

One-Year Check-In of the Returning Home Saint Paul Pilot:
Preliminary Learnings, Considerations, and Next Steps

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“Being able to rent in my name, being able to live with my family when my son is born, to have a home, has given me supreme security. I think the overarching story of Returning Home would just be hope and inspiration. It gives you an extra reason to know you’re doing the right thing and to keep doing the right thing. It’s changed my life perspective.”

- Housed Participant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Program Overview. The Returning Home Saint Paul (RHSP) pilot is a partnership between the City of Saint Paul, [HousingLink](#), and [Ujamaa Place](#) to house residents returning to the community from incarceration. The target population of the pilot is the primary population which Ujamaa Place serves: young Black men aged 18-30 years, many of whom have some experience with the criminal legal system. The program seeks to increase housing access, bridge the transition from re-entry to self-sufficiency, and mitigate perceived risk for landlords in the housing market. RHSP builds on an existing program from HousingLink, [Beyond Backgrounds](#), creating a Saint Paul-specific program. Enrollment for the pilot will end in March 2022. The program is designed so that existing housed participants receive support from RHSP for 12 months after their lease signing date. Evaluation is anticipated to continue through spring of 2023.

A Community-First Public Safety Initiative. The Returning Home Saint Paul pilot is a Community-First Public Safety Initiative, the City of Saint Paul's compelling approach to violence reduction. The Community-First Public Safety Framework is informed by "deep public engagement, research, tracking and analysis of real time data, and cross sector collaboration of stakeholders."¹ The Framework emphasizes both a community-first response to crime and crisis as well as proactive investments in neighborhoods and residents, including through housing support for residents returning home from incarceration, which is the purpose of the Returning Home Saint Paul pilot.

Method of Evaluation. The RHSP team is partnering with the [Minnesota Justice Research Center \(MNJRC\)](#) to measure, track, and report on program impact through quantitative outcomes and qualitative participant and landlord experiences. Over the course of the pilot, MNJRC researchers have conducted interviews with participants, landlords, and partners to better understand barriers to participating in the program, how the program is working for those who are enrolled, and what can be improved. MNJRC also collected descriptive quantitative data, including the number of participants currently enrolled in the program, number of calls made to landlords by participants, the number of units managed by participating landlords, and the fund amount accessed by each participant and landlord during the duration of the program.

How to Use this Report. The data presented in this report should be viewed as preliminary learnings and not final or conclusive findings. This report offers a high-level overview of what we are learning thus far. We cannot make any final claims about the data until the collection process concludes in spring 2023. A final report will then present key findings and recommendations based on the data collected from the beginning of the pilot to the end of the evaluation period.

Preliminary Learnings and Considerations. We highlight ten preliminary learnings and associated considerations from the pilot thus far at the one-year check-in point separated into three main categories: participant outcomes, cost/financial learnings, and relational learnings.

Participant outcomes

- 1. Finding housing through the RHSP pilot has helped participants feel hopeful, supported, and an increased sense of stability, especially for participants who are fathers.** The RHSP program has provided safe and secure housing for entire families, helping to create stability across generations. One participant

¹ [Community-First Public Safety Framework, City of Saint Paul, 2021](#)

was even able to move his child from foster care into his own care once he secured housing through the pilot. Many participants are fathers. In fact, half of the participants explicitly named their roles as fathers and desiring a safe place to be with their children as the motivating factor to take the steps to move into market-rate housing. However, participants continue to feel like resources for men returning from incarceration – and particularly for fathers – are few and far between.

Consideration: *Connecting participants with existing resources for fathers as well as advocating for additional father-specific resources at the city, county, and state levels could be key to supporting participants and their families as they move into permanent housing.*

- 2. Over 90% of participants have *not* been re-incarcerated since entering the program.** This is likely due to a combination of various factors, including participant resilience, family and community support, and stable housing. The fact that only one participant has re-offended* is a positive indication that RHSP is an important piece of the puzzle that supports residents returning home from incarceration as they work to build their futures and achieve their short- and long-term goals.

