

Commentary: HUD's Family Self-Sufficiency Program: Lessons for its Future

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Introduction

The Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program was established in 1990 to be administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The key objective of the FSS program is to promote increased earnings and savings for households participating in HUD-assisted rental housing programs to support these households in attaining economic security, with participants expected to graduate from the program within 5 to 7 years (CBPP, 2020). Since the initiation of this program, public housing agencies (PHAs) and their partners have developed a range of initiatives to achieve these goals that include (1) personal guidance through case management and financial coaching services and (2) financial incentives to save. The program has evolved through the years, including expanding to include Section 8 Project-Based Rental Assistance (PBRA), with HUD supporting technical assistance and developing a performance measurement system to examine implementation outcomes. As of 2020, about 700 PHAs had received FSS coordinator funding (out of more than 3,300 PHAs) (CBPP, 2020) and as of 2023, 97 PBRA properties received FSS funding (Cramer and McCarthy, 2025). The current level of funding is expected to support approximately 83,000 families, an increase of 20 percent during 10 years, which is substantial program growth but still serves only a small portion of the 4.3 million families participating in HUD's assisted rental housing programs.

The FSS program outcomes have been the object of extensive evaluations (de Silva et al., 2011; Geyer et al., 2017; Moulton, Freiman, and Lubell, 2021; Rohe and Kleit, 1999; Santiago, Galster, and Smith, 2017; Shlay, 1993), with the most recent evaluations included in this volume. The findings from these studies point to the diversity of efforts local actors have undertaken to achieve FSS program goals and the variation in their effectiveness, with mixed findings, particularly in regard to the key outcome of interest—labor force participation and earnings. One of the program's characteristics is that it provides extensive flexibility in its implementation at the local

level. The variations in implementation and the results for specific outcomes make an overall assessment challenging but also offer lessons for the program's future based on local successes. This commentary connects the findings from the evaluations included in this symposium to broader research on improving the outcomes of participants in housing and savings programs. Then, it provides considerations on ways to integrate FSS into proposed changes to housing assistance and welfare programs more broadly.

What Family Self-Sufficiency Has Accomplished: Key Findings From the Literature

The FSS program is available to families participating in a range of HUD-administered rental assistance programs: public housing, Housing Choice Voucher (HCV), Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act assisted housing, and, more recently, PBRA. Funding is available on a competitive basis for PHAs and Indian tribes to pay for FSS program coordinators. PHAs and PBRA owners also rely on their own resources to operate the program. Therefore, funding availability restricts the number of families served (HUD, 2016). The main features implemented through the FSS programs are (1) coaching services that are generally voluntary and help households build financial capability and (2) the ability for households to have the portion of increased earnings that would otherwise go to higher rents saved in an escrow account that they can access on graduating from the program.

As part of the first component, participants develop Individual Training and Services Plans (ITSPs) that have intermediate and long-term goals and steps to reaching those goals and obtaining a range of services aimed at lowering barriers to meeting these goals and accessing employment—such as job training, employment counseling, education opportunities, childcare, and transportation support. The intensity of the counseling and the services provided range substantially across local programs depending on their financial and human capacity and the level of autonomy the programs provide to different participants.

As part of the second component, participants are enrolled in interest-bearing accounts that program administrators manage. Any increases in a family's rent contribution from increased earned income result in a credit to the family's escrow account. Families have access to the escrow account upon program graduation and can use account funds for any purpose at that point. Therefore, the FSS program makes it possible to have the increased rental contributions expected from households that experience increases in earnings returned to the households that meet certain program goals. The goal of the FSS program is to strengthen financial incentives for program participants to be employed and earn more because they are able to get the increased earnings that would have gone to increased rental contributions returned to them on graduating. The amount saved in the escrow account is made available to participants upon graduation, which is based on completion of the goals set in the Contract of Participation. The Contract of Participation generally has a term of 5 years and can be extended up to 7 years under specific circumstances. Therefore, the FSS program enables increased asset building through savings, albeit with restrictions on how to access these savings.

Thus, the FSS program is designed to incentivize labor participation, increase earnings, and help families accumulate savings. In addition, it is focused on the idea that participating families can experience sufficient improvement in their financial situation through employment to be less reliant on assistance programs, although they can continue to receive housing assistance upon program graduation. Therefore, the program is focused on serving families with members able to work who have the capacity to be employed and increase their earnings through skills trainings and work experience.

