him a level of independence and autonomy he did not have before.

4.3. Neighborhood Features

Just as study participants identified certain housing features they desired, they also described neighborhood features they thought were important to their experience in the RRH program. The most common features discussed were familiarity, safety, access to transportation, and proximity to neighborhood resources.

Familiarity

Some participants, such as Bethany in Pine Grove, sought familiar neighborhoods as they searched for apartments. When Bethany was notified that she would have to vacate the apartment that was owned by the RRH agency because the complex was going to be redeveloped, she queried new units online exclusively in familiar ZIP Codes where she knew the landscape of bus lines, job options, amenities, and the proximity of her children's school. She refused to look at homes elsewhere out of fear that she would be too far from what she already knew.

Moses craved the familiarity of family and the support they would provide, but he wanted to avoid neighborhoods with other associations. During his housing search, Moses liked one Easterly neighborhood he visited because his sister lived there. However, he wanted to avoid other neighborhoods that his case manager suggested might be affordable. One neighborhood carried traumatic memories of losing two brothers to gun violence. In another neighborhood, he feared that being close to his social ties would trigger the substance use disorder he was working to overcome. He worried that he would begin drinking again if he moved to one of those neighborhoods. Moses ultimately did move to one of the neighborhoods he sought to avoid.

Safety

Those who liked their neighborhood commented on it being quiet and peaceful, with limited crime or safety concerns. Joel, for example, liked that his Pine Grove neighborhood was very quiet: "No gang activity that I've seen.... No beer cans in the yards, you know, anything like that. People seem to be well behaved. No fights. No...haven't seen any police cars or anything like that. So it's very...well-maintained neighborhood." Similarly, Ricardo liked that his Easterly neighborhood was nice and quiet. Having never seen bad things happen there, Ricardo felt like the neighborhood park was a nice, safe place to play with his son or simply sit on his own.

Study participants who were displeased with their neighborhoods desired greater safety for themselves and their children. Parents wanted to protect their children from negative activities outside, such as the sound of gunshots close by or beer cans and needles strewn across the yards. Although Michelle's unit in a subsidized project was in the same area in Pine Grove where she grew up, she disliked the neighborhood and described it as unsafe and filled with bad things she did not want to subject her children to—for example, people urinating in stairwells. She reported, "Even though we're in a place, we're not on the streets, we're not homeless anymore, it leaves me feeling like I failed myself. So here I am all over again, and it feels like a waste of time, like I failed, like I completely failed."

Jay and Luke also wanted safer neighborhoods in Pine Grove so their children could play freely outside, somewhere where there were sidewalks: “I want them to be able to ride bikes and skateboards. I want them to be able to be boys.” Parents did not want their children’s childhoods to be restricted by the negativity of their neighborhoods. Tania had resigned herself to accepting her current Easterly neighborhood, though she preferred where she had been living prior to being homeless. She believed her current neighborhood to be less safe, which was reinforced when she was mugged for her cell phone just before Christmas. Despite the difficulties posed by her neighborhood, Tania did not believe she had any option to move to a different area.

Transportation and Access to Jobs

A lack of reliable, affordable, and convenient transportation was a common challenge in both sites, limiting participants’ satisfaction with their neighborhoods. It reduced both the extent of participants’ job searches and the job options available to them. Without transportation, participants also struggled to access necessary services such as grocery stores and health care, and resources such as libraries, restaurants, and parks that improved quality of life.

In Pine Grove, cars were the primary mode of transportation. Without a car, many participants relied on living near bus routes or ride-sharing apps. When their car unexpectedly broke down, Jay and Luke were burdened financially by the cost and length of time for mechanic repairs. Although public transit was an option, Luke had a disability, having had one of his lower legs amputated recently, and the timing of public transit routes was also a problem. Jay and Luke frequently used ride-sharing apps and accrued the daily costs of those services on top of the expensive repairs to their car.

Bethany lived in two units during the study period and noted that each had a bus stop directly across the street, closer than where she had lived previously. However, her unreliable vehicle proved a decisive factor in limiting her job prospects. Bethany completed a hospitality training offered in partnership with a local high-end hotel while she was in the third trimester of pregnancy. Upon completion, she received an offer for a full-time job. She planned to accept the position as soon as possible after giving birth. However, her car had mechanical problems and expired tags she could not afford to reinstate. She tried to commute by bus, but Bethany found the roundtrip commute of 2-plus hours not to work for her with small children at home. Instead, she accepted a part-time position in a retail store that was closer by bus. When her manager wanted to promote her to full-time assistant manager at another store location farther from her home, Bethany turned it down. She believed that a longer commute was not feasible given her four children under the age of 5. Bethany also wanted to give her children’s father, who was caring for their children while she worked, the opportunity to look for work too.

In Easterly, study participants relied on public transit, including buses and trains, but the cost was high, and the routes and schedules often not convenient. For example, Javier disliked his new unit because it was not close to a bus line. He reported that he did not plan to stay long in that unit because good transportation options were not close. It took him an hour and a half to use the train to do the shopping and other tasks. The alternative was to walk 2 miles. Also in Easterly, Jude was limited by the cost of transportation. He reported that if he had been able to afford a monthly transit pass, he would have

Exhibit 4-2. Rapid Re-Housing Programs Try to Provide Transportation Assistance

In Pine Grove, the RRH provider tried to connect participants with transportation prior to their housing search. Doing so, however, depleted the financial resources the program had for rental assistance for the participants.

In Easterly, the RRH program provided transit passes to participants when it was able, but the passes were difficult to obtain and were often very limited.

been able to go to the library more often to access the Internet to search and apply for jobs and travel to interviews.

Proximity to Other Neighborhood Amenities

Study participants in both sites also described the importance of being close to neighborhood amenities such as grocery stores, libraries, and commercial establishments. For example, Ricardo appreciated the proximity of his quiet neighborhood park in Easterly, and Robert reported that what he valued most about his shared apartment in Pine Grove was how close it was to the grocery store. However, not all participants were able to find housing in neighborhoods that were close to the things they wanted and needed. Jay and Luke reminisced about their prior neighborhood, which had an array of restaurants within walking distance, as they lamented the lack of options in their current neighborhood. For those living in gentrifying areas, however, being *near* stores and restaurants did not actually mean they were *available*, both due to cost and because they perceived that the stores were “not for [them].”²⁴

Libraries were an important neighborhood asset for several study participants. Access to Wi-Fi and computers helped others besides Jude with their job searches. Libraries also provided a much-appreciated resource for information and free and enriching entertainment. One of the study’s researchers often conducted interviews in public libraries and observed that study participants were highly aware of library resources and policies from their having sometimes spent extensive time in the library during or after their period of homelessness.