Consideration: *Raising community awareness of the program by increasing entry points for participation in RHSP could help the program reach even more residents returning home from incarceration. Participants indicate that they heard about the program through a variety of entry points including prison programming and job fairs, homeless shelters, youth programs, parole officers, family and friends, and internet searches.*

**At the time the report was finalized, we were notified that one participant had been briefly re-incarcerated for a probation violation. This individual has since returned home. Final recidivism outcomes will be explored in more detail in the final report.*

- 3. The program's ability to house the goal number of participants was affected by program geography and target population.** Partners expressed that the ability of the program to house more participants was contingent upon 1) being able to offer housing opportunities outside of Saint Paul, and 2) having a deeper pipeline of participants who are immediately ready to be housed. As Ujamaa Place serves primarily one racial and gender group in a limited age range, the pipeline of participants has consistently been small. Ujamaa Place works with individuals who come to the organization seeking employment services and affordable housing through Ujamaa's transitional housing program. Therefore, it has taken longer for some participants to be ready and motivated to move into market-rate housing. Additionally, given the age range of the population Ujamaa serves, most participants had offenses on their records which were recent and therefore within the typical 8-10 year lookback policy for a criminal background that many landlords have for renting, which proved to be the most frequent barrier to securing housing. These myriad challenges were – and continue to be – exacerbated due to the ongoing pandemic.

Consideration: *HousingLink recommends having a pipeline of **triple** the number of participants and landlords that a program hopes to connect. Partnering with additional support organizations and/or partnering with other cities like Minneapolis could help expand the participant pool as well as the pool of available units and potential landlords, thus increasing the chance of housing success for the program.*

Cost/financial learnings

- 4. In one year of operation, the pilot program has spent under \$5,000 to directly help house participants, through application fees and security deposits, and \$0 of the risk mitigation fund has been requested by landlords.** This is a promising indicator that the program has been hugely impactful for participants with minimal costs to the City.
- 5. While the pilot offers some financial support to participants, many participants have struggled to pay their rent on time since signing their leases with the program.** Four of the nine participants housed in Saint Paul have struggled to pay their rent within 1-2 months of signing their leases, most often due to budgeting issues and unexpected financial obligations. However, every participant has been able to get back on track by putting together payment plans and firm budgets with the support of Ujamaa Place and their landlords.

***Consideration:** Increasing wraparound services for participants – including and perhaps especially employment support and financial education – can help participants achieve the financial stability they need to support themselves and their families as they move into market-rate housing and work towards their short-term and long-term goals.*

- 6. Unpaid rent has proven to be a challenge for landlords, particularly for property owners with fewer units.** At the 6-month check-in, one landlord was so dissatisfied with the situation with his participant that he said he would likely not rent to someone with a criminal background again. This landlord had originally been incredibly excited about the program. Property owners with fewer units feel unpaid rent more keenly than landlords with many units. While smaller landlords may be more willing to rent to participants initially, they are also affected by the financial challenges that participants face more than larger firms.

***Consideration:** Ensuring that participants understand the responsibilities of renting a market-rate apartment and are committed to paying rent on time is essential to the future success of a program like this. Implementing rental assistance could also help assuage landlords' concerns and support landlords when participants do not pay rent on time.*

Relational learnings

- 7. While certain offenses are typically harder to house, once a landlord is willing to house someone with barriers in their background, this becomes less of a deal breaker.** Our housed participant pool includes people with some of the hardest-to-house offenses, including gun-related offenses and sexual offenses. Partners at Ujamaa Place and HousingLink have worked hard to build trust with landlords. In particular, the case manager support included in the program has opened the door for participants to meet with landlords in person and make positive connections.

***Consideration:** Cultivating personal relationships with landlords has proven to be a strong entry point to getting participants housed. The City should continue to fund the human resources necessary to build and maintain relationships with landlords.*

- 8. The landlords who have housed participants already have a history of working with people returning home from incarceration.** Informing landlords about the pilot has been helpful in connecting participants

to Saint Paul-specific housing. At this point, the program does not seem to be changing hearts and minds of landlords but instead is connecting participants to those landlords who are already willing to give people a second chance. The quality of landlord relationships has been hugely impactful: three participants were able to be housed through a singular landlord connection, and another landlord is currently housing two participants. However, at the 6-month check-in, two landlords had moved on from their positions, and their replacements may or may not have been briefed on the program and participant(s) being housed.