The focus on not creating a disincentive to earn more for families receiving rental assistance is based on findings from the literature that show rental assistance receipt is associated with decreased labor force participation and decreased earnings (Chyn, Hyman, and Kapustin, 2019; Jacob and Ludwig, 2012; Olsen et al., 2005; Susin, 2005), although those effects potentially diminish over time (Carlson et al., 2011). The estimates for HCV recipients based on a lottery find that among working-age adults without disabilities, housing voucher use reduces labor participation by 6 percent and quarterly earnings by \$329 in the short run (Jacob and Ludwig, 2012). Note that although evidence exists of rental assistance decreasing incentives to work, the effect of rental assistance on labor participation is relatively limited—4 percentage points, or a 6-percent decrease, in Jacob and Ludwig (2012), for example. It is also worth noting that although the amount of rental assistance decreases when income from earnings increases, and that practice may disincentivize work, the converse may not hold. That is, it may be difficult to compensate for this disincentive effect of rental assistance with training assistance (Bartik, 2020). Moreover, an increasing share of families receiving rental assistance have members with disabilities or who are elderly and are, therefore, less likely to see substantial increases in their labor participation or earnings to ultimately stop requiring housing assistance.

Most of the evidence of the FSS program outcomes to date has been based on local evaluations and quasi-experimental studies in which the outcomes for FSS participants are compared with those of similar families rather than in a randomized trial framework. For example, an evaluation of Compass Working Capital FSS programs with several housing authorities in the Boston area found that participating households had annual incomes that were \$6,032 (23 percent) higher than the comparison group (Moulton, Freiman, and Lubell, 2021). Another study found that Compass Working Capital FSS participants experienced larger improvements in credit scores and reductions in credit card and derogatory debt than similar households not participating in the program (Geyer et al., 2017).

However, these findings are based on local cases, and although they use quasi-experimental approaches, they are still subject to the potential for selection bias. The most recent evaluation of the FSS program, presented in this symposium, based on a national randomized controlled trial conducted by MDRC, finds no significant difference in employment, earnings, household income, credit score, and housing subsidy receipt trajectories between program participants and the control group (Verma, 2025). In addition, only 20 percent of participants had graduated from the program by the end of the study. However, it is notable that those graduates had accumulated substantial savings with escrow disbursement of \$11,000 on average. These findings from a national study conducted rigorously and with medium-term followup raise substantial doubt about the program's

effectiveness in affecting employment and earning outcomes. However, for those who successfully graduate, the programs have benefits in terms of increased financial savings. The problem is that so few graduate.

However, the evidence from Castells (2025), which examines outcomes from MyGoals, an experimental workforce program, suggests that program participation and graduation can be increased substantially. Two PHAs, the Housing Authority of Baltimore City and the Houston Housing Authority, operated the MyGoals program between 2017 and 2022. These PHAs served unemployed recipients of federal housing subsidies, which were available to each participant for 3 years.

MyGoals borrows elements from the FSS program but differs in key aspects, including focusing on people who were not already employed, providing higher-intensity coaching, and offering immediate financial incentives tied to work in the form of cash rewards rather than delayed FSS escrow savings. The lessons from MyGoals are still emerging as MDRC and Mathematica are currently evaluating the program using a randomized controlled trial, but Castells (2025) describes early findings from the evaluation. These findings include sustained participant engagement at relatively high levels throughout the full 3-year program. By contrast, FSS case management was typically hands off, and participants generally did not meet frequently with case managers. MyGoals participants engaged with coaching at higher levels and sustained engagement over time, resulting in a positive effect on goal setting, skill attainment, and job search activities. Nonetheless, 21 months after study enrollment, outcomes in terms of employment and earnings were small to nonexistent and not statistically significant besides evidence of a slightly higher likelihood of being employed in jobs with a higher likelihood of promotion and higher job satisfaction. Therefore, the experience with MyGoals can help inform potential changes to the FSS program, although they do not at this stage provide evidence that the level of counseling and the financial incentives offered through MyGoals are sufficient to achieve substantial increases in employment and earnings.

More generally, the existing research and evaluation efforts show that 3 decades after being established, the FSS program has had success in allowing families to build liquid financial savings in escrow accounts. However, the program has struggled to achieve success in increasing earnings and labor participation in a consistent fashion.

The following section discusses why the limited effectiveness of the FSS program is consistent with other personal finance programs and ways to build on the findings from experimentation that show promising results to achieving the key goal of supporting financial stability and resilience that was at the origin of the FSS program. The FSS program has nurtured an ecosystem of innovative organizations that are mission focused and have partnered to produce evidence about what works and what does not. The studies in this symposium show the substantial and creative efforts from these organizations, such as Compass, Abt, Winn, and other multifamily housing providers and consortium participants, to help families attain greater financial stability. Making sure these efforts are recognized with lessons learned shared across organizations and integrated into the core programs of housing providers will require continued financial and capacity-building support from HUD.

