Connecting Housing Choice Vouchers to Houston’s Coordinated Access System

An overview of the approach developed by the Houston Housing Authority, Harris County Housing Authority, and the Houston/Harris County Continuum of Care

Current as of May 2014

Background:

- During the first year of implementation, individuals assessed and matched with PHA units via Houston’s Coordinated Access system were Veterans that leased HUD-VASH project-based vouchers (PBVs).
- As Houston rolls out the next phase of their coordinated access system for non-Vets, the Houston and Harris County Housing Authorities (HAs) are beginning to issue regular tenant-based vouchers available through limited preferences to clients referred through the coordinated system.
- Both PHAs have established preferences for tenant-based vouchers (TBVs) that are limited to people referred by homeless services providers to receive referrals of homeless households and ensure individuals receive supportive services throughout their participation in the voucher program, as needed.
- Houston HA has a limited preference for 200 homeless households, and Harris County has a limited preference for 100 homeless families with at least one child enrolled in school.
- Houston HA also has 100 HUD-VASH PBVs and another 25 for chronically homeless.
- Both PHAs established the preferences back in 2012 without services attached. They expected the vouchers would encourage local organizations to find funding for supportive services to be paired with the vouchers. And lo and behold, it worked!

The Process, Step-by-Step:

- A client is engaged and/or identified as needing services. A Housing Assessor completes a Housing Triage Assessment in HMIS and determines what housing intervention is the best fit: Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) or Rapid Rehousing (RRH).
- If PSH is identified, the Housing Assessor completes the Vulnerability Index (VI) with the client. This VI score is used to prioritize individuals if there are no units/slots currently available; in the case of a waiting list. The waiting list is prioritized, first, by VI score and then, in chronological order.
  1. The client can be referred, through HMIS, immediately to the service provider managing the unit that he or she prefers if the client has a VI score that is higher than other individuals on the HMIS waiting list who are interested in the same type of unit.
  2. If the client has a VI score that is equal to or lower than other individuals on the HMIS waiting list that prefer the same type(s) of unit, then he or she may have to wait until these individuals are served before being referred. This would take place if the unit preferred by the client is not available.
- After completing CA assessments and electronic referral, the assessor ensures the client is paired with a Housing Navigator to help him or her through the housing placement process.
- Service providers with which the PHAs have signed MOUs are responsible for entering available TBVs and PBVs into HMIS. If a client chooses a TBV or PBV, the client will receive services from the provider responsible for that unit.
- The provider refers the client to the PHA, and the client is placed on the PHA’s waiting list, but immediately goes to the top of the list due to the PHA’s preference.
- The Housing Navigator helps the client to acquire the documents needed to apply for the TBV or PBV.
- The Housing Navigator works with the individual through lease up and the period of transitioning to the services provided through the PSH provider (typically 30 - 90 days of overlap).
Notes on PHA policies:

- The MOUs between the PHAs and service providers specify the eligibility requirements that the service providers can use for screening the households referred. These requirements are basically that the households meet the HEARTH homeless definition and, in the case of the Harris County HA, is a family with at least one child enrolled in elementary or secondary school.
  - If the service providers have other eligibility criteria they use for other programs, they cannot apply them to the households referred to the Houston and Harris County HAs.
- By limiting their preferences to only serve individuals referred from an organization that signed an MOU with the PHAs, the PHAs help to ensure that individuals are not becoming homeless just to qualify for the preference and the voucher (which has been a problem identified by PHAs related to homeless preferences).
- Because the Houston and Harris County PHAs have such large voucher programs, whenever a referral is made, a TBV generally will always be available.
  - For example, the Houston Housing Authority administers more than 17,000 vouchers. The 200 vouchers in their limited preferences is a little over 1% of their entire voucher program. These vouchers are readily available through attrition, which frees up an estimated 140 vouchers per month.
  - The PHAs said that if there comes a time that vouchers are not readily available when referrals are made, they may consider expanding the size of their limited preferences.
- The support the client receives from service providers and navigators from the time the referral is made ensures that the PHA will not run into challenges finding and contacting the client during the application and leasing processes. The navigator helps to keep the client connected with the PHA.
- When individuals that are likely to be homeless contact the PHA and ask to apply for a voucher, the PHAs refer them to the service provider so they can be triaged and entered into Houston’s Coordinated Access system.
- The way the system is set up, the PHAs aim to maintain a continuous flow and for a client to immediately begin applying for a voucher once he or she is referred.
  - The PHAs waiting lists are currently open to individuals referred from service providers that have signed an MOU, as well as individuals that qualify for other preferences.
  - Technically, when a person is referred, they go to the top of the PHA’s TBV or PBV waiting lists and are selected in chronological order. A client generally is selected and begins the voucher application process almost immediately, because individuals are not referred if a TBV or PBV is not available.