Consideration: *Increased landlord outreach and engagement could help to maximize a Saint Paul-specific pool of interested landlords. Creative and meaningful outreach can also clarify certain points of the program that may seem unclear to landlords, including whether landlords are “matched” with participants and if they have additional responsibilities to the participant beyond what they would provide for other renters. Approaching landlord connections from a “quality” in addition to a “quantity” perspective could be a helpful strategy.*

- 9. The market moves fast, so timing is critical.** One of the challenges of any housing-related program is the need for all pieces to align: the participant must be ready to move into market-rate housing, a landlord must be willing to house someone with barriers in their background, *and* that landlord must have an available unit that meets the participant’s needs and desires for a home.

Consideration: *Increasing communication between the case manager, participant, and landlords is essential to successfully house participants. Ensuring that participants have the support they need to be ready to move into market-rate housing and that enough landlords are well-informed and interested in participating in the program helps to increase the chances that rental opportunities don’t go to waste when they become available.*

- 10. Partner relationships are crucial and need guidance and support.** At the onset of the program, partners met monthly to check in, but were for the most part completing their work in silos. As part of the evaluative process, MNJRC found that a communication loop was missing between Ujamaa Place and HousingLink, and that this could be improved. The establishment of this communication loop has helped mitigate the timing challenges the program faces. When an apartment becomes available, or a participant is ready to be housed, partners now communicate with each other immediately and work together to successfully house the participant.

Consideration: *While allowing community partners to take the lead on projects is an important aspect of collaborative partnership and social change initiatives, government entities should continue to take a structural leadership role in ensuring that partners have the support they need and that the program is functioning as intended. Nonprofit partners often do not have the same levels of resources that government entities do, making it harder for these partners to spend the time to identify and then meet the needs of a partnership like RHSP. The City of Saint Paul could take a more prominent role in facilitating partner relationships and ensuring that the program is operating at the highest level possible. This includes meeting regularly with the partners who are working directly with participants and landlords as well as their supervisors.*

At this one-year check-in point, we are seeing a few specific structural barriers consistently surfacing in the preliminary data, including:

- **Tenant screening:** Particularly the 8-10 year policy on lookback periods for criminal histories.
- **Background as a barrier:** To gainful, consistent, meaningful employment and secure, market-rate housing.
- **Lack of holistic, wraparound services** for people returning home from incarceration: Including services for fathers, financial planning support, employment services, healthcare, and mental health support.
- **COVID-19:** Losing employment and missing work with no PTO due to work closures and/or testing positive as a worker.

When the evaluation concludes in spring of 2023, we will have an even better understanding of what the greatest barriers to housing have been for participants in this program and what potential policy and programmatic solutions may help minimize and/or eliminate these barriers.

BACKGROUND

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Returning Home Saint Paul (RHSP) pilot is a partnership between the City of Saint Paul, [HousingLink](#), and [Ujamaa Place](#) working to house residents returning to the community from incarceration. The overwhelming majority of imprisoned people in Minnesota are men, with Black Minnesotans making up 36.6% of the state's prison population,² even as Black Minnesotans make up just 7% of the state's population.³ Given this, during the pilot research and planning process,⁴ Ujamaa Place was identified as a key community navigator which could bridge the gap between individuals returning home from incarceration and the supports they need, including housing. Thus, the target population of the program is the primary population which Ujamaa Place serves: young Black men aged 18-30. The program seeks to increase housing access, bridge the transition from re-entry to self-sufficiency, and mitigate perceived risk for landlords in the housing market. RHSP builds on an existing program from HousingLink, [Beyond Backgrounds](#), creating a Saint Paul-specific program. Enrollment for the pilot will end in March 2022. The program is designed so that existing housed participants receive support from RHSP for 12 months after their lease signing date. Evaluation is anticipated to continue through spring of 2023.

Partners

Ujamaa Place is a staple community-based organization in the Saint Paul community providing “holistic transformation for young African-American men experiencing inequity at the intersection of race and poverty.”⁵ The program helps young Black men, particularly those returning home from incarceration, establish brotherhood by being part of the Ujamaa community, and achieve personal stability and success through its transformational programming. Ujamaa Place opened its doors in 2010 and serves primarily Black men aged 18-30 from the Twin Cities seven-county metropolitan area. Men enroll at no cost in Ujamaa Place's programming that connects

² [Adult Prison Population Summary, Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2021](#)

³ [Minnesota Population Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau, 2021](#)

⁴ In 2018-2019, the Harvard-Bloomberg Innovation Track Team completed an investigation into the housing challenges experienced by those reentering the community from incarceration as part of the planning process for the RHSP pilot.