The Importance of Savings for Low-Income Families

McCoy (2025) articulates why low-income families face obstacles to saving. These obstacles include lower benefits from tax incentives for retirement, college and health savings that often are designed as tax subsidies that favor families with higher tax rates and tax liabilities, and not being employed in positions with benefits, such as employer-provided matching retirement or health accounts. By contrast, “there are scant federal tax subsidies for the emergency savings that these families most need” (McCoy, 2025: 21). At the same time, the benefits of increasing low-income households’ ability to save are clear. McKernan et al. (2016) report that even modest savings of \$250 to \$749 substantially lower a family’s likelihood of being evicted, missing a housing or utility payment, or receiving public benefits after an income shock. This benefit makes features like the FSS escrow account particularly important as a tool to support savings for low-income families.

Other programs showing promise in supporting low-income families in building savings include individual development accounts (IDAs), in which program participants receive a match on their savings and can use the savings for a range of qualified uses conditional on meeting certain requirements (McCoy, 2025). The findings from evaluating IDAs have found that although they tend to increase savings and can support access to homeownership (Engelhardt et al., 2010; Grinstein-Weiss, Lee et al., 2008; Grinstein-Weiss, Sherraden et al., 2013), many participants withdraw their savings before being eligible for the match and use them for nonqualified purposes, contributing to limited overall impact on wealth building (Mills et al., 2008). In addition, an obstacle to the growth of IDAs is the cost involved in matching savings, which, as for the FSS program, requires financial resources. Findings regarding the level of matching that achieves substantial uptake while limiting costs from the evaluation of different IDAs and FSS designs can help achieve a greater effect with limited funding. However, McCoy (2025) argues that substantial matches, similar to those from which higher-income participants in 401K plans or health savings accounts (HSAs) benefit, are more likely than financial education to be key to the success of a savings program.

Savings programs are likely to be more important than ever for HUD’s population of assisted households as they age. On the basis of HUD’s (n.d.) “Picture of Subsidized Households,” the share of those families with a head of household or a spouse younger than 62 with a disability or a head of household or a spouse 62 or older increased from 51 percent in 2000 to 61 percent in 2023.

Refocusing the program to provide mechanisms to save may serve a greater proportion of rental assistance recipients. Escrow accounts could be built into rental assistance programs, with a fraction of the rental assistance allocated to escrow accounts as an emergency reserve. This reserve would help families build a financial cushion that could have large welfare implications when those families face a negative shock that requires liquidity, such as health issues, which many low-income families lack, contributing to increased risks of falling behind on rent and facing evictions or trade-offs, such as forgoing healthcare treatments (McCoy, 2025).

One of the limits to increasing financial incentives is funding. Although the escrow account requires funding directly or through matches, the availability of an escrow account to serve as

emergency savings in case of negative income shocks might have positive effects on rental housing providers that at least partially offset some of these costs.

Providing further flexibility and support to providers, such as some Moving to Work (MTW) agencies that set up programs to support savings by participating families before they graduate from the program, could be beneficial. The national evaluation report did not cover MTW agencies (Verma, 2025), but Verma describes the innovative approaches MTW agencies are taking as deserving further analysis.

Designing savings and asset building for a broader range of participants rather than being focused on increasing labor participation and earnings would require a shift in how escrow programs are set up and might require regulatory and even legislative changes. This shift might be an evolution that allows programs to serve FSS participants better, supporting savings for all currently working recipients through a default opt-in program.

How FSS Components Can Be Incorporated Into Proposed Changes to Housing Assistance

The evidence to date suggests that focusing the FSS program on asset building through escrow accounts, potentially with matching funds to encourage participation, could be beneficial. Such focus on creating a savings instrument aligns with addressing the overall lack of tax-advantaged savings instruments available to low-income families that McCoy (2025) identified and the potential benefits for individuals and society of increasing the availability of savings among low-income families. In a program redesign, all participants in assisted rental programs could be the focus rather than families with heads of household or spouses able to work. Participants would not be expected to graduate from the program but rather be eligible to use the savings in their escrow accounts either for approved uses (similar to an HSA or 401K) or once it reaches a certain balance, which would represent a fundamental change to the program's focus from temporary to permanent and from families able to work to all families. Many questions need to be resolved regarding ways to set up such a program in a cost-effective manner and to build on existing effort and local capacity. However, on the basis of the evidence of the FSS programs to date, such programs could be designed to build savings effectively. It is also possible to incorporate this change in focus into a more fundamental rethinking of rental assistance (Bailey and McCabe, 2024), such as Direct Rental Assistance (DRA), which we discuss in the next section. Absent more fundamental changes to the program, room also exists for making changes designed to improve program enrollment, retention, and graduation.

