

Buffalo Rapid Rehousing Program White Paper

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Introduction

The Buffalo Rapid Rehousing Program (BRAP) is a pilot collaboration funded by the City of Buffalo tasked with reducing time spent in shelter for qualifying individuals and families in designated city shelters (Buffalo City Mission/Cornerstone Manor, Salvation Army, and Little Portions Friary). Several agencies pool resources to provide the necessary services to identify and guide currently homeless individuals to secure decent, affordable housing. Initial referrals to the program are made with the help of Crisis Services and shelter staff, after which an initial assessment and ongoing case management are provided by Matt Urban (individuals) and Catholic Charities (families). Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc. (HOME) supplies housing search assistance and an inspection of prospective housing prior to move-in.

To ensure the long-term stability of assisted households, temporary financial help and case management services are provided to clients for a period of 6 to 8 months. Throughout their time in the program, clients are able to attend workshops provided by Neighborhood Legal Services regarding public benefits and receive advocacy services to obtain or retain any public benefits for which they are eligible. After cases close, 2-1-1 provides ongoing support by phone and completes a follow up assessment to gauge the success of the program. For the purposes of better understanding risks to housing stability and the success rates of the methods

employed to reduce time spent in shelter, the Homeless Alliance of Western New York maintains and analyses all data collected throughout the course of the program.

In this white paper, we break down the program into 7 components: Collaborative Process, Data Sharing System, Referral Process, Legal Assistance and Informational Workshops, Case Management, Housing Process, Check Request and After Care. We will discuss the detail of each component and the pros and cons that we learned in this pilot program. We also included the recommendations on some of the weakness that we see in the program to provide an alternative solution.

Collaborative Process

Overview: The implementation of the Buffalo Rapid Rehousing Program is a collaborative effort among the following agencies: 2-1-1, Buffalo City Mission Shelter, Catholic Charities, Crisis Services, Homeless Alliance of WNY, Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME), Matt Urban, Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS), and Salvation Army Shelter for Women & Children. The collaborative began meeting in January 2013 - well before the start-up of the program - to ensure that Policies & Procedures were in place, that appropriate HMIS assessments were developed and completed by start-up, and the City of Buffalo signed off on the policies and program design.

Collaborative meetings were held bi-monthly until the program was running smoothly. We then reduced our meetings to once per month. During the meetings, the collaborative would address any problems or concerns in the program and would make process adjustments quickly. The policies and procedures manual became a living document that conformed to the full development of the program as needed. The City was quick to respond to process changes and eligibility questions.

Strengths: Each agency brought an expertise to the table and shared that expertise with their collaborative partners. Because of this, participants benefited greatly because while they appeared to work with one agency/individual case manager, they actually had access to a network of well-connected providers. This helped the partner agencies as well to more fully understand the role of their colleagues and as a result, there was little duplication of effort.

Recommendation: A collaborative project requires management. A paid coordinator is needed to oversee the scheduling of meetings, minutes, address process concerns, compliance issues, data quality, and to ensure that reports are standardized & compiled by all agencies. It is estimated that the coordination of this program would require an average of 8-10 hours per week.

Data Sharing System

The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is an online database that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) requires for all ESG funded agencies to use for collecting client information and services that providers offer. HMIS has the ability to share information among agencies. In this rapid rehousing program, there are various partners involved and they are all trained to use HMIS. All the partner agencies agree to share the following information with the client's consent by signing a HMIS inter-agency data sharing agreement: Client demographics, shelter stays, attachments, case notes, services, check requests and approvals. All the forms that used in this program, policy and procedures, attendee of meeting etc. are stored in HMIS, which allow all partners to access the most updated version of document easily.

Strength: Referrals to the rapid housing program are made through HMIS, including referrals the shelters make for potential clients to the program. Case management providers also refer clients through HMIS to receive certain services, such as housing search, workshops etc. as well as requesting checks by completing a check request assessment. The instant electronic referral system replaced the traditional referral process e.g. phone calls, mail or faxes. It is a lot faster and more secured.

