Title

Creating a Pathway to Voucher Utilization: The Potential for Cash On-Ramps

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F4GI

CREATING A PATHWAY TO VOUCHER UTILIZATION

The potential role of cash on-ramps

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program is the primary subsidy to help low-income households afford rental housing, serving over 2.3 million households nationally every year by subsidizing the gap between what families can afford (30% of income) and market rent. Rental housing cost burdens have never been higher in the United States, and a rising number of cities and metropolitan areas have acutely high burdens and rising homelessness.

The HCV program is a critical resource, yet nearly 40% of voucher recipients never find housing (Ellen et al., 2021). Most studies find utilization rates — the share of households who successfully use a voucher to lease a unit — range between 60–80% (Chyn et al., 2019; Ellen, 2018; Ellen et al., 2024). The low levels of voucher utilization are due to tight rental markets, landlord refusal to participate in the program, and other challenges faced by renters who rack up application fees, transportation costs, and security deposits in the struggle to lease up with a voucher. Research using paired testing found voucher holders must screen 39 units on average just to identify one potentially eligible option (Cunningham et al., 2018).

There have been several attempts to increase utilization in the voucher program. Many jurisdictions have passed source of income laws to reduce the likelihood that participants will be discriminated against by landlords. Small Area Fair Market Rents (SAFMRs) have been implemented by many housing authorities to provide households with more purchasing power in higher-cost neighborhoods.

More recently, pilots have emerged to provide direct rental assistance (DRA) to tenants in hopes that will make it easier for tenants to use housing subsidies to rent their homes. The potential for DRA to increase utilization lies in simplifying the three-way nature of the housing voucher program, where housing authorities provide payments to landlords (rather than tenants) to help make up the difference between what the tenant can pay and the fair market rent established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

DRA programs can minimize the landlord role in the program (because they do not receive the payment), or turn the landlord role into one that mimics the role they would play in a purely unsubsidized transaction, because tenants pay the full rent to the landlord and inspections and other voucher program requirements would (or could) be eliminated. How a DRA program would influence utilization rates depends on many of these design aspects. In collaboration with housing authorities across the country, the Fund for Guaranteed Income (F4GI) identified the need for a particular type of direct rental assistance: a “cash on-ramp.”

A cash on-ramp would provide prospective HCV tenants with short-term assistance to help with the costs of searching for housing. Such funds would be targeted to helping to pay security deposits, utilities in the initial months, transportation and other costs that renters incur when searching for a new home.

This report will describe the attributes and role of a cash on-ramp program, along with policy and research design considerations for making them effective and evaluating their impact. We elaborate on the problem of utilization in the Housing Choice Voucher program, comment briefly on direct rental assistance programs more broadly, summarize housing authorities' identification of on-ramps as a potential solution to utilization, and conclude with a summary of how researchers might evaluate cash on-ramp programs in the future.

Why Direct Rental Assistance is Important & How it is Being Applied

For as long as the housing voucher program has existed it has struggled with utilization rates, and HUD and housing authorities have experimented with providing rental assistance directly to tenants as a result.The Experimental Housing Assistance Program (EHAP) — the foundational precursor to the HCV program — provided cash assistance to participating households in the 1970s (Joice et al., 2024).[1] Housing mobility programs have added to this experimentation for decades. None of this experimentation has solved the utilization problem. These low utilization rates — in addition to recent emergency rental assistance programs that provided cash directly to tenants — have raised interest in implementing and testing direct rental assistance (DRA) programs in more places.

Direct Rental Assistance

DRA OVERVIEW: CASH IN LIEU OF A VOUCHER

Providing the subsidy directly could yield several benefits. First, it could reduce administrative burden for housing authorities, tenants and landlords, and potentially free up resources for additional subsidies or make more efficient use of scarce resources. Second, it may increase tenants' locational flexibility, as landlords in higher-opportunity neighborhoods would be less able to discriminate based on source of income when assistance is provided in cash. Third, because cash is more flexible than a voucher, tenants should be better able to budget over the course of a rental month and account for other basic needs. Finally, DRA could virtually erase the utilization problem: in some respects, direct cash assistance is utilized the moment it is received.