⁵ [Mission Statement, Ujamaa Place, 2010](#)

participants to support services to help them build positive futures and establish themselves as contributors in society as community and family members, renters, valued employees, home owners, and business owners. Ujamaa Place offers transitional housing options which help to prepare those enrolled in Ujamaa Place with affordable housing, rental experience, and budgeting practice.

As part of the RHSP pilot, Ujamaa Place provides comprehensive wraparound support to each household during the course of the program, including:

- Serving as housing navigators for participants and landlords.
- Providing tenant education and supporting positive landlord-tenant relationships through individual case management.
- Providing supportive services with an emphasis on employment, education, and stability, and making connections to additional community resources as needed.

Learn more about Ujamaa Place: <https://ujamaaplace.org/>

HousingLink is a nonprofit organization which provides an easy-to-use platform for property owners across Minnesota to list affordable housing options for free. For over 20 years, the site, in addition to support from HousingLink's staff, has helped remove barriers for individuals searching for housing in the state. RHSP is part of HousingLink's Beyond Backgrounds program, which provides financial and case management support to landlords who are interested in housing individuals with criminal, credit, or rental history barriers in their backgrounds. Landlords can indicate their interest in the Beyond Backgrounds program next to their available units on the HousingLink website, which allows future renters to more easily connect with these landlords.

Within the RHSP partnership, HousingLink serves as the access fund administrator and provides technical and navigational program support to partner organizations, including:

- Landlord outreach and establishing a pipeline of interested landlords in the Saint Paul area.
- Facilitating connections between interested landlords with available units and the Ujamaa Place case manager.
- Processing program applications.
- Providing additional support for navigation of landlord-tenant issues, should they arise.
- Managing the access fund and claims process.
- Providing programmatic support for property owners.

Learn more about HousingLink: <https://www.housinglink.org/>

RHSP is partnering with the **Minnesota Justice Research Center (MNJRC)** to measure, track, and report on program impact and success both in outcomes and qualitative participant and landlord experiences.

The MNJRC is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to driving meaningful change to Minnesota's criminal legal system through rigorous and community-centered research, education, and policy development. The MNJRC centers our work on exploring values like humane and fair treatment for all, safety, wellbeing, and trust. We provide our community and policymakers with information and tools needed to create a criminal legal system that truly delivers justice.

As part of the RHSP partnership, MNJRC is responsible for additional data collection, data management, and evaluation of the qualitative and quantitative data. MNJRC researchers coordinate with partners to streamline data collection from multiple entry points and then track and compile the new data as it becomes available. Additionally, MNJRC regularly checks in with partners to better understand any needs or program gaps that need to be addressed by the collective.

Learn more about the Minnesota Justice Research Center: <https://www.mnjrc.org/>

The **City of Saint Paul** serves as the coordinating body for the project, bringing together partner organizations, developing objectives, and securing funding. Key partners at the City of Saint Paul included the Director of the Office of Financial Empowerment and the Fair Housing Coordinator. The Office of Financial Empowerment was established by the City in 2019 and builds relationships and solutions with community members, community-led organizations, and businesses, understanding that “economic inequality is a whole-city crisis that demands a whole-city response.”⁶ The RHSP program is one of Mayor Melvin Carter’s Community-First Public Safety Initiatives. Saint Paul’s Community-First Public Safety framework “seeks to transcend crime response to build a compelling violence reduction strategy for Saint Paul which is informed by deep public engagement, research, tracking and analysis of real time data, and cross sector collaboration of stakeholders.”⁷

Design Elements of the RHSP Pilot

The RHSP pilot leverages community partners’ relationships, knowledge, and skillsets to enhance the coordination of resources for residents and property owners. Ujamaa Place provides comprehensive wraparound support to each participant during the course of the pilot. HousingLink serves as the access fund administrator, providing technical and navigational program support to the city and partner organizations.

The RHSP pilot was designed specifically to address criminal history as a barrier to finding housing in Saint Paul. The program addresses this barrier for participants and landlords by:

- Providing participants with a **community-based access point** to the program.
- Emphasizing **supportive services** and **case management**, with a focus on employment, financial education, and stability.
- Connecting participants with landlords through **housing navigational support**.
- Supporting participants with **application fees, security deposits, and other housing needs** as determined by a needs assessment:
 - Up to \$60 for application fee(s) with flexibility based on need.
 - Up to \$500 for security deposits with flexibility based on need.
- Mitigating landlord risk through the administration of a **housing access fund** that provides reimbursement to property owners for potential expenses incurred that exceed normal wear and tear and the security deposit, up to \$3,000.