Direct Rental Assistance: Direct Payment to Recipients

The FSS program could be integrated into the emerging DRA demonstrations (Gallagher et al., 2024; Joice, O'Regan, and Ellen, 2024; Reina et al., 2021). DRA aims to distribute assistance directly to families rather than to landlords, as is traditionally done in U.S. demand-side rental assistance. One of the main aims of the approach is to lower barriers to receiving assistance and address landlords' resistance to participating in the program. Despite initial experimentation by

HUD with the Experimental Housing Allowance Program in the early 1970s, DRA programs are still at an early stage in the United States (Joice, O'Regan, and Ellen, 2024). However, the experience from Emergency Rental Assistance (ERA) that some jurisdictions distributed directly to families during the COVID-19 pandemic and international experiences in a range of countries suggest that direct payments to recipients can be administered and scaled up (Reina et al., 2021). The benefits of providing rental assistance directly to households have been shown in the evaluation of the ERA programs established in response to the pandemic (Reina et al., 2021).

The interest in building on these efforts and generalizing DRA demonstrations offers the potential to build mechanisms such as forced savings in the form of escrow accounts. In incorporating an escrow account in DRA, a portion of the housing assistance could be kept in escrow to fund a savings account, although the rest would be disbursed directly to the households. Households could use these escrow accounts for a range of purposes after reaching a certain balance, and those funds could also serve as a rent guarantee mechanism because families could access these savings to cover their portion of the rent when faced with a negative income shock.

Reina et al. (forthcoming) reports initiatives to integrate FSS and DRA in Montgomery County, MD, where the Housing Opportunities Commission is considering making DRA available to FSS graduates, and O'Regan expresses support for such initiatives that would continue providing FSS-like services to DRA participants. Including an escrow account with matching funds to support emergency fund accumulation among the range of supports provided to families could provide them with an effective way to build wealth.

Potential Areas for Change Within the FSS Program

Increasing Enrollment

Some of the initiatives documented in this symposium have focused on marketing the program to potential participants and increasing uptake by making the benefits of the program clear and more immediate (Cramer and Reuter, 2025; Sanga et al., 2025, in particular). These efforts appear to bear some results, but moving from having participants needing to opt into the program to making it the default for all families newly receiving rental assistance from participating providers meeting the program's criteria might be an effective way to increase enrollment. Current program participants could still enroll in the program, and new participants would have the option to opt out, but making participating the default could have positive effects, assuming that funding and capacity are available. The shift from opting in to opting out has been shown to durably and substantially increase program participation across a range of programs (Birkenmaier, Maynard, and Kim, 2022). In addition, the lessons from the initiatives of Compass Working Capital FSS programs to retain participants once they enroll are important to ensuring engagement once participants are enrolled (Sanga et al., 2025).

Focusing on Escrow Accounts

The design of escrow programs has the potential to evolve to be accessible, be more flexible, and support a broader range of situations. Verma (2025) and Sanga et al. (2025) describe the potential

for alternative escrow models, with funds being available earlier based on different criteria and with different calculations. Initiatives, such as the Work Rewards demonstration, that provide further financial incentives to participants once they have been employed for 6 or 12 months seem to result in more positive effects on labor participation and earnings, as Verma (2025) describes. Further experimentation with the levels of incentives, size of the escrow amount (30 or 50 percent of the increase in earned income or 50 or 100 percent of the increase in rent, for example), length of lock-in period, and adoption of the approaches that work across a broader range of programs could have additional positive effects.

In particular, ensuring that participants are aware of the balance building up in their escrow accounts and that they can access it once they meet some benchmarks, even if not all the goals are met, rather than requiring them to graduate to access the escrow accounts could make the program more attractive to participants. A key element would require a policy change to allow participants to withdraw some or all their balances. Access to the funds could become possible either after a vesting period (of less than a year or not more than 2) or after amassing a minimum balance—a minimum possibly less than \$1,000 given McKernan et al.'s (2016) evidence that having liquid savings of \$250 to \$749 makes a meaningful difference in households' ability to weather adverse shocks. The details of the design for participants accessing escrow accounts if access is not tied to graduation will require further attention. If the funds are to be used as emergency savings, balancing access to the accounts with the need to ensure accountability in their disbursement might benefit from the example of HSAs that make it possible for participants to access funds with limited friction while documenting that they are used for qualified expenditures.