The nature of these benefits (and potential costs) depend on the specific design of the DRA program. These programs can take many forms, shaped by several key considerations: 1) whether the direct rental assistance augments or entirely replaces the value of the voucher; 2) the degree to which the DRA ends the contractual relationship between the landlord and housing authority; and relatedly, 3) whether annual unit inspections continue.

1 Families facing no housing quality requirements enrolled in the program at more than twice the rate. Despite the high enrollment rate, federal efforts evolved towards a model that focused on housing authority-managed vouchers with inspections and quality standards. Housing quality was a real problem (38% of rental stock was dilapidated in 1950) and direct Public Housing Authority (PHA) oversight protected vulnerable families from slumlords. But by 2021, the Urban Institute found only 4% of low-income households lived in severely inadequate housing. The processes designed for 1950s housing stock may now create more barriers than protections.

There are a limited number of existing DRA programs, but we have recent examples from the Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation (PHLHousing+), from guaranteed income programs that target people experiencing housing insecurity, and from emergency rental assistance programs operated during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID emergency rental assistance started by paying landlords directly, similar to the Housing Choice Voucher program's subsidy system to landlords. However, COVID-era rental assistance eventually pivoted to paying tenants directly in order to overcome administrative barriers and landlord suspicion that hindered the program (Joice et al., 2024).

PHLHOUSING+

PHLHousing+ is a randomized controlled trial that tests cash before families receive vouchers. It assigned renter households on the Philadelphia Housing Authority's 2022 waitlist to one of three groups: 1) an experimental group of 301 households that receives the value of the rental subsidy in the form of monthly cash payments; 2) a voucher group of 175 households that receives the Housing Choice Vouchers as usual; and 3) a control group of 725 households that remains on the waitlist (Reina et al., 2025).

Among the households in the control group, 24% experienced homelessness while waiting for assistance. By contrast, only 12% of cash recipients became homeless (Reina et al., 2025). The utilization rate of the experimental group was effectively 100% since all of the participants used the debit card provided. Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania are still evaluating the program, but preliminary results suggest that PHLHousing+ is significantly improving housing outcomes relative to the two comparison groups. The cash payments appear to keep families stably housed so they can conduct the housing search when their turn comes.

For PHLHousing+ families who found housing during the program, many may be able to lease in place, applying the voucher to the unit they currently occupy. In this way, PHLHousing+ helps families achieve housing stability, even if the program doesn't assist with navigating some of the bureaucratic hurdles that the voucher process adds to the housing search process.

GAP

These findings are encouraging, but PHLHousing+ doesn't test how cash helps during the voucher process itself. Rather, it shows that cash prevents families from falling into crisis while waiting to sign a lease, not how it helps them overcome inspection delays, upfront costs, and sequential application requirements during the search.

Housing Mobility Programs

HOUSING MOBILITY PROGRAMS OVERVIEW: CASH TO MOVE INTO BETTER NEIGHBORHOODS + SUPPORT SEARCH PROCESS

Housing mobility programs combine financial assistance with housing navigation, helping voucher holders move to higher-opportunity neighborhoods. The cash aspects of these programs most closely resemble the cash on-ramp framework that motivates this brief, although mobility programs typically offer more search assistance and counseling resources than a cash on-ramp program would. The most well-studied mobility programs, including Moving to Opportunity (MTO), often required participants to use their vouchers in low-poverty/high-opportunity neighborhoods and had a lower overall lease up rate than the HCV program (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). The newer CMTO removed this restriction but continued to focus navigation assistance only on moves to high-opportunity neighborhoods.

BALTIMORE HOUSING MOBILITY PROGRAM (BHMP) AND SEATTLE & KING COUNTY'S CREATING MOVES TO OPPORTUNITY (CMTO)

Two housing mobility programs have a significant evidence base and are well documented in the scholarly literature: the Baltimore Housing Mobility Program (BHMP) and Seattle and King County's Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO).

