



Using Tenant-based Housing Vouchers to Help End Homelessness in Los Angeles

Research Brief



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Research Brief

For more than 10 years, Los Angeles has been engaged in a community-wide effort to end homelessness, focusing on people with high-needs and chronic patterns of homelessness through a partnership among local government agencies, homeless service and healthcare providers, community organizations, and philanthropy.

Tenant-based rental subsidies are a major component of the strategy for expanding access to permanent housing that includes supportive services made available to residents—that is, scattered-site permanent supportive housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness. Most of the community’s tenant-based rental subsidies are provided through the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, which is funded by the federal government and administered by local public housing authorities (PHAs). Nineteen PHAs across Los Angeles County administer HCVs.

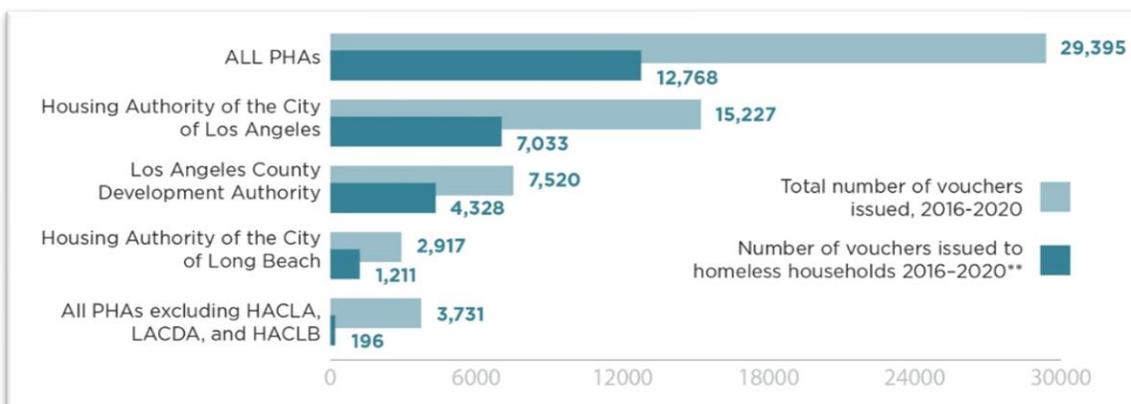
Across Los Angeles County, ***PHAs issued 12,768 vouchers to people experiencing homelessness between 2016 and 2020*** (Exhibit 1). Those vouchers came from a combination of turnover in the regular HCV program and new allocations of vouchers through special programs, in particular a program that provides vouchers to homeless veterans with disabilities (HUD-VASH). PHAs used their preference systems (the way in which they order their waiting lists) to devote major shares of their regular HCVs to households experiencing homelessness. The largest numbers of voucher issuances to households experiencing homelessness were from the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA, 7,033 issuances), the Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA, 4,328), and the Housing Authority of the City of Long Beach (HACLB, 1,211). Those are the largest PHAs in the region, but they also are devoting the largest shares of their HCV programs to the effort to end homelessness.

About this Report

In a partnership with the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, as part of the larger evaluation of the Foundation’s Chronic Homelessness Initiative, Abt Associates examined how effective the Los Angeles region’s public housing authorities (PHAs) have been in using vouchers to help people leave homelessness, the extent to which voucher holders succeed in using the vouchers, the locations where they use vouchers, and the implications for the PHAs’ programs—who they serve and at what cost. This study focuses on 2016 through early 2020, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To read the full report and methodology used, visit: www.hiltonfoundation.org/learning/using-tenant-based-housing-vouchers-to-help-end-homelessness-in-los-angeles-2016-2020

Exhibit 1: Large PHAs’ Overall Issuances of Vouchers and Issuances of Vouchers to People Experiencing Homelessness (2016-2020)ⁱ



Source: Total number of vouchers (HCV and VASH): [HUD Picture of Subsidized Households database](https://www.hud.gov/program-offices/office-of-policy/placement-and-tenancy/). Numbers of vouchers issued to households experiencing homelessness: HUD Administrative Data Extract of Voucher Issuances and Lease-Ups, 2016-2020.

Of the vouchers that went to people experiencing homelessness, the *highest number went to single individuals*, consistent with the high share of people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles who do so as individuals rather than as members of families (Exhibit 2). Many of those individuals had disabilities, consistent with the community’s priority of serving people with chronic patterns of homelessness.

Exhibit 2: Percentages of New Vouchers Issued for People Experiencing Homelessness (2016-2020), by Household Type



Source: HUD Administrative Data Extract of Voucher Issuances and Lease-Ups, 2016-2020.