Documents that are shared among agencies and the ESG funder (City of Buffalo) include signed client consent, common assessment, leases, housing habitability inspection forms, visual lead assessments, W9's, property verification, income verification, housing stabilization plans and any other documents that prove the client's eligibility. Sharing the required documentation, client records, and services records not only benefits the partner agencies but also creates an avenue for remote monitoring. The ESG funder uses HMIS to determine if a voucher should be issued and monitors each agency's services and performance.

Recommendation: Real-time data should be entered by all staffs to ensure all the partner agencies aware the client's status and customized reports was provided from HAWNY monthly in the collaborative meeting to monitor funding usage and understand overall performances. However, more customized report should be utilized by agencies level to monitor quality and outcome regularly.

Referral Process

Overview: The referral process was different for family households versus single households. The family household staying in Salvation Army Shelter for Women and Children were referred directly from the shelter staff to the Buffalo Rapid Rehousing case manager at Catholic Charities. The single participants staying at the City Mission for Men and/or Women were referred to Crisis Services, who would then schedule an intake assessment using the common assessment and, if applicant appeared eligible, refer to Matt Urban – Buffalo Rapid Rehousing case manager. Once the referral was received by Matt Urban, another interview was schedule to review the intake information and discuss the program in more detail. In both the family and single process,

the Rapid Rehousing case manager determined eligibility and entered the applicants into the program.

Strengths: BRAP was the pilot for the common assessment tool which will eventually become part of the coordinated entry system. The tool was completed during the initial interview, and was fairly smooth and comprehensive. The 'barriers to obtaining/retaining housing' evaluation tool within that assessment was used to determine eligibility not only for the Rapid Rehousing program but also for transitional housing programs, permanent supportive housing, etc. The tool assigns a numeric score based on the number of barriers for either obtaining or retaining housing. That number is then placed in the corresponding numerical range which would suggest an appropriate housing program, i.e. Permanent Supportive Housing would require a score of more than 7 + barriers, where Rapid Rehousing would accept clients in the 3-4 range. A cursory review of the program participant's ranking using this tool, revealed successful clients in the 3-4 range and those with higher scores were not as successful. A more thorough study of this ranking system will take place at the end of the Rapid Rehousing Program.

Weaknesses: The multi-layered intake process negatively impacted shelter stays of many participants. The referral process for single individuals involved two agencies essentially doing the same thing – Crisis Services interviewed referrals from the shelter and referred to Matt Urban. While Crisis Services did screen-out ineligible individuals – saving time for Matt Urban, the trade-off was a slower process for eligible candidates. Another area of concern was that referrals were not made by shelter personnel in the targeted time period of “within 4 days of entering shelter”, and in fact, many referrals exceeded 30 days, and a few were more than 100 days. Another problem was difficult communications between the case manager and the program participants due to the lack of phones, and the message process at the shelter. These delays resulted in longer-than-necessary shelter time for some applicants and caused others to become frustrated which lead to leaving the shelter and abandoning the program.

Recommendation: Stream-line the referral process and train shelter case managers to help them identify viable candidates within a few days of entering the shelter. During these trainings, a shelter messaging system should be worked out that cuts down on the number of days it takes for a client to receive a message.

Legal Assistance and Informational Workshops

Overview: Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS) provided legal assistance regarding public benefits by designating a specific staff member that the collaborative could consistently contact concerning the application and public benefits process with the Erie County Department of Social Services (ECDSS). NLS frequently addressed questions by clients and participating partners/case managers relating to client budgets, shelter allowances, utility allowances, ECDSS program requirements and eligibility. NLS staff provided direct advocacy on behalf of client's experiencing difficulties with their public benefits and emergency shelter placements. NLS provided legal advice to clients concerning the Fair Hearing process and in most cases legal representation at Fair Hearings.