Baltimore has a longstanding and well-studied program that provides security deposit assistance and transportation costs.[2] CMTO, by contrast, is more recent and did not tie any financial incentives to moving to particular neighborhoods, but provided extensive search counseling and cost support (DeLuca & Groccia, 2024).

The research on CMTO and BHMP suggests that a holistic approach to housing search assistance is necessary to increase utilization in higher opportunity neighborhoods. Deluca & Groccia (2024) find that prospective tenants often lack information and time in their housing search.

Financial assistance covering costs such as security deposits and application fees were undoubtedly important in helping tenants secure housing and use their vouchers, but the research on CMTO and BHMP does not tell us whether financial search assistance is successful without the human resources

2 Along with Baltimore, Chicago, which is also a Moving to Work (MTW) site, also provides security deposit assistance in addition to child-related expenses and money for application fees. Columbus, Ohio, recruits about 30-35 families per year to participate in a targeted housing mobility program that provides $500 per month rental support for the first 18 months. Similarly, the state of Massachusetts provides $4,500 in myriad search costs for a small number of families who participate in a targeted mobility program. The state of Michigan has a pilot program in three counties that has enrolled 13 families thus far to receive up to $3,500 in search costs (Tegeler et al., 2025).

provided by housing navigators (Bergmann et al., 2019; DeLuca & Groccia, 2024). Housing mobility counselors can make a big difference by providing timely and accurate information, providing transportation assistance, arranging neighborhood tours, assisting with credit checks and lease paperwork, and helping navigate inspections. Mobility counselors also provide landlord outreach and education, which can help make more landlords amenable to voucher tenants.

GAP

A recent survey by the Poverty and Race Research and Action Council (PRRAC) of 40 housing mobility programs found that only a handful provide financial resources during the search process (Tegeler et al., 2025).

Mobility programs test a more robust intervention that is harder to scale and is more tailored to improving neighborhood outcomes for voucher holders, rather than increasing the overall lease-up rate. Instead of testing if cash alone can help low-income families navigate the existing bureaucracy, these programs combine financial assistance with extensive support from a housing navigator. More research is required to understand the impact each individual support has on increasing high-opportunity and general lease-up rates.

What's Still Untested

CASH ON-RAMP: CASH TO LEASE UP AND IMPROVE THE PROCESS FOR PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE A UNIT

A cash on-ramp should have two basic goals: improve the chances that recipients will successfully lease up using a voucher and reduce (or at the very least not increase) the administrative burden for families and housing authorities.

Research on the Housing Choice Voucher program documents a number of barriers to a successful lease up, including inspection delays, security deposit gaps, information asymmetries, and landlord discrimination. Getting a voucher in the first place can take years. Housing authorities open their waitlists infrequently, sometimes only once a decade, and families selected through lottery often wait several additional years before receiving vouchers.

When families do receive a voucher, they need to find a unit that accepts vouchers and falls within rent limits, submit an application to the housing authority, wait for the unit to pass inspection, and then sign a lease. Research consistently shows that vouchers work well for families who successfully lease up, but getting to that point isn't easy.

The inspection process illustrates this tension. Studies show that when units pass inspection on the first attempt, the back-end process takes about three weeks. Multiple inspections, however, are common and can add another two to three weeks, extending the inspection timeline to five weeks. For landlords, this represents roughly 10% of annual rental income lost while units sit vacant. As housing quality has improved dramatically since the 1950s, recent research has questioned whether this level of scrutiny is still warranted (Stegman & Shea, 2024).

The housing search process itself is also demanding. Paired testing studies found voucher holders must screen an average of 39 listed units to find one potentially eligible (Cunningham et al., 2018).

GAP

Research on voucher utilization, along with discussions with housing authorities, suggest several key reasons why program participants fail to use their vouchers. Programs like CTMO can create an increased success rate for lease ups into high-opportunity neighborhoods, but they are resource intensive and likely too difficult to scale. PHLHousing+, meanwhile, is a critical lifeline to those on the waitlist for a voucher, but does not test if cash can help families in the lease-up process.