The racial/ethnic characteristics of people experiencing homelessness who are issued vouchers reflect the disproportionate representation of Black people among people experiencing homelessness in the Los Angeles region. According to the 2020 homeless Point-in-Time Count, about 34 percent of people experiencing homelessness in the Los Angeles region identify as Black/African American.¹ *More than half of households experiencing homelessness issued vouchers by LA County PHAs between 2016 and 2020 were Black* (Exhibit 3).

According to the 2020 homeless Point-in-Time Count, 36 percent of the homeless population are Hispanic/Latino.² However, only 23 percent of people experiencing homelessness who received a voucher from the Los Angeles PHAs were Hispanic/Latino (Exhibit 3). The low participation in public programs among Hispanic households is related to several issues, including fear of exposing the undocumented status of family members, information on programs not reaching the community, lack of cultural competence by public agencies, and language barriers.³

Exhibit 3: Percentages of New Vouchers Issued for People Experiencing Homelessness (2016-2020), by Race and Ethnicity



Note: Figures may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.
 Source: HUD Administrative Data Extract of Voucher Issuances and Lease-Ups, 2016-2020.

¹ “[2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count—Los Angeles Continuum of Care \(CoC\)](#),” Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (June 22, 2020).
² “[PIT Inflow and Annualized Estimate](#),” Los Angeles Homeless Services Data & Research (June 1, 2020).
³ Melissa Chinchilla, *Stemming the Rise of Latino Homelessness: Lessons from Los Angeles County*, Latino Policy and Politics Initiative (n.d.). Stephen J. Conroy and David M. Heer, “Hidden Hispanic Homelessness in Los Angeles: The ‘Latino Paradox’ Revisited,” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 25:4 (2003). Conversation with Melissa Chinchilla (January 2022).

HACLA and LACDA have developed close relationships with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), a joint powers authority of the City and County governments. LAHSA has been designated by HUD as the Continuum of Care (CoC) to plan and implement a strategy for ending homelessness across much of the Los Angeles region. Part of LAHSA’s mission is to implement a coordinated entry system (CES) to coordinate and match available housing and supportive services to people experiencing homelessness. LAHSA implements the CES through contracts with homeless service providers responsible for defined geographic portions of Los Angeles County. LAHSA’s CES is designed to assist people with highest acuity or needs first and match them with available housing subsidies and supportive services.⁴

To serve people experiencing homelessness with vouchers, the Los Angeles PHAs have contracts with homeless service providers, the County’s Department of Health Services (DHS) and Department of Mental Health (DMH), and the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs (VA). When vouchers become available, through either new allocations or turnovers, a PHA will notify the appropriate voucher contract holder. The process used to match a client to a voucher varies by contract holder.

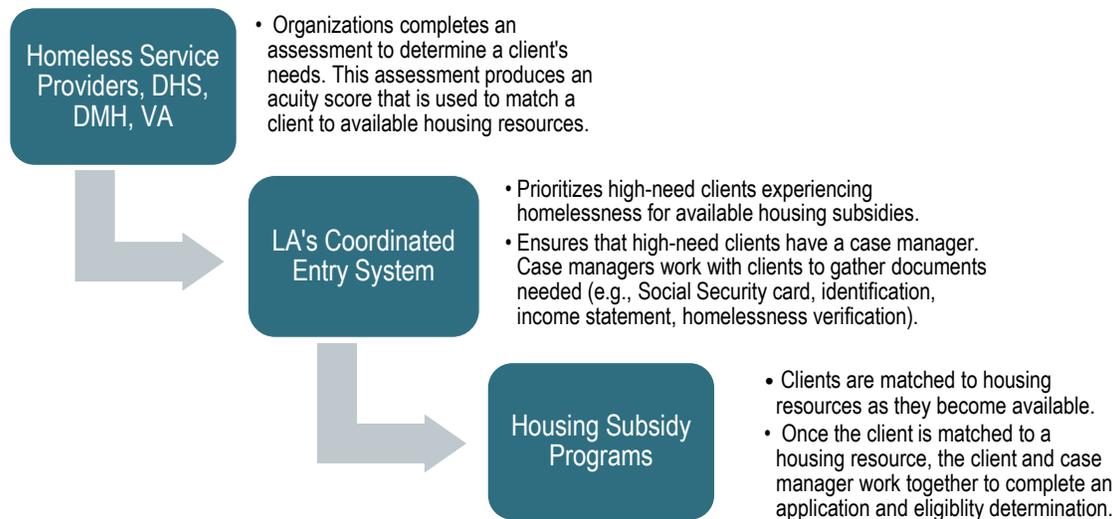
Households matched to a voucher through these agencies had case managers dedicated to helping them get through the PHAs’ process for determining HCV program eligibility (Exhibit 4). The process to qualify for an HCV is notoriously complex, as households must produce documentary evidence of their identity and legal status (such as Social Security cards), as well as evidence that they qualify for preferential access to a voucher because of their current homelessness. Some people are barred from receiving federal housing assistance based on certain types of criminal histories or outstanding debts to PHAs. The process can take many months, but staff of PHAs said that *most people referred to the PHA from the homeless service system make it through the process and are issued a voucher.*

