Shared Housing: Challenges, Best Practices, and Outcomes

Background

Los Angeles County, and the country overall, are facing a housing affordability crisis. In 2016, 38.1 million U.S. households spent more than 30% of their income on housing costs – rendering them cost-burdened. In Los Angeles County, 57% of renters are cost-burdened and 31% are severely cost-burdened, meaning they spend upwards of 50% of their income on housing (JCHS, 2017). The rising cost of housing, paired with a lack of affordable housing options, continues to contribute to the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in places like Los Angeles County. The shared housing model is one strategy that has been deployed to maximize housing resources and reduce the amount of individuals facing housing insecurity. At present there is no standardized model or definition for the shared housing model. Shared housing encompasses multiple model designs in which, generally, two or more unrelated individuals live together in a house or apartment and share housing costs. Shared housing models often include shared common areas such as kitchens and living rooms, individual bedroom areas, and may also include either individual or shared bathrooms. Specifics often vary based on the housing unit being utilized and the organization operating the shared housing program. Despite the lack of a standardized model, promising practices continue to emerge around shared housing practices as organizations and governments test the model.

Key Takeaways:

- Existing shared housing models have been utilized to house a wide range of subgroups including older adults, veterans, individuals with severe mental illness, and young adults.

- Research suggests that shared housing has the potential to improve living circumstances for those living in poverty through decreased rent burden, decreased sense of isolation, assistance with childcare, and increased sense of safety.

- Challenges faced by agencies and organizations operating shared housing programs include interpersonal issues between tenants, identifying viable homeowners and landlords, and overcoming misconceptions about shared housing.

- Emerging best practices of the shared housing model include:

    o Engaging and supporting landlords and homeowners

    o Develop a person-centered matching process

    o Establish formalized agreements – both formal roommate agreements, and agreements between landlords and the organization operating the program

Literature Review

Background and Research Motivation

In Los Angeles County, the housing affordability crisis continues to jeopardize the ability of families and individuals to obtain housing stability. In 2016, 57% of Los Angeles renters were considered cost-burdened, and 31% were considered severely cost-burdened. The lack of affordable housing options in areas like Los Angeles County exacerbates the homelessness crisis faced by many communities. According to the 2018 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count, there are 52,765 individuals experiencing homelessness on any given night in Los Angeles County. One strategy deployed to maximize existing housing resources and provide options for those experiencing housing insecurity is the shared housing model. The specifications of this model often vary from site to site. The model generally involves tenants sharing common spaces such as kitchens and living rooms, having access to individual bedroom areas, and may also include either shared or individual bathroom space. While there is currently no standardized definition of the shared housing model, promising practices are emerging as the model is tested with different subpopulations and groups. This memo reviews existing literature and highlights the identified challenges and best practices associated with the shared housing model.

The Shared Housing Model

Broadly, shared housing describes a situation in which two or more people who live in a permanent rental housing unit share costs associated with maintaining housing such as rent and utilities (Benton, 2014). Shared housing programs are often diverse in design and operation but typically provide residences with common areas such as dining rooms, kitchens, and living rooms – while bedrooms are used for private space or shared with roommates (Cho, Woo, & Kim, 2019). Housing units in this model are often apartments or houses with multiple bedrooms provided by the homeowner, private landlords, or agency landlords (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018). Tenants are placed in homes through a variety of ways in the shared housing model including matching programs in which agencies and organizations provide references and develop matches between home providers and home seekers (ALA, 2012). Home providers generally offer lower rent compared to fair market trends, and in some cases a service exchange is involved in which tenants agree to provide services such as housekeeping in exchange for lower rent (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018).

Shared housing models have been used to serve many different groups and subpopulations including formerly homeless individuals and individuals at risk of experiencing homelessness (He, O'Flaherty, & Rosenheck, 2010), veterans (Tsai, Kasprow, & Rosenheck, 2011), older adults (Bodkin & Saxena, 2017), single adults (Woo, Cho, & Kim, 2019), and individuals with severe mental illness (Richter & Hoffman, 2017). Many of these programs vary in their tenant matching process, incentives for home providers, and other operational characteristics. The following section provides an overview of three different shared housing model programs.