This is the untested moment: Does cash help families navigate the bureaucratic process and afford the search? When security deposits are due immediately, does cash close the gap? When fees and transportation costs mount across dozens of property visits, does cash keep families searching?

The Fund for Guaranteed Income (F4GI) and research partners learned from collaborations with housing authorities — most extensively through a partnership with Housing Authority of the City of Long Beach (HACLB) — to better understand how a cash on-ramp program could be designed, implemented and evaluated.

Lessons from Los Angeles County for Cash On-Ramp Program Design

Introduction to the Los Angeles County/Long Beach Context

The Housing Authority of the City of Long Beach (HACLB) is one of 35 housing authorities in L.A. County alone, serving the city of Long Beach and administering 7,837 vouchers. HACLB has six departments, three of which support new voucher holders. The intake team helps households submit required documents to get their voucher issued and provides briefings to families. The inspection team tests unit quality. And the contracting team is responsible for executing the three-way agreement between the housing authority, tenant and landlord. A fourth team — the ownership team — recruits landlords to the program, but does not work directly with voucher holders.

Long Beach has a 3.9% rental vacancy rate compared to 5.2% in L.A. County; it is also one of the most housing segregated cities in the country (Evans, 2024). These features put considerable burden on voucher holders searching for units, so additional support could have a greater impact and support more equitable outcomes.

Conversations with intake staff, inspection supervisors, and landlord outreach teams validated many challenges predicted by research, while revealing how they appear from the front lines. What emerged wasn't a story about families lacking motivation or capability — it was a story of unnecessary friction at many points in the process.

Insights from Long Beach Staff

An overdue and grueling search. Given how rarely waitlists open and how long families wait for vouchers, recipients arrive at HACLB and similar housing authorities with years of compounding housing challenges. These challenges do not end once they receive vouchers and begin searching. Instead, they typically undergo an overwhelming and exhausting housing search. HACLB intake staff described a process where voucher holders must contact dozens of landlords, submit multiple applications, and face repeated rejections before finding success. Many successful voucher holders, they noted, are those who "lease in place" — already residing in units that can pass inspection. These families avoid the grueling search process entirely. Everyone else faces the full challenge of finding willing landlords in a competitive market.

The barrier of large up-front costs. Beyond monthly rent, securing housing requires substantial up-front payments that often total more than a month's income for voucher holders. Security deposits typically equal one month's rent — around $1,325 for a twobedroom unit in Long Beach. Application fees run $30-$50 per adult household member. Utility companies require deposits to turn on service. Moving costs add hundreds more. At HACLB, only voucher holders in special programs can receive additional financial assistance for these costs, with funding coming from community specific initiatives. Everyone else must cover these expenses from their own resources, which may already be depleted after weeks or months of searching. The timing is also particularly problematic: families need these funds immediately when landlords approve them, not after navigating an assistance application process.

The one-unit-at-a-time problem. HACLB requires voucher holders to pursue applications sequentially. Once a family submits a Request for Tenancy Approval, its search window freezes while the inspection and approval process unfolds. If the unit fails or the landlord withdraws, they must restart their search. As a result, households cannot maintain multiple options simultaneously. Each failed attempt means beginning the process again rather than moving on to backup options.

Inaccurate listings. A third party vendor maintains a list of units purportedly accepting vouchers to help HACLB families search. As is common for housing authorities, HACLB finds the list is hard to keep up to date, making it difficult for families to actually use. Listed units may already be occupied, contact information may be incorrect, and rent levels may have often changed. Staff get direct feedback about these problems but lack capacity to fix the third-party platform. So families receive what looks like helpful guidance at intake but discover it has less practical value when they actually need it.