A Community-First Public Safety Initiative

The Returning Home Saint Paul pilot is a Community-First Public Safety Initiative, the City of Saint Paul’s compelling approach to violence reduction. The Community-First Public Safety Framework is informed by “deep public

⁶ [Office of Financial Empowerment, City of Saint Paul, 2019](#)

⁷ [Community-First Public Safety, City of Saint Paul, 2021](#)

engagement, research, tracking and analysis of real time data, and cross sector collaboration of stakeholders.”⁸ The Framework emphasizes both a community-first response to crime and crisis as well as proactive investments in neighborhoods and residents, including through housing support for residents returning home from incarceration, which is the purpose of the Returning Home Saint Paul pilot.

The RHSP pilot has been designed to fulfill – and early data at this one-year check-in point supports that the program *is* fulfilling – several of the Community-First Public Safety Framework principles:⁹

- **Principle #2: Improving Community Connectivity and Supports.** *Residents who are financially stable and connected to community are less likely to commit a crime or be victimized by criminal activity.*

The Returning Home Saint Paul pilot has been designed to enhance feelings of community and access to resources for participants returning home from incarceration. The partnership was designed with support systems at the center: directly through Ujamaa Place case management and more indirectly through HousingLink housing search support. Ujamaa Place focuses on creating a community of “Ujamaa Men” and serves as a resource hub for participants throughout the housing process.

Participants have described how having a program like RHSP available to them has been encouraging and has made them feel like someone has their back, that they are important, and that they belong. Being able to rent their own apartments in Saint Paul made several participants feel like they were truly contributing members of the Saint Paul community.

“It lets me know that there’s people out here that actually care about men like me. Ujamaa is like an extended family, and I don’t have any family, so it’s just me. It makes me want to give back to Saint Paul a little bit. I always said to myself, ‘Minnesota adopted me.’”
- Housed Participant

- **Principle #3: Leveraging Research and Localized Data to Inform Policy and Strategies.** *CFPS partners share respective data, dashboards, metrics, grids, logic models, and report outs to analyze and inform collaborative work.*

The RHSP pilot was designed to leverage collaboration and sharing of knowledge and resources between program partners, and at different points in the evaluation process, with broader stakeholders and community. All four partners collect a variety of data, which is then compiled and analyzed by MNJRC researchers throughout the evaluation process. By the end of evaluation in 2023, pilot partners will work to create opportunities for community conversations around the pilot findings and potential paths forward within the Community-First Public Safety Framework.

- **Principle #4: Collaborating to Create Shared Expectations, Process, and Outcomes.** *CFPS partners build trust and cohesion to ensure support and leverage of respective projects/initiatives for the greatest collective impact on violence reduction.*

⁸ [Community-First Public Safety Framework, City of Saint Paul, 2021](#)

⁹ [Community-First Public Safety Principles, City of Saint Paul, 2021](#)

As also evidenced in Principle #3, cross-sector collaboration is a foundational part of the RHSP pilot design. By bringing together partner organizations with various knowledge bases, skill sets, and resources, RHSP has been able to continually improve on program processes to successfully house participants. Findings from this collaborative effort will be shared with stakeholders and the broader community at the end of the evaluation process in 2023.

Program Context: The COVID-19 Pandemic

The RHSP pilot was scoped, funded, and designed **pre-COVID**. The COVID-19 pandemic ultimately impacted the design and functioning of the pilot, including that the launch of the pilot was delayed (see timeline on p. 12). Partner organizations needed time to adapt their business operations to respond to COVID “best practices” and state and federal requirements. To this end, the RHSP partner engagement and programming also had to be adapted to a virtual format. The COVID-19 pandemic also played a role in participant outcomes, as discussed in the learnings below.

Policies created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the eviction moratorium,¹⁰ also impacted the RHSP pilot. The eviction moratorium shifted priorities from housing transitions to keeping those already in market-rate apartments housed. Landlords reported to RHSP partners that the eviction moratorium resulted in lost profits and increased feelings of risk-aversion for landlords, even as the moratorium was lifted.