²⁴ Dastrup et al. (2015) reported a similar finding about feeling excluded in one’s own neighborhood for residents of New York City public housing in expensive neighborhoods.



Gentrification in High-Cost Easterly

Bunny's apartment (described above) was in a newly-constructed development in close proximity to transportation including trains and buses. However, because the neighborhood was undergoing gentrification, the businesses in the new development were high-end and expensive. Rather than being able to shop near home, Bunny had to travel almost an hour by bus to an affordable grocery store. She made a special trip to take advantage of price specials. However, when a researcher visited her apartment, she was often running low or out of food.

Similarly, Ricardo moved into shared housing in a prosperous Easterly suburb. "My room is on the third floor. You can see the view to the street. It's like a big avenue and a street and it has a nice view because it has a whole bunch of views on the front and, as you can see, the street and people walking on the front of the avenue. It has a trolley station right in front of my apartment, right in front of my window we have a train station...you can jump on and go downtown...it's easy to go anywhere."

However, Ricardo said there was one thing that he didn't like about his new neighborhood – high prices in local businesses.

"Me and my girlfriend went to buy eggrolls, it was like a chain store next to my building, so we love egg rolls. So we felt like, oh let's buy an eggroll, let's buy two eggrolls so we can take it on our way. And it was almost \$13, for two eggrolls. We was tripping through like, what, what, that was the only thing...other than that, everything's nice. And then the place, the area is real nice and has a nice view, it's smaller but it's ok. I don't mind that. It's just, everything is really expensive, around the stores and stuff like that. Everything's real expensive. The regular price, the regular price like in a regular Chinese restaurant is like \$1.50 or \$2.00. Almost \$7 for an eggroll, it's crazy. It's too much."

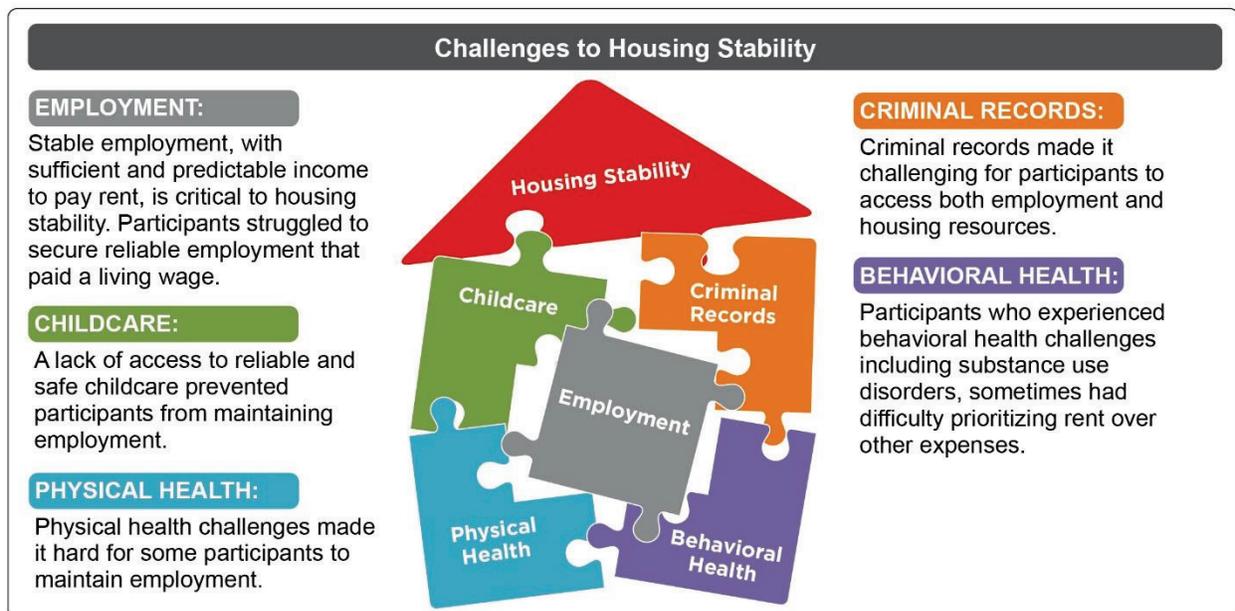
All Photos are stock images and not actual residences.

5. Ongoing Challenges to Housing Stability

Exhibit 5-1. Chapter 5 Key Findings

- Finding and maintaining employment was challenging for many study participants, with barriers such as childcare, criminal records, or unpredictable schedules and seasonal variation in available work.
- Some study participants had ongoing behavioral health challenges during their time in RRH, and others continued to cope with ongoing physical health problems.
- Households struggled to maintain their housing stability after RRH assistance ended. Seven participants moved from their RRH unit after assistance ended, because they could no longer afford their rent, because they preferred another unit or neighborhood, or because of a crisis related to substance use disorder.
- The financial situation of many study participants improved during their time in RRH. However, they continued to struggle with unpaid debts, and prioritizing paying the rent was challenging.

The study participants' experiences reinforce that a person's needs and challenges are interconnected and affect their ability to maintain housing stability. The RRH clients followed for this ethnographic study had complex challenges and had many experiences that had reduced their resilience. With low resilience, when one aspect of their lives was not working, that rippled into other parts of their life and could often derail their progress entirely. For example, working-poor families faced barriers to employment, including lack of childcare and transportation challenges. In turn, their housing stability was in jeopardy from their tenuous work situation. In their final interviews, many study participants demonstrated that they did not have all the building blocks of housing stability in place, even after receiving rental assistance and case management from the RRH program and, in some cases, having an ongoing rent subsidy from another program.



5.1. Employment

Employment that brings in a sufficient income to afford rent and other necessities is a vital component of housing stability. Finding and keeping jobs was challenging for study participants. In addition to lack of transportation and childcare, the jobs they found were unstable, with unpredictable schedules and variations in available work. Criminal records were another barrier to employment. Referrals from RRH case managers to job search and training programs generally were not productive in helping participants find stable employment within the timeframe that we observed.²⁵

Childcare

All four mothers participating in the study experienced a lack of childcare that inhibited their ability to work and, therefore, cover their rent. For example, Holly's experience was that losing her childcare meant she could not keep her job. She then found childcare responsibilities made it difficult to seek new employment. When she finally started working, she was unable to work sufficient hours to cover her rent. Two women gave birth to an additional child during the study period. Lacking maternity leave further confounded their struggles to stabilize their finances and assume rent payments. In her third trimester of pregnancy, Michelle quit her job at a childcare center under a combination of stresses: grief over the loss of her grandfather, anxiety, being paid unreliably, overcrowding in her apartment, and the physical toll of her pregnancy.