Inspection unpredictability. Many inspections fail for procedural reasons before anyone can evaluate the unit itself. Owners and property managers can fail to show up and coordinate utilities and other access issues. When this happens, it is a wasted trip for the inspection team that causes delays in the lease up for the prospective tenant. Nevertheless, HACLB inspectors defend the necessity of the inspections but also maintain that the process should not be expedited or simplified. Inspectors note that infrastructure problems like gas leaks, faulty dryer vents, and broken heating are hard to spot and expensive to fix, sometimes requiring contractors and weeks of work. In the HACLB inspection team’s view, this process is the only way to identify these issues and compel owners to make the necessary repairs.

The landlord incentive threshold. The HACLB ownership team works hard to recruit landlords, but the economics are difficult. Landlords weigh participating in the voucher program against the alternative of renting immediately to market-rate tenants without inspections or paperwork. Staff pointed to Emergency Housing Vouchers, where $2,000-$2,500 payments proved “extremely effective” at recruiting landlords. They are skeptical that smaller dollar amounts, such as $500, would be at all effective. Such smaller incentives would fail to outweigh the perceived hassle. Even when both parties want to participate, facilitating matches is hard — landlords may accept vouchers in principle but balk at specific applicants; families find willing landlords but units don’t pass inspection or fall outside payment standards.

The invisibility problem. After households are issued their voucher, HACLB staff have limited contact with searching families. They only learn of progress when families submit paperwork to HACLB. The housing authority doesn't track how many applications families submit to landlords, which landlords they contact, or what informal barriers they hit. The actual search — where most families succeed or fail — remains largely invisible.

CONCLUSION: DESIGNING CASH ON-RAMP PROGRAMS

The Housing Choice Voucher program has an underappreciated structural problem: accessing housing assistance is expensive. Families must invest substantial time and money before they ever receive any benefit. Application fees, transportation costs, security deposits, phone bills, and time away from work add up to hundreds or thousands of dollars over the course of the voucher's 120-day search limit. For families who successfully lease up, these are one-time costs that enable access to ongoing rental assistance. Other families commonly spend large sums of their own money on transportation, rental applications and other search expenses only to exhaust their voucher term without finding housing. For these families, these costs are a pure loss and they are worse off than if they had never received a voucher at all.

This creates a perverse dynamic. Housing authorities like HACLB invest significant administrative resources in families during intake, eligibility verification, and voucher issuance — averaging 13.8 staff hours per voucher. When families then fail to lease up because they can't afford the up-front costs of an effective housing search, both the family and the housing authority have absorbed losses without producing the intended housing outcome. The housing authority has processed someone who receives no service; the family has spent resources they couldn't afford on an unsuccessful attempt.

Providing cash during the search phase reframes this dynamic. Rather than expecting families to self-fund their way to accessing assistance, a cash on-ramp provides the working capital families need to search effectively: covering application fees for multiple units, affording transportation to expand search geographically, maintaining phone service to respond to landlord inquiries, providing deposits immediately when landlords say yes, and waiting through inspection repairs without losing other housing.

Designing a DRA Cash On-Ramp Program

A cash on-ramp program would provide an opportunity to build evidence for how to increase utilization rates.

ELIGIBILITY

A universal program that provides cash automatically at voucher issuance would be the best approach for the dual goals of improving lease-up rates for voucher holders and reducing the administrative burdens for families and housing authority staff. Not only would that reach the biggest group, but it would prevent housing authority staff from having to determine eligibility for a separate aspect of the program.

AMOUNT

The cash on-ramp could be set equal to average Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) for the Public Housing Authority (PHA). While not perfect, the HAP acts as a rough proxy for what families can expect to receive through the voucher program and is a reflection of what the PHA believes is a fair market rent in the area, scaling support received to how expensive the housing market is. In expensive cities, such costs might be $1,500 monthly; in lower-cost areas, $800. Using HAP is also simple for PHAs as they already determine this number as part of their reporting to HUD.

TIMING

Payments could amount to 30% of estimated search costs as a one-time payment when the voucher is issued or monthly for the duration of the search process. For administrative ease, a one-time payment upfront would be the most efficient way to provide financial search assistance. One monthly payment replaces dozens of expense approvals.The efficiency gains could benefit both families and housing authorities.