SHARE! Collaborative Housing – Los Angeles, California
SHARE!, or the Self-Help and Recovery Exchange, is a Los Angeles based non-profit that operates several self-help and recovery programs including a collaborative housing program. The SHARE! Collaborative Housing program has been in operation since 2005 and is a project supported by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health. The program's matching process involves SHARE! staff recommending certain housing vacancies based on an individual's specific needs and

backgrounds – and also includes a conference call with the homeowner (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018). Collaborative housing tenants must meet certain requirements including having a willingness to attend at least 3 self-help support groups per week, being willing to help with chores, and must be receiving supplemental security income (SSI) or some other form of income (SHARE!, 2015). Approximately 80% of the program's residents are chronically homeless with mental health issues and/or substance use and physical health issues (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018). Home providers are expected to furnish the home, pay all utilities, and agree not to collect a security deposit. Residents pay rent (approximately $600 or less per month) from their source of income directly to the homeowner. SHARE! staff provide oversight of homes including responding to any tenant problems in a timely manner and visiting homes regularly to help with tenant needs (SHARE!, 2015).

HAAVEN – Los Angeles, California
HAAVEN is a partner organization to SHARE! and represents a model for private-market shared housing for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Founded by a married couple who used their own savings and connections with housing developers to purchase and renovate a number of properties, HAAVEN provides each resident with affordable, furnished, shared community housing paired with a specially trained peer advocate who can help them develop the social and emotional skills needed to lead a healthy and successful life. Resident referrals come from non-profit service providers integrated with the Coordinated Entry System (CES), shared housing matching services, and personal referrals (HAAVEN, 2019). HAAVEN's goal is to eliminate bureaucratic and financial barriers to securing housing, charging between $550 and $700 per month in rent so people with SSI/SSDI, low wage jobs, or other income can afford a home (HAAVEN, 2019). HAAVEN claims that its per-bed cost is under $4,000 (as opposed to over $50,000 per bed for bridge housing and over $500,000 per bed for permanent supportive housing) and since its inception, 88% of its placed tenants have stayed housed (HAAVEN, 2019).

Micah Ecumenical Ministries – Fredericksburg, Virginia
The Micah Ecumenical Ministries program works to move individuals experiencing chronic homelessness into shared apartments. This program's matching process focuses on keeping together existing groups or matching individuals based on prioritization process, interests, or expressed deal breakers. The organization negotiates directly with landlords that would be willing to overlook common barriers to housing including criminal records, poor credit scores, and substance use issues, among others. The program administrators have found that matching individuals with different levels of serious mental illness can create an informal caregiver/care receiver relationship that the organization has found to work well (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018).

Affordable Living for the Aging Shared Housing Program – Los Angeles, California
Affordable Living for the Aging (ALA) provides affordable housing, supportive services, and alternative housing options for low-income and formerly homeless older adults. ALA's shared housing program works to match two or more unrelated people to share a home in exchange for rent or services such as cooking or cleaning. While ALA shared housing home seekers of all ages are accepted, the average age of the program's tenants is 65 years old. To be eligible for shared housing through the ALA program, housing seekers must be mentally, physically, and financially self-sufficient. Housing providers are homeowners or renters, typically older adults, who want to share their homes. ALA serves as an intermediary to screen both home providers and seekers, match compatible roommates, and develop roommate agreements and monitor ongoing matches (ALA,

2017).

Friendship Place – Washington, D.C.
Friendship Place is a housing services provider for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Washington D.C. whose programs include street outreach, a drop-in center, a free medical and psychiatric clinic, shelters and transitional housing facilities, permanent supportive housing, and specialized programs for youth and veterans. Their shared housing program connects people experiencing homelessness with approved landlords who are offering shared living spaces specifically for people experiencing homelessness (Giraud, 2016). While Friendship Place does not manage the properties—that is up to the landlords—they do streamline the process of obtaining stable housing, usually allowing participants to secure housing in two to three days (Giraud, 2016). Friendship Place's model empowers participants to sustain self-run shared living spaces, encouraging the housemates to make decisions among themselves about new members and to deal with the landlords directly so that they can grow and assume a new set of responsibilities inherent to maintaining housing Giraud, 2016). The program also includes tenant's rights education, job placement services, and the possibility for short-term leases (Giraud, 2016).

Overview of Shared Housing Outcomes
Research suggests that the shared housing model does not affect participants in an adverse way. In fact, living in shared housing has been shown to be associated with less psychotic symptomology, increased sense of social support, and an increased sense of personal safety (He, O'Flaherty, & Rosenheck, 2010). Altus and Mathews (2000) found that the health of older adults improved after they found a roommate. The study found that older adults with roommates ate and slept better, became more active, felt less isolated, and has an increased sense of safety (Altus & Mathews, 2000). Additionally, literature suggests that shared housing can be used as a community building tool. Shared housing experiences are positively associated with a sense of attachment to the community in terms of both community sentiment and social bonding (Cho, Woo, & Kim, 2019).