“For landlords, unpaid rent is a big problem, especially because of COVID, when they couldn't get rid of tenants because they refused to pay rent. That has made landlords hesitant to accept anyone who they think might be a problem.”

- Kahari Smith-Brewer, Outreach Coordinator at HousingLink

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants through employment loss and instability, as well as limited employment opportunities once a job was lost. One report from the University of Minnesota found that Black men, the pilot’s target population, had significantly higher rates of unemployment claims compared to Latino, Asian, and white men during Minnesota’s shut down period between April and May of 2020, and that racial discrimination in firing practices may have played a role in these disparities.¹¹ The volatile pandemic job market paired with participants’ backgrounds made maintaining employment and financial stability incredibly difficult for participants during this time.

“Since I’ve been out, I have applied to good jobs and have had interviews, but because of my background and COVID, I was turned down. So COVID and my background play a big role in that.”

- Participant

Interestingly, one participant noted that **COVID may have actually helped him find employment**, as more and more people were leaving the workforce and some employers became more open to employing people with recent criminal backgrounds:

¹⁰ Learn more about the eviction moratorium in Minnesota and its impacts on Minnesotans [here](#)

¹¹ [COVID's Unequal Impacts on Minnesota Workers: A Race and Gender Lens](#). Ewig, Bombyk, & Dorman, 2020

"Honestly, I think COVID helped me out. It opened up a lot of jobs. I believe that if COVID wasn't going around, I don't believe the job that I have would have been available to me."

- Participant

Overwhelmingly, participants reported experiencing **COVID-related disruptions in income**, given that many participants work in jobs that do not provide health insurance or other benefits like PTO. Many participants noted that the pandemic had cleared out their savings, which can be a critical factor in being able to move into a market-rate apartment.

"COVID affected my life dramatically 'cause now I'm in debt. When I came home from prison I wasn't in debt. When COVID happened that's when everything started to pile up."

- Participant

CURRENT PROGRAM STATUS

Project Timeline

Over a nine-month period spanning 2018-2019, the City of Saint Paul partnered with the Harvard-Bloomberg Innovation Track Team to complete a human-centered design process to investigate housing challenges experienced by individuals returning home from incarceration. The Harvard-Bloomberg team reviewed the extant research, engaged in ethnographic research, and presented the City of Saint Paul with two prototypes to build the Returning Home Saint Paul pilot. In late 2019, the Carter administration made an investment in Community-First Public Safety, which supports several initiatives including Returning Home Saint Paul.

The RHSP pilot was planned to be launched in late spring 2020. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the program launch was delayed and officially launched in December 2020. During this time, leaders of the partner organizations met to discuss the project and move towards implementation. In January 2021, participants began to enroll in the program and search for housing through HousingLink as well as other outlets. The following month, a case manager from Ujamaa Place joined the program to facilitate the housing search process and support participants in building positive connections with potential landlords. Due to a slow start getting participants housed, in March 2021 the City hosted a root cause analysis session with partners to identify programmatic challenges and discuss potential solutions. From this, partners identified the need to conduct barriers interviews, which the Minnesota Justice Research Center conducted that month. Interviews with enrolled participants focused on better understanding the barriers that kept participants from being in a place to actively search for and secure market-rate housing. These interviews found that COVID-19 had a profound impact on participants, including by way of lost and unstable employment, healthcare costs, and family health.

In May 2021, an outreach coordinator from HousingLink joined the RHSP pilot and increased outreach to Saint Paul landlords, helping to establish a pipeline of interested landlords to better facilitate the process of connecting interested landlords to participants who are ready to move in to market-rate housing. Shortly after, the first participant was housed in Saint Paul. In July 2021, a research project lead was hired by MNJRC for the evaluation of the RHSP project. This same month, Minnesota's eviction moratorium began to phase out. MNJRC discovered the need for enhanced communication between Ujamaa Place and HousingLink, and facilitated the establishment of a communication loop between the Ujamaa Place case manager and the HousingLink outreach coordinator. This communication loop has proven essential to being able to manage the time constraints of the market by better connecting ready participants with interested landlords as soon as units become available.

A streamlined process for data collection between the partner organizations was established in August 2021, including a spreadsheet that tracked the barriers participants experienced to both actively searching for housing as well as securing housing. Barriers most commonly experienced by participants that kept them from being able to search for housing were employment instability and a need for emotional support and encouragement. The barrier experienced most often by participants who were ready to be housed was the 8-10 year arbitrary background limit policy set by many landlords.