With no paid leave for pregnancy or maternity leave, and having timed out of the RRH program, she fell behind on the rent for her unit in her subsidized unit. Michelle had planned to use her tax refund to catch up on the arrears, but the IRS unexpectedly used it to pay off a defaulted student loan. A few months after giving birth, she was hired as a customer support specialist for a government program, which would pay a living wage. However, she was evicted before receiving her first paycheck.

Criminal records

Criminal records limited several study participants' employment options. Several participants had felony records, including two who were registered sex offenders. Others had criminal records associated with their substance use disorder. For Moses in Easterly, his prison time associated with his substance use disorder contributed to his sporadic work history. He believed that employers dismissed him out of hand for his criminal history and limited work history:

When I go out here and try to look for work, everybody, "Oh, well, what have you been doing so long?" I mean, what can you tell an employer what you've been doing and how you've been doing, you know? You've been an addict for most of your life, and you've been in trouble with the law and stuff like that? You know, it's kind of hard. It is, it's kind of hard because that's a lot of years of missing things in life and being addicted to drugs and alcohol. It wasn't my plan when my mom died, but that's what ended up happening, because for me, when she died, that was a big smack in the face.

²⁵ The end of our study period (early 2020) coincided with the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns. Most jobs that study participants held prior to the shutdowns were already precarious and were in industries such as retail and restaurant work where they were vulnerable to layoffs, were frontline workers at health risk, or both.



“Lost the job because I lost my childcare”: Holly’s story

Prior to entering RRH, Holly obtained a childcare voucher that enabled her to work at a technical support call center, earning \$13 an hour, “the most money I ever made.” She lost her childcare voucher when she pulled her child out of his center abruptly—without the 10-day notice required by the voucher agency—after he came home with apparent injuries the staff could not explain to her. Her job offered her a month-long unpaid leave of absence to get her childcare reinstated, but she was unable to do so and she lost her employment. Holly reported applying for more than 50 jobs in the following months.

“But I haven’t heard anything. The one time I had got an interview...the manager told me I got the job... Then I didn’t hear anything back from them for like two weeks. When I reached back out to them... they told me that the manager got fired. It was just one of them things like, okay, back to square one... And [the new manager] was like, well, we can do the interview process all over again, and run your identification all over. But when something like that comes your way and then gets taken from you again, it’s just like, you’re not going to want to do the same thing over and over again. When it comes to me finding a dependable job, it’s like, I’ll have hope for something, and it gets taken from me. I’ll have hope for something, and they renege on it every single time. Today, literally this morning, I was going to go to my old job and see if they were hiring...I was going to go there this morning, but my son got sick. So, yeah. It’s always something.”

Discouraged by her unsuccessful job search, Holly started working as an exotic dancer, which provided variable income. At her last contact with the study team, she had fallen behind on her rent and was facing the start of eviction proceedings.

Unpredictable Schedules and Variable Availability of Work

Job quality also made it difficult for study participants to maintain their employment. Most jobs offered varied and unpredictable hours and undesirable schedules. Variations in hours and, therefore, pay, made it hard for them to cover regular monthly expenses or to plan for future shortfalls. Two participants explained that they intended to undertake such savings. Jermaine, for example, was new to the type of construction work he was doing and planned to cut back his expenses the following summer to build up savings in anticipation of lean hours in the winter.

Michelle held two jobs during the study, each of which posed substantial challenges. The first employer effectively demoted her because she could not work evening hours when she needed to care for her children:

[W]ithout me having a support system, I couldn't work those hours, which was like evening hours from like 4 to 9[pm]. So that would mean I would have to have somebody get my kids off the bus. I would have to have them get them in the house and situated, get their homework and everything done. That's what I should be doing around that time.

She left that job because of the scheduling challenges and went to work at a childcare center. However, that employer paid her erratically as a result of the organization's cash flow problems.

Schedules in the retail, service, or entertainment sectors varied based on customer demand. Study participants often had little advance notice of their schedules, so they could not obtain an additional job, childcare, or sometimes even schedule appointments for an anticipated day off. Some of the income variation was associated with seasonal variation in workloads—for example, Brandon worked long hours at a produce warehouse but only in the summer, Jermaine expected winter to be slow in his construction work, and Tania's work as a school bus monitor decreased when school was out of session.

In an effort to avoid struggling to pay rent when school was out for the summer, Tania would not make her loan payments in order to pay rent months in advance. Despite this juggling of her financial obligations, she still found herself taking on \$2,000 in payday loans to cover her rent. When money was particularly low, Tania would also cut back on food, as she received only an extremely low (\$15) SNAP benefit. After an incident at work put her on probation, Tania's pay was cut while she was being investigated. This exacerbated her struggle to pay her rent.

Employment Aspirations

Many people sought to improve their work situations during the study period, both of their own accord and with encouragement from RRH case managers.

Self-directed job searches. Several study participants conducted extensive job searches to find work that was not only accessible to them but also paid sufficient wages and that they found meaningful. For example, before his period of homelessness, Jude in Easterly had worked in the insurance industry for decades, earning some \$50,000 per year. He was unemployed for nearly 2 years as he searched for comparable new employment. He struggled with the idea of accepting a job as a dishwasher or cashier because he had a college degree and decades of work experience. He ultimately found a temporary job in his field that he was very satisfied with, but the agency did not convert it to a permanent position when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Jude anticipated restarting his job search after the pandemic had calmed down—he anticipated after a few months.

Job search assistance and job training. Study participants' efforts to improve their employment situations were generally unsuccessful, even with job search assistance and job training. The community action agency that operates Pine Grove's RRH program also operates job training programs. Its programs follow best practices, offering training in conjunction with local employers to increase the chance that

training leads to an actual job. Robert completed a training and certification program for Department of Transportation employment. Initially, Robert was optimistic that this program would be different from other job training he had completed, believing the connections to employers were strong enough that he would be offered a job upon completion. Instead, there was a job fair, and “some promises were made” when he submitted his resume, but he did not receive any call-backs.

Robert remained unemployed for the duration of the study. Other study participants who attended job fairs in Easterly reported similar disappointments. Ultimately, none of the five Pine Grove participants in the study who completed employment training programs was able to obtain a related job. This is broadly consistent with findings from research on workforce programs that it is very difficult to connect or reconnect to the workforce, even after completing a sector-specific training.²⁶

5.2. Health Challenges

Some study participants experienced ongoing behavioral health challenges during their time in RRH, and others continued to manage ongoing physical health problems. RRH participants may need more intensive help in managing their health problems than was offered by RRH. Three of the six people who reported at baseline that substance use disorders or mental health challenges were related to their homelessness were unstably housed at the study’s conclusion.