Lowering Graduation Requirements (or Moving Away from Graduation Altogether)

One of the key challenges of the FSS program to date is the low share of program participants who eventually graduate, as Verma (2025) highlights. The program was set up with the goal of having families graduate within 5 years, with the potential for a 2-year extension. Families who did not successfully graduate would forfeit access to the savings in their escrow account. The focus on meeting employment goals to graduate from the programs and be eligible to receive escrow funds is based on the notion that families should be able to become self-sufficient through stable employment and adequate earnings. Finding ways to increase flexibility in the requirements that must be met before funds can be disbursed and to account for changes in circumstances that might make it difficult for some participants to remain employed are ways that could increase successful outcomes. This change requires recognizing that success might look different for some participants than others, depending on the barriers to employment participants face on the basis of their physical or mental health, for example, as Verma (2025) describes. Removing the graduation component or de-linking graduation from the ability to access their escrow funds would provide participating families with the benefits of having access to emergency savings, and earlier withdrawal would allow families to more effectively smooth their incomes, increasing the benefits of participating in the program.

Applying Learning From Creating Moves to Opportunity to Counseling

The Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) experiment, conducted by the Seattle and King County Housing Authorities in partnership with a team of researchers, aimed to build on the experience of Move to Opportunity (MTO) (de Souza Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010) in order to support families with young children receiving HCVs access to neighborhoods found to have historically had high levels of intergenerational economic mobility (Bergman et al., 2024). The experimental setup provides strong causal evidence of the effectiveness of different components of the interventions tested to increase access to high-opportunity areas. The quantitative and qualitative findings from the study identified the key role played by trained housing navigators who assisted families in their search process. Bergman et al. (2024) highlight that the ability of the navigators to customize their services to the specific needs of each family was an integral part of the success of the intervention, with high levels of services due to the heterogeneous levels and types of needs across families.

These findings are consistent with the findings for the FSS program regarding the heterogeneity in the effect of counseling and point to the need to understand better how to recruit and train counselors who provide effective services at scale. The lessons from CMTO suggest that such programs can be established and scaled up but that the intentionality and capacity of the organizations setting up the programs and the skills, training, and caseloads of recruited counselors are key to their success. Given the decentralized nature of the FSS program, identifying the approaches that are most promising and then finding ways to refine them and replicate them are areas that have the potential to increase the effectiveness of the interventions, with a focus on supporting families in reaching their financial goals. Reaching that objective requires careful design and monitoring at the program level, along with support from national networks and HUD.

Conclusion

Increasing employment and earnings for low-income families is a challenging task, and therefore, it is not surprising that the FSS program has not had success in reaching these goals. Except for customized job-training programs for specific in-demand positions in tight labor markets, job-training and skill-building programs face difficulties in consistently improving participant outcomes (Bartik, 2020). It is not clear if HUD and its partners have a comparative advantage in delivering these programs. Repositioning the FSS program to focus on supporting the savings goals of participating families may be a more attainable goal, with the potential of having a positive effect on a greater number of families. The program appears successful in supporting participating low-income families who graduate from the program in building substantial savings. Building on the success of the escrow programs to support emergency savings for low-income families could leverage the robust network of organizations involved in implementing the FSS program while serving participants in rental assistance programs more broadly and without a limited graduation horizon. Doing so could provide an effective tool to support accumulating emergency savings for low-income families who currently largely lack a financial safety net. Downstream benefits could include increased financial security and reduced risk of residential instability for families and participating housing providers.

Moreover, the changing demographics of the assisted population matters. To date, the FSS program has focused on providing support for participants to connect to the labor market and increase their earning opportunities. However, given the increasing share of rental assistance recipients who are disabled or elderly, the focus of the FSS program on work and graduating out of needing rental assistance might benefit from being altered. At the same time, the focus of the FSS program on building savings through escrow accounts is likely important for these individuals. In particular, families with members who are elderly or have disabilities are likely to face health-related needs for which liquid savings might have major welfare benefits. Keeping the elements of the FSS program that encourage savings and making these savings available in case of life events, such as health needs, could have large private and social benefits.

Future work to integrate better the program to the changing demographic of participants in rental assistance programs presents some interesting issues that need to be addressed—such as adapting program goals and operations to the increasing duration of participation in the program, the coordination of housing and health services, and the professional delivering these services—to serve an aging population.

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