Qualitative studies involving individuals with severe mental illness (SMI) living in shared housing units reveal that participants experienced a high degree of security and satisfaction due to access to service providers and having the opportunity to socialize with other residents in the common areas of the housing unit (Roos et al., 2016). Findings also suggest that shared housing has the potential to improve the living circumstances for those living in poverty through companionship, increased safety, and assistance with childcare (Richards & Lindsay, 2003). With regard to economic benefit, shared housing has also been associated with reduced rent burden and increased affordability (Koebel & Rives, 1993). Literature suggests that for every year a young mother shares housing with another family while her child is young, her later income will increase by approximately $1,000 – which is attributable to changes in behavior facilitated by shared housing including higher educational attainment (Sandfort & Hill, 1996).

High quality research on the shared housing model is sparse and more comprehensive research is required in order to fully understand the impact this model can have on specific populations, subgroups, and communities overall.

Challenges of the Shared Housing Model

As shared housing programs across the country continue to be tested in different regions with varying populations and subgroups, challenges to program operation and implementation continue to emerge. The following section highlights the various challenges associated with the shared housing model identified by agencies and organizations familiar with the model.

Interpersonal Issues

People living together in a shared housing unit must negotiate many aspects of daily life and conflicts will inevitably arise from these interactions. Often times these conflicts arise from miscommunications and unclear expectations or guidelines, either between tenants or between tenants and the house provider (US Dept. of Veteran Affairs, 2017). According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH), in order to avoid these types of conflict, it is important to establish clear lines of communication with the program, the participants, and the home provider – as well as the flexibility to make changes as issues arise.

Landlord and Homeowner Challenges

Shared housing models require program administrators to identify landlords and homeowners who are willing to overlook common barriers to housing. These home providers must be willing to forgo collecting a security deposit, and in many cases, must not require a background or credit check on tenants. Identifying landlords who would be willing to agree to these terms can be difficult (Benton, 2014). It is important to have agreements with landlords, even if informal, that are set before tenants move in to shared housing units (US Dept. of Veteran Affairs, 2017).

Housing Stability

Existing shared housing programs have experienced different levels of housing stability for tenants. Some programs have found high satisfaction with long-term matches, while others have found matches that encounter problems and lead to housing instability (US Dept. of Veteran Affairs, 2017).

Misconceptions from the Community

Agencies and organizations attempting to implement a shared housing program may encounter challenges from neighborhood residents and others who have concerns about shared housing in their neighborhood (Benton, 2014). The shared housing model faces challenges similar to those of other homeless interventions in overcoming misconceptions about the program, cultural and societal bias, and general lack of awareness (ALA, 2012). Given the model's ability to house members of vulnerable populations such as formerly homeless individuals, individuals with serious mental illness, and those with substance use disorders, there is often a stigma associated with the presence of shared housing units within communities – requiring organizers of shared housing models/units to contend with community concerns and NIMBYism (Benton, 2014).

Emerging Best Practices from the Shared Housing Model

Organizations and agencies operating shared housing programs continue to develop best practices and test emerging strategies. The following section provides an overview of emerging best practices associated with the shared housing model.

Engage and Support Landlords

It is important to establish agreements between landlords and tenants that include responsibilities, expectations, reporting, schedules, and visits. Agreements between landlords and tenants should also include the recruitment of new housemates (NAEH, 2016). Best practices with regard to homeowners and landlords also includes providing training for trauma-informed care, housing first practices, mental health and community referral network, and conflict resolution, among others (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018).

The Matching Process

A shared housing program's matching process should be a person-centered process in which the individual or entity facilitating the match understands the home seeker's preferences and areas where compromise can occur. It is also important that the client maintains the ability to enter into or leave a shared housing agreement. Additionally, maintaining existing relationships between clients can help to develop housemate relationships and can lead to referrals for other clients by building off of an existing peer network. Individuals or agencies facilitating matches should not rush to make matches simply based on vacancies, but rather engage in a comprehensive screening process (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018). Additionally, emerging best practices around matching services includes a trial period where matched tenants can learn more about the living situation and their housemates before making a final decision (ALA, 2012).

Formalized Agreements

Shared housing programs should include formalized tenancy agreements. One such agreement includes a lease agreement in which each individual resident has a separate lease with the landlord which can help to avoid complications if one roommate leaves before the other. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the organization operating the shared housing program and the landlord should also be established. This MOU should outline various items including the moving of residents in and out of the housing unit, maximum occupancy, rent inclusions (utilities, furniture, etc.), conflict mediation processes, and other items. It is also important to have formalized roommate agreements between tenants that clearly stipulate roles and responsibilities, identify processes and provide accountability for conflict mediation (Fernandez & Taylor, 2018).

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