Case Manager Support Can Be Critical to Navigating Application and Lease-Up Process

“Joe [the case manager] is really awesome, I never have to call anyone else above him, and he always gets back to me, even when he’s on vacation.... He bent over backwards to support me during the COVID pandemic.”

—Voucher User

Exhibit 4: Process of Matching a Client to Housing Resources



⁴ [About CES](#),” Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, Los Angeles County Coordinated Entry System, (August 23, 2017). The way in which the assessment tool is currently being used for resource matching is undergoing revision; it is uncertain how and if it will be used in the future.

Once issued a voucher that permits them to search for housing, *nearly seven of every 10 households experiencing homelessness (65 percent) succeeded in leasing a housing unit with voucher assistance* (Exhibit 5). This was a somewhat higher success rate than for households not experiencing homelessness (61 percent) and can be attributed to two factors—the *high motivation* to make the effort to use a voucher for people without a current place to live and the *help they received from case managers*. During the 2016-2020 period, Los Angeles County funded and implemented incentives for landlords that agree to rent to people experiencing homelessness, and that also appears to have helped drive these high success rates.

People Experiencing Homelessness Face Barriers in Applying for Units

“It was hard becoming document-ready. I didn’t have a rent history or a credit score, I would have had voucher assistance and they would [have] need[ed] those things to show that I would be a respectable tenant.”

—Voucher User

Among the largest of the Los Angeles PHAs, HACLA a success rate of 63 percent and HACLB had a similar rate of 62 percent for people experiencing homelessness. LACDA had the highest success rate, 67 percent. LACDA serves the balance of Los Angeles County not served by a city housing authority. While LACDA and HACLB had higher success rates for people experiencing homelessness compared to other households, success rates were comparable at HACLA across people experiencing homelessness and people not experiencing homelessness.

Exhibit 5: Lease-Up Success Rates for New Households Issued Vouchers (2016-2020), by Homeless Status¹

PHA	Vouchers Issued to Homeless Households (#)	Lease-Up Rate for Homeless Households Issued Vouchers (%)	Lease-Up Rate for Other Households Issued Vouchers (%)
All LA County PHAs	11,771	65%	61%
Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA)	6,276	63%	63%
Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA)	4,235	67%	51%
Housing Authority of the City of Long Beach (HACLB)	1,087	62%	59%
All LA County PHAs Excluding HACLA, LACDA, and HACLB	173	73%	64%

Source: HUD Administrative Data Extract of Voucher Issuances and Lease-Ups, 2016-2020.

The average time elapsed between the issuance of a voucher and lease-up for people experiencing homelessness was 122 days. *Many households experiencing homelessness needed more than 180 days to find a unit.* This reflects the challenges of the Los Angeles housing market. Across the US, most households who succeed in using a voucher do so within 180 days. Both people experiencing homelessness and other households need a longer time to secure housing in the Los Angeles region.

Success in using a voucher was similar among people experiencing homelessness, regardless of household size and disability and for all racial and ethnic groups (Exhibit 6). Black households experiencing homelessness had a success rate of 66 percent. Black and Hispanic households experiencing homelessness had greater success using vouchers than Black and Hispanic households who were not homeless at the time the vouchers were issued. That was not the case for White households. Case managers and landlord incentives appear especially important for helping Black and Hispanic households overcome barriers to leasing up.