From July 2021 to January 2022 and the completion of this check-in report in February 2022, participants continued to secure housing through the new streamlined process and communication loop between Ujamaa Place and HousingLink. At the time of the writing of this report, and after one year of the pilot, 11 participants have been housed (9 in Saint Paul, 2 in Minneapolis through RHSP efforts), 1 participant is actively searching for housing, 8 individual landlords are housing participants (6 in Saint Paul, 2 in Minneapolis), and a pipeline of 41 interested landlords in Saint Paul has been established. Participants who were housed in Minneapolis and the landlords who housed them did not have access to RHSP funds and were not included in the subsequent data collection for the pilot as they were outside the geographic scope of the Returning Home Saint Paul program.

Timeline

- **2018-2019**
 - The City of Saint Paul partnered with the Harvard-Bloomberg Innovation Track Team to complete a human-centered design process to investigate housing challenges experienced by individuals returning home from incarceration.
 - The Harvard-Bloomberg team recommends two prototypes for a Returning Home Saint Paul pilot program.
 - The Carter administration invests in Community-First Public Safety initiatives, including Returning Home Saint Paul.
- **2020**
 - Preliminary high-level discussions begin between partner organizations.
 - Planned pilot launch is set for late spring 2020.
 - The COVID-19 pandemic delays the pilot launch.
 - S.A.F.E. Housing Saint Paul Tenant Protections are passed.
- **December 2020**
 - Returning Home Saint Paul pilot is launched.
 - COVID-19 vaccinations begin in Minnesota.
- **January 2021**
 - Participants begin to enroll in the program.
- **February 2021**
 - Ujamaa Place case manager joins the project to help facilitate the housing search for participants enrolled in RHSP.
- **March 2021**
 - The City hosts a root cause analysis session to discuss programmatic barriers and potential solutions.
 - MNJRC conducts interviews with enrolled participants to better understand barriers to seeking and securing housing through the program.
- **April 2021**

- S.A.F.E. Housing Saint Paul Tenant Protections enforcement enjoined.
- **May 2021**
 - An outreach coordinator from HousingLink joins the project to increase outreach to Saint Paul landlords.
- **June 2021**
 - Participants begin to be housed.
 - MNJRC hires a research project lead for the evaluation of the RHSP project.
 - Minnesota’s eviction moratorium begins to phase out.
- **July 2021**
 - Facilitated by MNJRC, communication loop established between the Ujamaa Place case manager and the HousingLink outreach coordinator to better ensure connection between landlords and participants when units become available.
 - HousingLink adds a feature to their website that allows landlords to indicate that they are interested in the Beyond Backgrounds program next to their open unit listings.
 - First case of the Delta variant confirmed in Minnesota.
- **August 2021**
 - Data collection streamlining process established by MNJRC and partners.
 - MNJRC establishes a data collection process in partnership with Ujamaa Place to track participant barriers to actively searching for housing and barriers to securing housing.
- **December 2021**
 - Discussions around the future of the pilot begin in earnest.
 - First case of the Omicron variant confirmed in Minnesota.
- **January 2022**
 - At the one-year point, 11 participants have been housed (9 in Saint Paul, 2 in Minneapolis), 1 participant is actively searching for housing, 8 individual landlords are housing participants (6 in Saint Paul, 2 in Minneapolis), and 41 landlords have indicated interest in housing participants.
 - Minneapolis and Saint Paul reinstate city-wide mask mandates.
- **February 2022**
 - One-year check-in report is completed by MNJRC and disseminated to City of Saint Paul stakeholders, partners, and participants.
- **March 2022**
 - Pilot scheduled to close enrollment, with continued support given to existing housed participants for one year after lease signing.
 - Evaluation anticipated to continue through spring of 2023.

Participant status

This table approximates the status of each housed participant, including when they originally enrolled in the RHSP program and started searching for housing, the date their lease was signed, how many months (to date of this report, February 2022) they have been housed, and approximate dates for the 6-month and 12-month check-ins with housed participants living in Saint Paul. The table is organized by lease signing date, with Participant 1 being the first participant housed. Participants who were housed in Minneapolis are listed at the bottom of this table.