Future DRA Evaluation Design

Introduction: Filling the Research Gap

Most of the existing evidence on voucher utilization focuses on the role of source-of-income laws to combat discrimination against voucher holders or evaluates the success of housing mobility programs at influencing moves to higher-opportunity neighborhoods. There is limited systematic information on the role that direct cash assistance plays in influencing moves through these programs. Increases in the rent ceiling across metropolitan areas provide an implicit test of the role of greater financial resources for housing, but this research finds that landlords tend to capture much of these additional resources, and this does not test the role of money during the search process. There are many reasons to assume that a cash on-ramp would improve the search outcomes for voucher recipients, but this is untested.

Design Considerations

TEAM

A successful cash on-ramp evaluation must begin with a strong partnership between an evaluation team and one or more housing authorities.

ELIGIBILITY AND RANDOM ASSIGNMENT

The most rigorous way to evaluate a cash on-ramp would be to randomly assign voucher recipients off a waitlist to either a treatment group that receives a cash on-ramp or a control group that receives voucher services as usual. Researchers could also vary the amount of cash received among multiple treatment groups.

Such evaluations require that researchers have a very clear understanding of the process through which participants are 1) pulled from the waitlist; 2) determined to meet eligibility criteria; 3) informed of and consent to participation in the study; 4) enrolled into the program; 5) randomly assigned; 6) provided the various benefits (depending on their assigned group); and 7) tracked and documented in administrative data sources. Many, if not all, of these steps require that researchers have considerable control and/or oversight of processes that are typically carried out by housing authority staff with limited resources, bandwidth and, in some cases, an understanding of or priority for research protocols and import.

Both the evaluation team and housing authority (in addition to any relevant funders) would need to come to clear agreement about what the counterfactual to a cash on-ramp would be for any particular evaluation. Potential counterfactuals include: a traditional voucher program without housing counseling or a cash on-ramp, a housing mobility program without a cash on-ramp, or even a cash on-ramp for any population of low-income renters. If the intervention of interest is cash assistance during a housing search, the broader renter population is a far larger group to draw a sample from than the voucher population.

In addition to the challenges of enrolling recipients off of waitlists and into programs and study protocols, most housing authorities do not issue vouchers quickly enough to provide a large sample in a reasonable amount of time.

Example: PHLHousing+

The PHLHousing+ program began by randomly selecting 1,503 households for the cash (DRA) group and 6,000 households for the control group from the bottom half of the Philadelphia Housing Authority waitlists. After inviting those households to participate in one of those groups and eligibility was determined, they enrolled 301 in the cash group, 170 to receive vouchers, and 600 as the control group which remained on housing authority waitlists. Philadelphia is one of the nation's largest housing authorities, and the size of the initial recruitment pool illustrates the scale required to generate statistically meaningful findings.

POWER CALCULATIONS

Table 1 displays the minimum detectable effects for two outcomes: the percent of recipients who lease up, and the number of days to lease up, assuming an average lease-up rate of 60% and a mean lease-up duration of 120 days. Very few housing authorities are likely to serve 1,000 new households per year with a voucher, and under most circumstances the minimum effect would have to be an 8 percentage point increase in the utilization rate for that to be detected by a study with those numbers. Such a study would have to shrink the time to lease up by 19 days to be detectable by a study with these parameters. Table 1 provides minimum detectable effects for sample sizes of 200 and 500 — the latter with and without equivalent-sized treatment and control groups, because sometimes control groups can be easier or less costly to recruit.