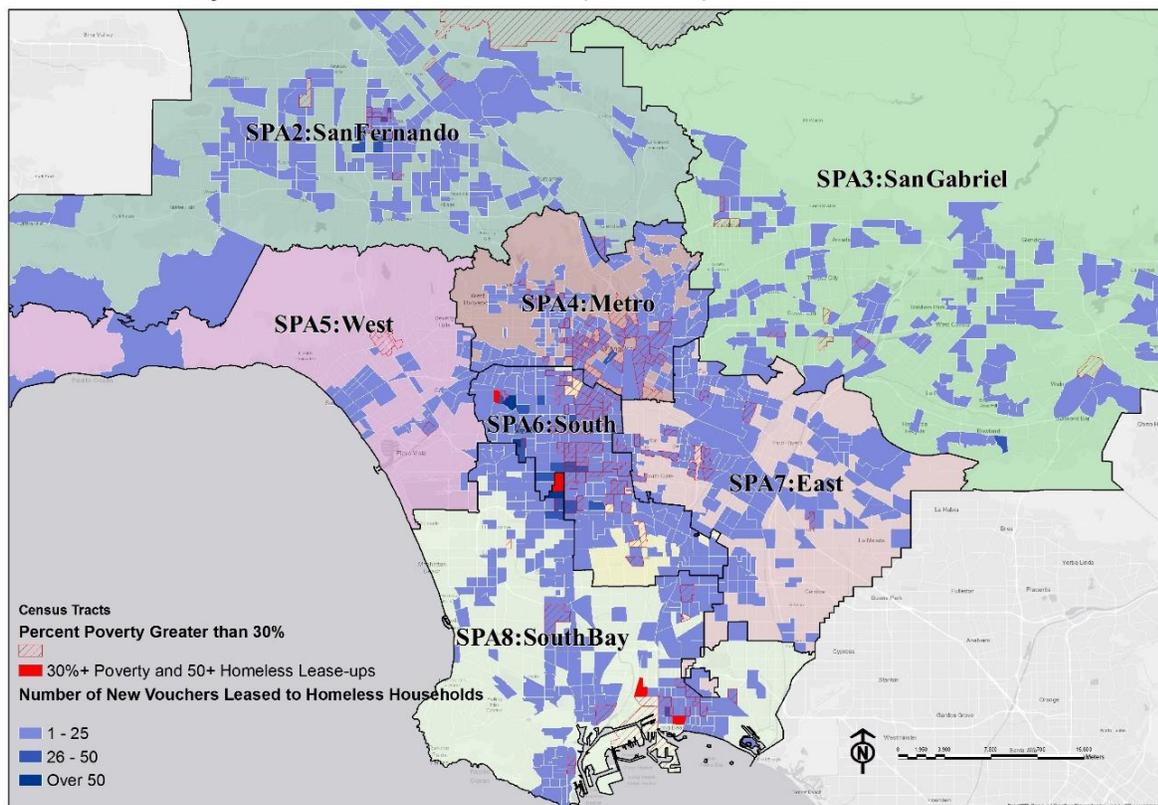
Exhibit 6: Lease-Up Success Rates for New Households Issued Vouchers (2016-2020), by Race/Ethnicityⁱⁱ

Racial/Ethnic Category	New Vouchers Issued to Homeless Households (#)	Lease-Up Rate for Homeless Households Issued Vouchers (%)	New Vouchers Issued to Other Households (#)	Lease-Up Rate for Other Households Issued Vouchers (%)
Black non-Hispanic	6,289	66%	5,527	58%
Hispanic (any race)	2,783	66%	3,283	59%
White non-Hispanic	2,258	60%	2,710	68%
Asian non-Hispanic	174	67%	652	65%
Indigenous non-Hispanic	176	56%	69	55%
Other non-Hispanic	91	65%	36	56%

Source: HUD Administrative Data Extract of Voucher Issuances and Lease-Ups, 2016-2020.

Use of vouchers by people experiencing homelessness is heavily concentrated in certain parts of the Los Angeles region (Exhibit 7). This is true of other voucher users as well, but *households who use a voucher to leave homelessness are more likely to be concentrated in the same locations and more likely to rent units in census tracts with a high proportion of people living in poverty*. This could reflect their high imperative to use a voucher (and willingness to compromise on location), racial discrimination (reflecting the high percentage of voucher users who are Black), or the greater likelihood that they stayed close to the locations where they were staying during their episode of homelessness.

Exhibit 7: Number of Vouchers Leased to Homeless Households in Central LA County Census Tracts and Tracts with Poverty Rates Greater than 30 Percent (2016-2020)



Source: Poverty rates are from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; Voucher lease-ups are from HUD Administrative Data Extract of Voucher Issuances and Lease-Ups, 2016-2020.