Informational workshops were conducted by NLS staff bimonthly at Belmont Housing Resources of WNY in Buffalo to educate program participants on public benefits and tenant's rights and responsibilities. Attendance to these workshops was not mandatory but was encouraged. Workshops provided clients with an expanded understanding of their Temporary Assistance budgets and ongoing eligibility for public benefits. A Tenant's Rights and Responsibilities manual produced by NLS was provided to all workshop attendees that included detailed information in four chapters on how to find an apartment, what to expect while living in an apartment, what to expect when moving from an apartment and what to expect after moving from an apartment.

Strengths: The ability for case managers and clients to directly access an NLS Staff member allowed questions relating to public benefits to be quickly and efficiently addressed. This direct access was extremely helpful in assisting case managers in obtaining budgets and case related information from ECDSS and assisted greatly in communication between clients and ECDSS case workers when necessary to prevent agency errors in budgets, case closings and other eligibility related issues. Not only was legal assistance helpful to clients and case managers but allowed us to maximize existing benefits for clients and be certain that clients received all of the assistance that they were entitled to.

The informational workshops were helpful in educating clients on the range of grants available at ECDSS in order to meet their ongoing needs. The informational workshops additionally educated clients on landlord tenant relations.

Recommendation: Attendance at workshops needs to be strongly encouraged. We also recommend to provide a menu of workshops topics and to utilize community resources to conduct the workshops rather than re-create.

Case Management

Overview: Case managers receive referrals from Crisis Services (for Buffalo City Mission/Cornerstone and Little Portions Friary) or directly from Salvation Army Shelter for Women and Children. Upon the receipt of a referral from Crisis Services or Salvation Army, case managers schedule an intake appointment with the potential client(s) to review the common assessment and client's eligibility for the program. Once a client(s) is determined to be eligible, case managers complete a Housing Stabilization Plan, noting barriers and initial financial status. Case managers also refer clients to Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) for housing search assistance and Neighborhood Legal Services (NLS) for legal education and information. During this stage case managers would meet with clients more frequently to address any concerns, answer any questions, and assist with the housing search process as needed.

Once housed, case managers meet with clients on a monthly basis to review and update their Housing Stabilization Plan and monthly budgets, ensuring that their finances remain secure or new resources are acquired, and checking on the status or progress of barriers noted at intake. The Matt Urban Center and Catholic Charities will provide the case management to individuals

and families, respectively. Financial assistance in the form of rental subsidies, security deposits, utility assistance and moving assistance along with case management are provided.

Strengths: Maintaining monthly contact with the case manager has allowed the clients the opportunity to address any concerns or challenges that may have come up between meetings. These concerns may include issues with the landlord or unexpected needs. Many clients have maintained ongoing contact with the case manager in between home visits as well and are made aware that the case managers can assist with problems that arise outside of scheduled visits. This has allowed the case managers the chance to educate their clients about advocating for themselves when needed. This regular contact also allows for the opportunity for case managers to link clients to existing community resources which may help stabilize them. These resources may include food pantries in their neighborhood, medical, mental health services, and substance abuse services. From time to time there is also a need for assistance from partner agencies, including NLS and HOME. The expertise and collaboration that occurs among the agencies is a great strength of the program. In the event that the case managers cannot provide a service directly, clients are made aware or referred to the participating liaisons at these partner agencies and their needs can be met, or their questions answered. As part of case management, if a client has no income, case managers will link clients to agencies that provide employment assistance or assist clients with accessing benefits, providing advocacy through the process and support if there are any sanctions, discontinuances, or additional barriers. If the case managers are unable to assist with these issues, a referral is made to Neighborhood Legal Services for legal advocacy and representation during fair hearings. Again, this is critical as going through this process alone can be cumbersome and time consuming.

Weaknesses: We have identified five weaknesses. They are: (1) When monthly contact is not maintained, the results are detrimental to the client's housing stability, (2) transportation - both housing search and to maintain housing stability, e.g. DSS appointments, getting to work, etc. (3) childcare, (4) household budgeting/financial literacy, and 5) complying with the DSS housing search requirements.