Table 1. Power Calculations

Sample Size	Treatment/Control	Minimum detectable effects (% Lease Up)	Minimum detectable effects (Time to Lease Up)
200	100/100	25%	31 days
500	250/250	11%	19 days
500	100/400	14%	24 days
1,000	500/500	8%	14 days
2,000	1,000/1,000	6%	10 days

**Assumes share of variation explained by covariates of 20%; two-sided test, 0.05 significance, power 0.8, and one location. Time to lease up minimum detectable effects varies based on the distribution of lease up in the baseline population. Following Ellen et al. (2024) we use a mean of 75 days with a standard deviation of 77.*

Challenges to Consider

CHALLENGE 1: HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS

Lessons from the field and research suggest that different populations are likely to be better served by different needs. The housing voucher program is a very successful program for the majority of recipients who are able to use their voucher to lease a housing unit. Some recipients might be much better served by cash, or a cash on-ramp (with or without counseling services) that leads to a traditional voucher. Housing authorities will never be able to perfectly predict which households would benefit most by different program modalities. However, more service provision options for housing authorities — including the potential to put cash in tenants' hands during the housing search — is likely to get more people housed using vouchers.

CHALLENGE 2: LIMITED RESOURCES MEANS SMALL SAMPLE SIZES

Most housing authorities don't issue 2,000 vouchers annually. Even large housing authorities might need multiple years to enroll sufficient participants, extending evaluation timelines and costs. This reality suggests rigorous evaluation may require the participation of very large housing authorities, multi-site collaborations, or longer study periods. In lieu of a large-scale randomized control trial that can detect impact with statistical significance, a cash on-ramp program can still have practical benefits for participants and make economic sense for housing authority partners who invest in the 40% of recipients that fail to lease up — an investment that produces no outcomes.

Concluding Thoughts

Voucher utilization rates have declined in recent years as housing becomes more expensive and renter burdens rise. In competitive rental markets, landlords have more leverage and are less willing to accept a tenant if it involves any additional administrative burdens. Many don't want to hold the unit vacant while inspections and contracting occur (Garboden et al., 2018). Additional stigma around the HCV program also hampers some landlord involvement.

At the same time, the average HCV holder stays in the program for eight to nine years (Housing Choice Voucher Fact Sheet, 2021), reliably paying rent each month. Increasing utilization benefits both the tenant and the landlord. Households searching with a voucher need to be able to invest time and money, because finding a unit unlocks a durable benefit that can support their economic stability decades after cash payments end.

Why Cash On-Ramps Make Economic Sense

With a cash on-ramp program, families who would have exhausted resources before finding housing instead maintain search capacity throughout their voucher term. From an efficiency standpoint, this increases the return on investment for the housing authority. Housing authority staff invest considerable time and resources issuing vouchers. If, for example, 100 families receive a voucher, but only 60 successfully lease up because 40 run out of resources during search, that's 40% wasted administrative investment. Cash assistance that increases lease-up rates turns that administrative spending into actual housing placements.

INSIGHTS FROM LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Staff observations about landlord incentives apply here: "$500 would be pointless" because it doesn't meaningfully change outcomes, but $2,000-$2,500 "proved extremely effective" because it was sufficient to shift behavior. The same logic applies to families —meaningful cash support during search could be the difference between the housing authority's intake investment resulting in housing or resulting in nothing.

Where to Start

There are many existing programs to learn from when designing a cash on-ramp that provides direct financial assistance to tenants searching for housing. However, these programs do not isolate the effect of financial assistance on utilization. A cash on-ramp can provide critical financial resources to voucher recipients during the housing search. An evaluation of such a program would help HUD and housing authorities better understand how to increase lease-up rates.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Housing agencies that have existing flexibility from HUD are often better situated to take advantage of potential collaborations with the Fund for Guaranteed Income and other entities that seek to provide these resources in the search process. Moving to Work agencies provide the most obvious target given the flexibility they have to shift resources and program requirements as needed and their experience implementing similar programs.

EVALUATION DESIGN

To provide an evidence base, evaluations using random assignment are essential, as is a tight collaboration between any housing authority and evaluation team. Sample size considerations loom large, particularly in an era of limited resources to provide additional vouchers for people off of waitlists and to provide the dollar amounts necessary for a meaningful cash on-ramp to a large enough group to detect meaningful effects. But the benefits to such auxiliary financial assistance could be quite profound given the intractable problems that voucher utilization rates pose to households and housing authorities.

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