Behavioral Health

Several participants in both Easterly and Pine Grove struggled with behavioral health conditions, including substance use disorders, prior to entering RRH. Javier—a heroin user who described committing crimes to pay for his addiction—had struggled with substance use disorder for years. During the study period, researchers in Easterly lost contact with him. When he reappeared, he reported that he had been using heroin again. He explained that he had avoided contact with caseworkers and the study team while using, feeling ashamed about “falling off the wagon.” He eventually went back into detox and got back in touch with the study team. He explained that his addiction had “changed his brain” and made managing money to ensure his housing stability challenging. He described how any savings or income was a liability to him while he was trying to get clean, that he was at risk of using those resources to pay for heroin.²⁷

Victor also described fragility in his recovery from a substance use disorder that could affect his housing stability. With the help of his RRH case manager, Victor had secured long-term housing assistance but struggled to find a social network and to connect with mental health professionals who could understand his situation and empathize with him. He also struggled with depression. Although he took prescribed medication daily that would eliminate any effect of taking heroin, Victor worried that living right next to an open-air drug market in his local neighborhood was risky. It was too easy to purchase drugs—that is, his living situation did not provide him the stability he needed to feel safe in his sobriety. Victor also lived in a fourth-floor walk-up unit even though he had had three heart attacks and suffered from neuropathy; issues with his roommate made home tense; and his unit had a malfunctioning stove and several other maintenance issues. At one point, Victor decided to spend his monthly income to visit family. The cost to both his sobriety and his finances was marked. He recounted becoming drunk and losing his wallet and phone. Although Victor had not yet missed a rent payment, during his last interaction with the study team, it was unclear whether he would be able to pay rent for the next month.

²⁶ See Forston et al. (2017).

²⁷ Another participant with active substance use challenges expressed the same sentiment.

Physical Health

Ongoing physical health conditions sometimes limited the units in which study participants could use RRH rental assistance. Physical disabilities might also limit their ability to work and thus gain enough permanent income to achieve housing stability after RRH assistance ended.

After Luke had one of his lower legs amputated to treat severe blood clots—a complication from his career installing telecommunications equipment—the household fell behind on their rent and were evicted before he applied for and received Social Security Disability Income. Prior to entering the RRH program, Luke, his partner Jay, and their two children lived in an apartment in a Pine Grove suburb known for being family-friendly and having good schools. After the eviction, they spent 12 weeks in a church-based shelter program in which a cohort of families moved at night to a different church each week and were transported each morning to a day center. Luke attributed the stress of that living situation as being partially responsible for the heart attack he had during that time. Luke and Jay were accepted into an RRH program while in the church-based shelter program and moved into a single-family home recently renovated and owned by the RRH program’s parent agency. While they were in the study, Luke was still adapting to life with a prosthetic leg or in a wheelchair but holding out hope that he could resume some less physical labor in his field.

Weight challenges and associated water retention issues meant Easterly participant Bunny was unable to stand for long periods of time. As a result, she was unable to work. She had dreams of taking computer classes and reentering the workforce, providing her more financial security and a social life. She looked forward to a weight-loss surgery that, if successful, might mean she could return to work and be more physically active.

5.3. Housing and Financial Stability after Rapid Re-housing

After RRH assistance ended, study participants struggled to maintain their housing stability, especially if they did not have a long-term housing subsidy.²⁸ Seven participants moved from their RRH unit after the program ended—sometimes because they could no longer afford their rent, sometimes because they wanted a better housing unit or neighborhood, and sometimes because of a crisis associated with a substance use disorder.²⁹ At our last contact with these seven households, one was homeless, four were precariously housed (including one person doubled up and one in the hospital), and two were stably housed in their new units. Study participants who received long-term housing subsidies generally were more stable than those who had entered market-rate housing with RRH assistance. Trying to maintain housing stability was part of the participants’ overall effort to cope with limited resources and public supports.

Participants’ Finances

RRH programs can improve their participants’ finances through two mechanisms: The first is by allowing households to use the money they otherwise would have spent on rent to instead build savings or pay off debts. Jude, in Easterly, saved some \$2,000 from his new employment during his time in RRH, which was made possible by RRH paying his full rent. This savings proved critical when his temporary job was not renewed in March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic emerged. Another of our study participants used the period of RRH assistance to begin paying off debts.

²⁸ Even with subsidized units, Bunny in Easterly was struggling to pay rent in what appeared to be an affordable unit with a flat rent, and Michelle had been evicted from her affordable unit with a flat rent in Pine Grove.

²⁹ Exhibit 2-2 shows that nine study participants moved during the study period; two of these people moved while they were still in their RRH programs.

The second mechanism is that RRH case managers can refer participants to employment services that might help them raise their incomes. However, study participants who received employment training during their time in RRH found that the training did not lead to new employment or immediate increases in their earnings.³⁰

Participants' finances remained strained and precarious both during their time in RRH and after exiting from the program. Exhibit 5-1 shows participants' budgets at the time of each of their interviews (at baseline, at 6 to 9 months after study entry, and at 12 to 15 months after study entry). Each budget is based on the month preceding the interview.

Between the first and third interviews, the number of study participants with zero income declined, and the median household income rose.³¹ Of the eight participants who provided detailed budget information 15 months after their study entry, one-half ran a deficit (expenses > earnings) and one-half a surplus (earnings > expenses). Those who were running a monthly surplus at the end of the study period had generally been improving their finances incrementally throughout the period, showing larger surpluses at the end of the study than in the middle.³² The size of participants' budget deficits ranged from -\$621 to -\$4,007.³³

Both during their time in RRH and after exit, income support benefits from the Social Security Administration and other benefits such as SNAP and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provided financial support for many study participants. Social Security Disability Income was significant for Luke's family, paying disability both for him and for his two young children. Social Security retirement benefits covered Joel's rent and car payments, leaving his part-time income to cover his living expenses and deposits to savings. However, there were limits to the public benefits single adults could receive. For example, Tania, whose children were grown, received only \$15 a month in SNAP benefits.

³⁰ See Forston et al. (2017).

³¹ This could be an artifact of attrition in the study sample. Study participants had a pattern of being unresponsive for a time and then getting back in touch after getting through a difficult period. This may suggest that people without data for the follow-up periods were struggling.

³² Joel is an exception. In the middle of the study, he quit his job to search for a better one and was supporting himself on his Social Security income and an inheritance from his mother.