Using a Voucher in the “Ghetto”

“When I was told, ‘Hey, we have a place for you,’ I didn’t want to live in that location because of gangs, drug dealers, and that kind of thing. But when you don’t have a choice, you don’t have a choice. The availability [of units] is in the ghetto, which leaves no choice. A one bedroom wasn’t enough for me and my vision situation. One bedrooms were small in general, small square footage even without a little extra I need for my equipment. Should I move to the outskirts of LA? But where I was connected in the community is in the South LA area, and we do a lot of community advocacy and our networks are here. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to be safe. I want to be able to walk and exercise in my neighborhood without a gun, without pepper spray or a taser. I want to be able to do this where I live.”

—Voucher User

Devoting substantial shares of their HCV programs to helping people leave homelessness has implications for the PHAs.

They are *less likely to serve families with children and seniors and more likely to serve single, non-elderly people*, including people both with and without disabilities. The per household cost of serving people experiencing homelessness is only slightly higher than the per unit cost of serving other households. People leaving homelessness use their vouchers to rent somewhat less expensive units (because they more often only need one bedroom and perhaps also because they are renting in less expensive locations). However, their income is lower on average, with more households with income below \$5,000 per year. **The additional cost of serving a formerly homeless households is \$29 per month or about 3 percent.** PHAs also consider that their administrative costs (staff hours) are greater when they serve homeless people.

Overall, the commitment of tenant-based vouchers by the Los Angeles PHAs to the effort to address homelessness appears successful. Based on the study’s detailed findings, we have

some recommendations for making the effort work even better. A ***stronger focus on speeding the process from assessment and referral through qualification and voucher issuance is needed***—for example, devoting effort to ensuring people are document-ready before they are referred to the PHA. The new practice adopted by some PHAs of ***issuing provisional vouchers*** while documents are located could be extended. This might require cooperation from HUD. In view of the time needed from receiving the voucher to leasing a unit and the compromises people are making on location, ***landlord incentives should continue to be tested*** and their effectiveness evaluated. Strong enforcement of the laws prohibiting owners of rental housing to discriminate against voucher holders is needed, together with other measures that increase the availability of units available to voucher holders across the Los Angeles region.

Study Scope and Methodology

This study draws on a data source that only recently has become available. PHAs have made it possible to measure the extent to which households who receive vouchers succeed in using them by submitting a Form 50058 to HUD at the time a voucher is issued, rather than waiting until a household succeeds in using a voucher and the housing subsidy starts. PHAs are also complying with HUD’s request to indicate whether the voucher is issued to a household currently experiencing homelessness. Some PHAs are entering the homelessness indicator only at the time a voucher is used to lease a unit. Therefore, the analysis of lease-up rates for people experiencing homelessness uses characteristics of households that leased up with a voucher to fill in missing data on homelessness at the time the voucher was issued. The analysis also makes use of the extensive information on household characteristics, the locations of leased housing units, and the subsidy costs incurred by the PHAs to produce the findings presented in the report.

In addition to drawing on that rich data source made available to the study team by HUD’s Office of Policy Development and Research, the study team conducted extensive interviews with staff of PHAs, organizations in the region’s homeless services system and health system, and people with lived experience of using a voucher to leave homelessness.

This study focuses on the period 2016 to early 2020, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and before a new allocation of tenant-based EHV's added new resources to the effort to end homelessness. Nonetheless, we provide some information on how the pandemic effected the effort to use existing resources and preliminary information on how the homeless services system and the PHAs are using EHV's.

Acknowledgements

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The Office of Policy Development and Research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provided an extract of administrative data on the voucher programs in the Los Angeles region. Without the support of that office, this study would not have been possible.

Carol Wilkins conducted some of the interviews with PHA staff. Henry Love conducted and analyzed interviews with people with lived experience. Jessica Kerbo produced the report graphics. Nancy McGarry assisted with programming for the analysis of administrative data. Katherine O'Regan of New York University provided technical advice, based on analysis she is conducting on success rates of Housing Choice Vouchers nationwide.

ⁱ The PHAs excluding HACLA, LACDA, and HACLB are the Housing Authority of the City of Glendale, the Housing Authority of the City of Santa Monica, the City of Pasadena Housing Department, the Housing Authority of the City of Inglewood, the Housing Authority of the City of Burbank, the Housing Authority of the City of Pomona, the Housing Authority of the City of Baldwin Park, the City of Compton Housing Authority, the Housing Authority of the City of Norwalk, City of Hawthorne Housing Authority, the Housing Authority of the City of Torrance, the Housing Authority of the City of South Gate, the Housing Authority of the City of Redondo Beach, the Pico Rivero Housing Assistance Agency, the Culver City Housing Authority, the Housing Authority of the City of Hawaiian Gardens.

ⁱⁱ The Indigenous category is households identifying as Native American, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander. The Other category includes people identifying as mixed race.