Recommendations: (1) Maintaining monthly contact- develop a firmer policy requiring clients to keep in contact. (2-3) Transportation/Childcare - it is recommended that more financial assistance be provided for transportation, including alternate methods such as taxi which would allow families to more easily view apartments, especially those not on a bus route. Additionally, this may alleviate the need for childcare in some instances. Transportation and childcare remain a challenge for many households and resolution is perhaps beyond the scope of this program. That being said, additional funding specifically for transportation and childcare pertaining to housing stability is greatly needed. (4) Financial literacy and budgeting skills workshops are recommended for BRAP clients in an effort to improve or strengthen these skills. (5) Engage with the Department of Social Services to better coordinate realistic housing searches.

Housing Process

Overview: Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) assisted clients with their housing searches, completed the inspection process and paperwork process with the landlords, served as a contact for the landlords, and provided fair housing advice to caseworkers, landlords and tenants. A HOME caseworker would meet with each client after the initial referral from their primary caseworker (either at Catholic Charities or Matt Urban) to go over the housing search with the client. The HOME caseworker would follow up with the client throughout the housing search process until the client had an adequate housing option. After the client found an apartment or room, the HOME worker would speak with the landlord to explain the program, walk the landlord through the paperwork process and complete an inspection, and follow up with the landlord as needed until the program received the paperwork necessary to issue a check. Following housing, the caseworker at HOME would remain available to address any concerns from the landlord or tenant and would be available to complete additional inspections and outreach should a client need to move.

Strengths: Housing focus is the foundation of a rapid rehousing program. Having a housing coordinator assisted case managers and helped them focus on additional client needs. It also provided the landlords with a point person to speak with about any housing issues, and HOME was able to use expertise from the agency lawyers and fair housing counselors to assist both landlords and tenants with their rights. Establishing strong relationships between primary caseworkers and housing caseworkers was perhaps the most essential element in success and should be emphasized to those involved in similar programs.

Recommendations: Many clients were under the false impression that they should not begin their housing search until they met with their housing counselor, so an emphasis needs to continue to be placed upon the fact that clients should be searching for their housing immediately. Additionally, it may be helpful to have clearer policies on how to terminate clients should they make choices that hinder their ability to be rapidly rehoused. Finally, additional caseworkers might be useful with a maximum of 50-60 clients per caseworker in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

Check Request Process

All check requests are completed by the case manager at each respective case management agency, quality checked by the supervisor and sent to the Buffalo City Mission who will act as the program “bank”. The Supervisor will approve each Check Request. Check requests are prepared in HMIS by the 15th of each month to ensure timely delivery to the landlord. The City Mission will regularly generate a “pending check request” report in HMIS, but if there is an emergency, the caseworker may contact the City Mission directly. The Buffalo City Mission will rely on the agencies submitting check requests to institute a quality control process to ensure eligibility and that all checks requested are within the maximum household limit.

Strengths: Having a “central bank” works great for processing check and City Mission is flexible and accommodating to resolving any issues.

Weakness: The process is layered causing delays and complications when in need of follow up. There are different people involve in the check referral and issue process and checks are not issued directly from City Mission, instead, it has to go through a actual back. So City Mission cannot obtain the actual check information until the checks have been processed.

Recommendations: Ability to issue checks in 1-2 business days, audit initial request for compliance, allow case managers or housing staff to check the check status when needed. The central agency should be able to produce the check.

Aftercare

Once a client's financial assistance ends, the case manager will refer the client to an aftercare agency. The aftercare agency will then call the client at least once a month for up to 6 months.

Strength: Questions about client's stability were asked at follow up, such as "Are you housed?", "Has your income changed?". By collecting this information, it allows us to evaluate the success of the program. One of the objectives of this program is to ensure clients are stable with their housing. Although HMIS can track recidivism, there are other possibilities besides entering shelters which may indicate that clients are unstable. So it is helpful to follow up with the client for a period of time. The aftercare agency is our regional 211. If the client needs help, they can refer them to other community resources.

At this point, this pilot program has only referred a few clients to 211. We would provide more information once we have better understanding on this process.