³³ The largest deficit includes \$1,072 in rent arrears due before the end of that month to avoid eviction.

Exhibit 5-2. Participant Monthly Finances Over Time

Income	Baseline (n=16)	6 to 9 Months (n=13)	12-15 Months (n=8)
Monthly Income			
Zero income	n=3	n=2	n=1
Median monthly (non-zero) income	\$620	\$1,089	\$1,860
Monthly income range	\$213–\$1,600	\$180–\$4,265	\$374–\$2,696
Sources of Income:			
Employment	n=8	n=10	n=5
Social Security (any type)	n=4	n=1	n=2
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	n=11	n=11	n=7
Monthly benefit range (median)	\$15–\$799 (\$192)	\$15–\$773 (\$191)	\$15–\$768 (\$194)
Expenses			
Median monthly expenses	\$882	\$1,553	\$2,265
Range of monthly expenses	\$113–\$2,110	\$235–\$4,670	\$976–\$5,349
Cash Flow			
Net positive	n=4	n=5	n=4
Net positive range (median)	\$293 to \$684 (\$479)	\$132 to \$1,015 (\$493)	\$110 to \$1,243 (\$287)
Net negative	n=12	n=8	n=4
Net negative range (median)	–\$1,510 to –\$153 (–\$488)	–\$3,740 to –\$38 (–\$330)	–\$4,007 to –\$621 (–\$2,183)

Source: Participant interviews.

Many RRH participants had significant debts to manage. Some had been incurred much earlier, while others were related to their evictions prior to the episode of homelessness that led them to apply for the RRH program. Debts also accrued while participants experienced homelessness while waiting to enter RRH. All these debts made the path to financial stability very long and uncertain:

- Six reported having student loans, four were aware of overdue medical bills, and others had unpaid credit card debt.
- Several owed rent arrears from units they occupied immediately prior to experiencing homelessness. These debts were impediments both to their overall financial stability, affecting their credit scores, and to their acceptability to landlords when they tried to use their RRH assistance.
- Two study participants anticipated receiving tax refunds to pay off overdue bills but had their refunds claimed by the IRS for the Department of Education to pay off defaulted student loans. Bethany was pleased that her student loan debt was now settled, but Michelle had been planning to use her refund to catch up on rent and was evicted soon after.
- Jermaine owed a large amount of back child support, and his wages were garnished for the repayment plan.
- Tania described increasing credit card debt while homeless to pay for hotel rooms. She also took on new debt once she was housed in her RRH unit. Receiving only the security deposit and first month's rent from RRH (for which she was grateful), her rent was greater than the average monthly income she earned through work. When faced with unemployment while school was out for the summer, she took out payday loans and used credit cards to cover the difference. At the end of the study period, her financial situation had worsened after participating in the RRH program. She was aware that her credit score had dropped precipitously since becoming homeless.

Conversely, two participants acquired assets during the study period. Those resources proved very helpful for attaining financial and housing stability:³⁴

- Bethany exited the RRH program after 15 months and appeared on track to stay stably housed in private market housing after a settlement from HUD URA. The affordable housing complex where she lived while in the RRH program was being redeveloped, and the owner (the same agency that administered her RRH program) worked to connect residents in good standing to new units and to help them qualify for URA. To make sure she would qualify for URA, Bethany’s case manager extended additional RRH housing assistance to catch her up on rent and utility arrears. Bethany intended to manage the \$53,000 settlement, delivered in three installments, by living frugally, pre-paying her rent, and investing some of it buying into a franchise so she could build financial security over time.³⁵
- During the study period, Joel received \$15,000 from his mother’s life insurance policy. He used the money to cover his living expenses while he quit a job he hated—washing dishes “in that pot room” at a high-volume restaurant—to devote himself for 6 months to search for work he found more meaningful and satisfying. He sought work opportunities beyond the service sector, but, because of his sex-offender status and criminal record, he found many types of work were closed to him. Ultimately, Joel accepted a position washing dishes at another restaurant. The owners of that restaurant acknowledged his strong work ethic and offered him additional responsibilities. Although he did not obtain the type of work he desired, he was satisfied that his inheritance allowed him the opportunity to look for alternative employment.

Affording Rent

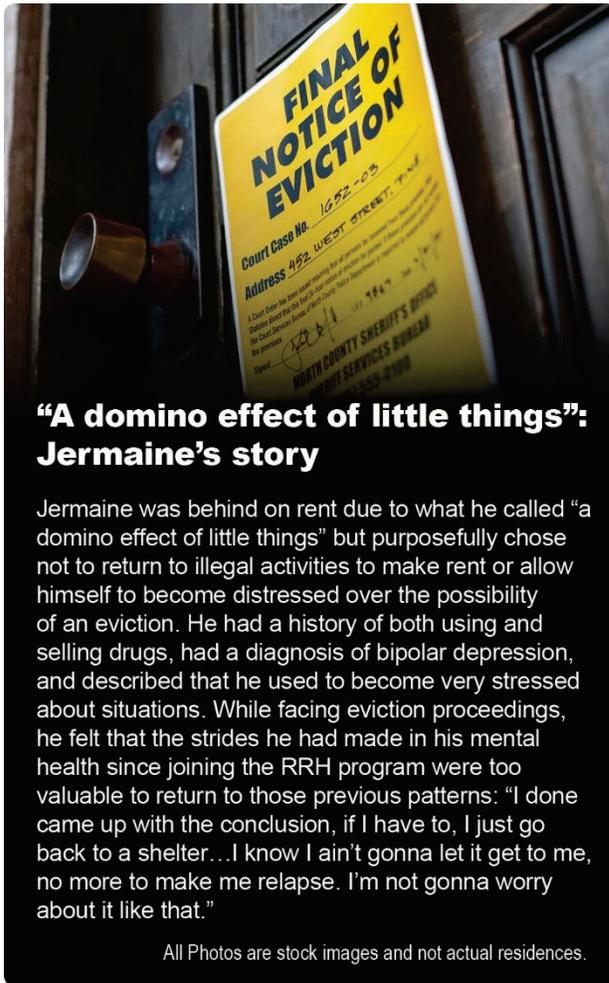
- Using HUD’s housing affordability standard, many participants were cost-burdened or extremely cost-burdened both during and after their time in RRH programs.³⁶ The median housing cost burden for participants declined from the middle of the study period (at 6 to 9 months after study entry) to the end of the study period (at 15 months). However, participants at this median cost were still housing cost-burdened. Six to 9 months after study entry, the median housing cost for the 13 households for which we had budget information was 55 percent of income, ranging from 20 to 80 percent. At 15 months after entry, the median housing cost for the eight participants who provided details was 45 percent of income, ranging from 23 to 253 percent of income. However, this 10-percentage point improvement in the median housing cost burden reflects a 0 percent cost burden for Robert, who was staying in a shelter again.
- Given these rent burdens and participants’ generally precarious financial positions, most participants in the study appeared likely to experience future housing instability or homelessness, the only question being how soon.
- After their RRH assistance ended, most participants prioritized paying rent before everything else in their budgets. They used various strategies to balance their budgets, including ignoring bills until they faced a service shut-off, going without items, picking up additional work, and borrowing from family.

³⁴ Research has found that having access to assets improves a household’s ability to weather adverse events, such as illness or unemployment. See McKernan, Ratcliffe, and Vinopal (2009) and Thomas et al. (2014).

³⁵ Michelle lived in the same apartment complex but had been in the RRH program too long to receive additional support to cover her arrears. She was evicted, then doubled up and considered herself homeless (but was precariously housed according to HUD’s definition).

³⁶ HUD defines *cost-burdened* as spending more than 30 percent of monthly income on housing costs, and *severely cost-burdened* as spending more than 50 percent of monthly income.

When they were unable to pay rent on time, some participants tried to negotiate with their landlords and contacted their RRH caseworker for assistance.



“A domino effect of little things”: Jermaine’s story

Jermaine was behind on rent due to what he called “a domino effect of little things” but purposefully chose not to return to illegal activities to make rent or allow himself to become distressed over the possibility of an eviction. He had a history of both using and selling drugs, had a diagnosis of bipolar depression, and described that he used to become very stressed about situations. While facing eviction proceedings, he felt that the strides he had made in his mental health since joining the RRH program were too valuable to return to those previous patterns: “I done came up with the conclusion, if I have to, I just go back to a shelter... I know I ain’t gonna let it get to me, no more to make me relapse. I’m not gonna worry about it like that.”

All Photos are stock images and not actual residences.

- Tania described how her previous good behavior helped her when she was late: “I always pay her on time, that’s the nice thing. Since I’ve been living there, I always pay her ahead of time. I pay her 2 weeks ahead of time. I’ve always paid my rent on time, most of the time. That’s where I get to get away with murder.” Her landlord still charged her a \$25 late fee.

Some people turned to other strategies—for example, consignments or payday loans—for getting money for rent on tight deadlines.

- A month after Holly was exited from the RRH program, she was \$125 short on rent and facing the start of eviction proceedings. She had tried calling her case manager but did not leave a message. A researcher for this study was the only person she had told about her situation until the day before the eviction would be filed. After discussing the situation with the researcher, she tried again to contact her case manager, who did not answer. The agency’s receptionist told her there was not anyone else available to help her that day. She consigned some of her toddler’s outgrown clothes and toys and managed to borrow the final \$50 from her godmother.

Study participants’ strategies were usually effective at postponing an eviction. Despite these rent-prioritizing strategies, as of their last contact with the study, 4 of the 14 housed participants were behind on their rent. Some participants did not make paying rent their top priority for a variety of financial and non-financial reasons:

- An active substance use disorder appeared to contribute to two participants’ lack of resources for housing costs.
- Two other study participants reported prioritizing their mental health and overall well-being over making their rent payments. During a period of intense depression (including suicidal ideation), Victor chose to spend money to visit family in another city to help him cope. After incurring the costs of that trip, he was short for rent and hoped to borrow against his security deposit for the shortfall. Jermaine, who had resisted entering shelter during his prior bouts of homelessness, described feeling at peace with the prospect of returning to shelter if it helped him keep his inner sense of calm.
- Two other participants appeared to prioritize other budget items over rent for different reasons. Bunny’s mental health challenges appeared to affect her executive functioning capacity to plan for and follow through on a budget that prioritized rent. Holly was earning sufficient income to cover her rent but was paying off other bills. She said in an interview that she simply had not put rent first: “I

know I waited until the last minute to pay my rent, but it's not because I was broke. I was just like, 'Well, maybe just I need to do this, or maybe I need to pay this.' Rent always comes first. Maybe that's where I fucked up at. I'm too busy trying to pay everything else and get everything else out the way." Both Holly and Bunny might have been better served by having received more focused and individualized budget coaching.

Exhibit 5-3. Strategies to Pay Rent

- Pre-paying during higher periods of income
- Cutting back on food
- Skipping other bills
- Selling belongings on consignment
- Picking up additional shifts and odd jobs
- Gifts or loans from family and friends
- Negotiating with landlord
- Reaching out to RRH case manager for additional assistance

6. Conclusion

6.1. Overall Rapid Re-housing Experiences

Overall, participants expressed gratitude for the assistance that they received from the RRH program. Participants reported being immensely grateful for the payment of rent and security deposits and the provision of furniture, along with the emotional support from case managers. At the conclusion of our research, most RRH participants (9 of 14) described having a positive experience with their RRH program. Relationships seemed more positive with the RRH program in Pine Grove than in Easterly. This could be partly because Pine Grove is a lower-cost community, and therefore housing is more accessible. Or it could be related to differences in the experiences of the Pine Grove versus Easterly participants related to how the RRH program set and managed client expectations, to strong case management relationships, and to some participants' luck during the study period.

- **Jermaine** “went from rag to riches because of that program.... [My case manager is] a wonderful lady, so, yeah...now I've been in my place almost 2 and a half years. Been on my job for 7 months, got a girlfriend I've been with for a year, starting to get in contact with my mother, starting to see my mother and my family again. Being with my kids, it's just been a great journey, though.... It's been all worth it.”
- **Bethany** described her RRH program as treating her “almost like a kite, [they] get you flying in the air. They're holding that string, but then when they see you've got good momentum, and the wind's blowing well for you, they cut the cord and cut the string, and you can keep on going.” She had expressed doubts and anger toward the program when she was uncertain whether she would qualify for URA, but she was elated when the settlement came through, and her RRH case manager supported her by finding a new unit and covering move-in costs.

Four participants of the 16 expressed frustration and disappointment with their RRH experience, feeling either that it was not appropriate for them or that it had let them down. Some described feeling personally hurt or betrayed by the program. These participants perceived being exited from the program as a betrayal by their case manager or program—when exits often are not the case manager's fault but rather that program resources have run out. However, being exited can feel personal and hurtful to participants.