Summary

While the BRAP program will continue to operate through November of 2014, overall the Buffalo Rapid Re-housing Assistance Program (BRAP) appears to be a successful implementation of the rapid rehousing model thus far. The National Alliance to End Homelessness identifies a minimum of four essential components for a successful rapid re-housing program:

- Landlord Outreach/Housing Search
- Financial Assistance
- Case Management
- Assessment of Housing Barriers

The BRAP program included all of these components and additionally provided Legal Assistance/Informational Workshops and Aftercare as part of its case management services, both of which add to the program's success.

The collaborative approach appears to be the basis for the success of the pilot. While the collaborative approach requires greater coordination and management to prevent duplication of effort; there is no one agency that has the experience and expertise in each of the components required for a successful rapid re-housing program. The collaborative approach appears to be cost effective by bringing together existing community providers/resources rather than providing funding to individual organizations to re-create what already exists in the community. If

implemented, the recommendations for streamlining and improving the referral process would maintain the collaborative approach but increase timeliness and efficiency of the partners. As the Coordinated Entry system for the CoC is developed and implemented; responsibility for the the screening and referral process for rapid re-housing programs in the future could move to the Coordinated Entry system.

Therefore, it is crucial that all of the collaborative partners as well as the entire homeless system, fully buy-in to the rapid re-housing model and the established policies and procedures, particularly with the process outcomes such as timely referrals, reducing length of stay in shelters, etc. Without this commitment homeless persons will not quickly secure housing or remain stable in housing.

In addition to the recommendations included in the different sections of this white paper there were also several “lessons learned”.

1. Targeting homeless sub-populations or limiting the number of shelters that participate in a rapid re-housing program. BRAP originally was targeting homeless young adults (ages 18 – 24) and households who had children (less than 5 years old) and was working with two emergency shelters. This contributed to the slow start-up of the program in addition to the multi-layered intake system. A rapid rehousing program could certainly prioritize certain sub-populations (young adults, DV victims, etc.), but using the assessment process to determine the barrier score appears to be a more inclusive and successful approach to ensure that projected numbers of households are served.
2. The high number of RRH participants receiving public assistance (TANF or Safety Net) has a dramatic effect on the amount of short/medium term rental assistance required. This needs to be considered when developing the budget and program design for future rapid re-housing programs. The shelter allowance paid by ECDSS reduces the amount of rental assistance that can be paid with rapid re-housing funds. Future rapid rehousing program design should consider either increasing the length of time rental assistance is provided (maximum of 24 months per HUD regulations) or increasing the number of persons served. Either solution would seem to require budgeting additional resources for case management. Increasing the length of time assistance is provided could provide the additional time necessary to increase the self-sufficiency of the household through employment, education, etc.
3. A good rapid re-housing program will have flexibility to adapt as needed and should consider:
 - a. the ability to provide some services during nontraditional hours for participants who are employed or in treatment programs, etc.
 - b. Transportation and child care needs of participants should be considered in the program design and location of services
4. Expand collaborative partners (both funded/non-funded by ESG) to provide translation services, employment services, budgeting, financial literacy, etc.

5. The involvement and cooperation of the Department of Social Services (DSS) is crucial to the success of a rapid re-housing model. DSS should be involved in the assessment/referral process, ensure timely issuance of household establishment grants and work with providers to reduce the stress on participants during the housing search process.

6. In future rapid re-housing projects there should be additional funding provided first for the Housing Specialist(s) then for case management. Removing the extra layer in the referral process could free up some funding as well as establishing fee-for service schedule for workshops and other ancillary services.

Appendix

- BRAP Policy and Procedure
- Forms and informational materials used in BRAP
 - BRAP Introduction Letter
 - Client Consent and Release of Information Authorization
 - Common Assessment Form
 - DSS Security Agreement Denial
 - Habitat Stabilization Plan
 - Income Verification
 - Lead Screening Worksheet
 - Master program checklist
 - Rent Reasonableness Certification
 - Shelter Allowance Chart for Case Managers
 - Staff Certification of Eligibility
 - W9