- **Tania** felt like she didn't receive enough support to be fully stable; she believed that the RRH assistance needed to be at least 3 years to help people stabilize. She perceived that the program did not work for her, and she was “blacklisted” because she did not have a disability or behavioral health challenges. Tania reported that a program staffer told her that and also that they “send [people] out too soon.”
- **Bunny** expressed tremendous frustration with the uncertainty of RRH: “It was like you want to commit suicide or something because...it was just that you don't know which way—it's like you don't know which way you going here. You know what I'm saying? They saying, ‘Well, your time might be up in that 12 months range, okay? And you might have to come back to the shelter.’” Bunny reported she believed she got more help from a housing advocate unassociated with the RRH program than from the program itself. This may be a negative result of the progressive engagement approach to providing RRH assistance.³⁷

Some participants changed their opinions of RRH during the study period:

³⁷ See Fyall, Moore, and Malone (2016) for case managers' challenges with progressive engagement.

- **Michelle** stated halfway through the study that she believed RRH helped her “get my ducks in a row” by paying for school supplies, various housing costs, and food items. Just 3 months later, however, Michelle complained that RRH had not done enough for her and her family. She had recently been evicted from her apartment, and she and her children were doubled up with a friend’s family: “I did my part. I just feel like they didn’t do their part at all. I’m not a dumb girl at all. That’s a resource within our community that’s supposed to help us. When I leave there, I’m supposed to be able to say I got on my feet...They just pushed us out and didn’t care and didn’t make a plan with us.” When she entered the RRH program, Michelle had believed she would be eligible for up to 5 years of RRH assistance and was highly disillusioned when her RRH rental assistance ended, and she was subsequently evicted after 2 and a half years in the program.

There may be a gender dimension to how the study participants experienced and evaluated their experiences in RRH.³⁸ The study had more men overall, and a greater share of men reported positive experiences with RRH (7 of 10) than did women (two of six). Men more often described their case manager’s emotional support as making them feel cared for as a person, as especially positive, or even transformative in their lives. These men had very challenging but varied histories: substance use disorders, criminal convictions, mental health challenges, abuse, and being a recent immigrant. What they had in common was a lack of a social network and personal, empathetic support outside RRH. That their experience was positive also may be because single adult men do not have many other options to receive assistance, as most public benefit programs target families with dependent children. Women may also have had numerous case managers from contact with those programs and have become cynical about the experience. Understanding gender differences in RRH experience merits further research with larger samples.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

For some households, especially the higher-needs households participating in this study, RRH may not provide enough assistance to help them achieve longer-term housing stability. Though RRH programs can adjust the amount and duration of assistance to meet a participant’s needs, this overall shorter duration of housing assistance with minimal other supports was insufficient. Short-term assistance provided temporary relief. Many study participants, however, appeared vulnerable to future housing crises, or even evictions from units they had leased under RRH, which would then create an additional barrier to future housing stability.³⁹ This was especially true in high-cost Easterly, where it was challenging to locate and secure affordable units. In an effort to stretch their RRH resources to assist as many households as possible, the Easterly RRH program offered only a few months of rental assistance.⁴⁰ Participants with higher barriers to housing need a longer duration of rental assistance than even the maximum of 2 years to address their complicated barriers. In addition, they also would likely benefit from a higher level of ongoing rental assistance as well as stronger linkages to other supports.

For these higher needs participants, a PSH program or a community-based housing subsidy paired with ongoing supportive services likely would provide the support needed for the participants with ongoing substance use disorder or mental health issues. Current models offering such a pairing of rent subsidy and ongoing supportive services include Los Angeles County’s Flexible Housing Subsidy Pool.⁴¹ However,

³⁸ The study team could not assess differences in program experience by race due to the limited sample size: all but one participant and both case managers in Pine Grove were Black, and study numbers were too small to assess this based on Easterly alone.

³⁹ See Fyall, Moore, and Malone (2016).

⁴⁰ See Dunton and Brown (2019).

⁴¹ <https://brilliantcorners.org/FHSP/>

because most communities have a very limited supply of PSH, it can be difficult to access. RRH's time-limited assistance may be better targeted to people with fewer barriers to housing and employment or used as a temporary bridge to long-term housing, similar to Easterly's approach.

However, if RRH programs will continue to help people with higher needs experiencing homelessness, this study's findings suggest several recommendations for consideration.

- RRH programs could **more clearly communicate the level of support** offered to a household, to ensure they fully understand the temporary and potentially varying level of assistance. As part of that, RRH participants would benefit from **case management with a core component of coaching** in how to prepare for their assistance amounts to vary (and for fluctuations in their income and expenses).
- RRH programs could provide **stronger linkages to mainstream benefits** and other support programs to help ensure that participants access these services, including mental and physical health services and childcare subsidies, to help them address other of their barriers to employment and housing stability.
- RRH programs could offer **larger amounts of financial assistance, still temporary but with a longer duration than current programs typically offer**, especially if they continue to serve households with high needs. Doing so would recognize the longer time horizon some households need to recover from a housing crisis or to build the stability they have lacked. HUD's Family Self-Sufficiency Program for housing choice voucher recipients recognizes how long this can take and offers participants up to 5 years in that asset-building program. Such a change to RRH assistance levels would certainly require either increased funding or that programs serve a smaller number of households more intensively.

Aside from the limitations of the RRH model, many of the challenges our study's participants were facing were a result of structural barriers that RRH programs alone cannot address:

- Lack of living wage employment with sufficient and reliable hours.
- Insufficient levels of mainstream programs (childcare, SNAP, income support, options for single adults).
- Lack of accessible, affordable, or free healthcare options to address deep-seated and significant issues of mental health, substance use disorder, and physical health.
- Insufficient transportation infrastructure (or its high-cost vis-à-vis incomes).
- Accumulated debts and reduced credit from the instability that preceded their homelessness. This economic burden follows them into their new housing, increasing their economic instability and potentially their housing stability.

Homelessness is a symptom of other problems that participants face as the result of both personal challenges and gaps in the social safety net and services. This research with RRH participants suggests that without programs to address these underlying vulnerabilities to homelessness, many RRH participants will likely continue to experience the types of struggles and instability we observed for these study participants.

Appendix A: Methodology

Methods and Data

This applied ethnographic research employed open-ended data collection in the form of:

- Interviews (RRH participants and program staff).
- Observations, including home visits.
- Ongoing check-in communication (weekly to quarterly).
- Review of housing-related documents (e.g., letters/notices from landlords and housing assistance agencies) provided by participants.

Ethnography differs from other research approaches because it explicitly commits to understanding an experience—eviction (Desmond, 2016) or home purchase (Jefferson and Thomas, 2020), for example, or in this case, RRH—from the perspective of people living it.

Traditional ethnography involves a researcher’s sustained presence in research settings over a long period of time to establish the rapport needed to understand a phenomenon holistically and as it unfolds in everyday life. The methodology emphasizes long-term and repeated interactions with respondents to build the trust that leads to higher-quality, more truthful self-disclosure. For this study, we adapted traditional ethnography to include targeted participant observations on housing activities, rather than extensive observations, such as a researcher moving into a community under study and participating in daily life for months or years.

Interviews (Baseline, 6–9 Months, and 15 Months), Leading to Transcripts

Participants entered this study by completing an in-depth baseline interview, another interview about 6 to 9 months later, and finally about 12 to 15 months later. Exhibit A-1 provides a summary of topic areas. The topic guides for the ethnographic interviews were loosely structured around these key topics but highly tailored to individual respondents based on the information we had gained from check-ins, observations, and prior interviews, as well as from the current conversation. They followed an open-ended narrative structure.

Exhibit A-1. Selected Interview Questions by Topic Area

Topic	Sample Questions
Housing Costs / Rent Burden	Tell me about how it's going managing the rent. How much do you pay? What amount of help do you get? From whom? (Rent burden calculated based on review of income)
Housing History/Stability	Have you moved since the last time we talked? Please tell me about the last place you lived. How long were you there? Tell me about your relationship with your current/last landlord. Did you have any issues with the landlord? The quality of the housing?
Rapid Re-housing Support	Do you work with a case manager? What kinds of assistance does the case manager provide to you? What services do/did you receive? Who provided them? Did your case manager help to arrange for services for you? What did the case manager do? What do you think of the services you've received since you got into rapid re-housing? Please tell me about your experience with your case manager; with certification/recertification. (As applicable) How have things been—money-wise and otherwise—since your rapid re-housing ended?
Financial Status	(Review of all monthly expenses, followed by all sources of income including employment, benefits, family/friend support, in-kind trades) How has money been since you moved into this unit (with RRH support)? How do you think RRH has changed your financial situation? Is there anything you've had to go without since you moved in here? (Review basic needs to identify material deprivation) Can you tell me about that/those times?

Participant Observations and Check-In Communication, Leading to Fieldnotes

Participant observation is the “omnibus strategy” (Patton, 2005) of ethnography, meaning that participant observation can include any useful specific form of data collection to answer the research question, but always places emphasis on being present in the research setting in real-time. In this study, research team members took detailed notes and audio recorded or took photographs during observational activities, as appropriate and in accordance with our informed consent protocol.

We sought to conduct at least four in-person visits with each participant; however, in reality, the number varied across participants according to their situation and willingness. Among the observations we conducted were RRH case management appointments, a housing counseling session, housing court, visits to potential new apartments, home visits, and visits to other programs that participants used. Some participants were less receptive to home visits for a variety of reasons, including living in units that did not allow visitors and challenging work schedules.

Between interviews, we maintained contact with participants across the study period through phone calls, text messages, and emails. On average, we reached out to participants monthly, though the frequency of communication was higher or lower depending on the participant’s responsiveness. The duration and content of these check-ins varied, though we always sought to learn about major changes in the participant’s life (including household composition, work, housing, positive and negative events) and the participant’s assessment of their situation and well-being. Some participants were very forthcoming, spending an hour or more at a time on the phone with us between interviews; others were more reserved, sharing only over text or minimal details over the phone until the next interview.

We wrote fieldnotes about each observation and check-in. Fieldnotes included the participant’s pseudonym, the date, setting for the contact (e.g., phone, home, RRH program, coffee shop), and a summary of the conversation and events (both real-time events and those reported by participants), including verbatim or reconstructed dialogue. We noted our own reactions, assessments, and analytic thoughts in separate sections.

Data Summary

Through these methods, the research generated 106 documents analyzed for this report (exhibit A-2).

Exhibit A-2. Tally of Ethnographic Data Analyzed by Type

Type	N
Interviews	38
Baseline	16
6-9 months	13
12-15 months	9
Fieldnotes	68

Analysis and Reporting

Analysis in this report is based on thematic coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and fieldnotes were loaded into NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software.

For this report, the research team updated the codebook developed for the first 30 interviews in the first stage of this research (see Jefferson et al., 2019). Added codes included *changes*, *emotions*, *housing instability* (in RRH unit), and we updated code definitions. The same three analysts who coded the first 30 interviews coded the ethnographic data included in this report. Each study participant’s materials (interview transcripts and field notes) were coded by the same analyst to give the analyst a fuller understanding of a participant’s experience and to support case analysis.

We then ran a series of NVivo queries on the coded material to identify major themes articulated by the participants or that we identified. The queries examined each topic by case. Exhibit A-3 shows an excerpt of the output generated for topics we examined under the heading of “Experiences with RRH.” Each row includes all materials collected from that participant (transcripts, field notes); each column represents material coded to each topic. The cell contents show how many passages of text are coded to that topic for that participant.

Exhibit A-3. Example Output of Analysis

Output Topics by Participant for “Experiences with RRH”

	A : Financial assistance ... ▼	B : Experiences of RRH ▼	C : Role of case manager ▼
1 : Bethany ▼	10	13	13
2 : Brandon ▼	5	1	6
3 : Bunny ▼	0	20	9
4 : Drake ▼	3	1	5
5 : Holly ▼	5	2	8
6 : Javier ▼	9	10	22
7 : Jay ▼	6	11	10
8 : Jermaine ▼	9	5	13
9 : Joel ▼	7	7	9
10 : Jude ▼	21	15	14
11 : Michelle ▼	9	6	10
12 : Moses ▼	1	7	9
13 : Ricardo ▼	4	9	13
14 : Robert ▼	6	3	10
15 : Tania ▼	9	13	11
16 : Victor ▼	3	8	5

We then reviewed the contents of these query results and summarized them in two ways. First, analysts summarized the content for each theme across participants, noting commonalities and variations in experience.

Analysts also summarized each participant’s experience across various dimensions of the research in Excel tables, to aid in understanding a participant’s experience holistically. For example, analysts summarized each participant’s housing history, relationship with their case manager, RRH assistance received, housing barriers, key life context (e.g., giving birth during the study, having a felony record, struggling with substance use disorder, self-perception), aspirations, and budgets over time.

Finally, we synthesized the findings from the analysis for this report, using illustrative quotes and passages of fieldnotes to personalize and further explain key themes. We also compared our analysis with findings from this study’s other components: the other one-time, in-depth interviews (Jefferson et al., 2019), RRH systematic review (Gubits et al., 2018), RRH community scan (including in-depth interviews with local programs) (Dunton and Brown, 2019), and additional analysis of Family Options Study data (Walton et al., 2018).

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