PARTICIPANT	DATE ENROLLED in RHSP	DATE LEASE SIGNED	# OF MONTHS HOUSED (Jan 2022)	6-MONTH CHECK-IN	12-MONTH CHECK-IN
Participant 1	March 2021	June 2021	7 months	Jan 2022	June 2022
Participant 2	March 2021	July 2021	6 months	Dec 2021	July 2022
Participant 3	March 2021	July 2021	6 months	Jan 2022	July 2022
Participant 4	July 2021	Sept 2021	4 months	March 2022	Sept 2022
Participant 5	May 2021	Nov 2021	2 months	May 2022	Nov 2022
Participant 6	Sept 2021	Dec 2021	1 month	June 2022	Dec 2022
Participant 7	Sept 2021	Dec 2021	1 month	June 2022	Dec 2022
Participant 8	Dec 2021	Jan 2022	< 1 month	July 2022	Jan 2023
Participant 9	Sept 2021	Jan 2022	< 1 month	July 2022	Jan 2023
Participant 10	July 2021	Oct 2021	3 months	N/A - Resident lives in Mpls	N/A - Resident lives in Mpls
Participant 11	March 2021	Jan 2022	< 1 month	N/A - Resident lives in Mpls	N/A - Resident lives in Mpls

Enrollment for the RHSP program will end in March 2022. Evaluation is anticipated to run through spring of 2023, at which point all 12-month check-ins with housed participants should be completed.

What to expect from the final report

The data collected up to this one-year check-in period have provided us with preliminary learnings and considerations as we wrap up enrollment in the pilot and continue data collection and analysis through the end of the evaluation in spring of 2023. In a little over a year, we look forward to presenting an expanded data landscape that can deepen our understanding of the final quantitative and qualitative data specific to this program as well as the broader data context surrounding these stories and numbers. This includes but is not limited to:

- Final costs to house each participant through application fees and security deposit support.
- Final costs of the program, including case management and partner staff time, per participant.
- Final housing outcomes and recidivism outcomes for participants.
- Impacts for participants and across families of 12 months being housed through the program.
- Impacts for landlords across 12 months of housing a participant.
- Final amount of access fund dispersed to landlords at the end of the 12-month period for each participant.

Data collected throughout the first year of the pilot are consistent with research findings that emphasize the multifaceted barriers individuals face when returning home from incarceration. Barriers to securing employment, housing, and a sense of community are deep challenges that residents returning home face. Multifaceted social issues require multifaceted approaches, such as the RHSP pilot, which brings together organizations with expertise in supportive services, case management, landlord relationships, the housing market, politics and policies, urban planning, community building, collective leadership, and evaluation. More information on the intersecting challenges residents returning home from incarceration face can be found below in a brief exploration of existing research on this issue.

ISSUE OVERVIEW

The Returning Home Saint Paul pilot set out to address one of the many, and perhaps the most immediate, challenges individuals returning home from a period of incarceration face: the ability to access housing. Housing is a basic need, and access to stable housing reduces the risk of recidivism.¹²

Across the nation, and in Saint Paul, access to housing is a challenge even for individuals without a criminal background. Affordable housing is scarce, and market-rate housing in Saint Paul is hard to find and expensive. According to HousingLink, the vacancy rate in 2021 in Saint Paul hovered around 3%, and there were only 281 affordable¹³ one-bedroom rental vacancies.¹⁴ Landlords often require tenants to make 2.5 times the rent in income, and for 2021 this would require tenants to make \$2,500 a month to be eligible for a one-bedroom apartment.¹⁵

The addition of a criminal background makes this challenge seem insurmountable. Research (and any conversation with an individual attempting to access housing with a criminal record) paints a grim picture: a criminal background is a significant barrier. In his research, Lucius Couloute of the Prison Policy Initiative points out that homelessness and incarceration form a vicious cycle in which one is more likely to lead to the other.¹⁶ As we criminalize homelessness, this leads to incarceration and conversely, individuals who have spent time in prison are 7 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general public (this is *13 times* more likely for those incarcerated more than once).¹⁷ Those who do not end up unhoused often have limited options, and most end up living with family. Research from the Urban Institute found that 60-88% of respondents in their returning home study (depending on the state) reported living with family members upon release.¹⁸ Furthermore, restrictions for public housing and housing vouchers (for example, individuals with criminal backgrounds can wait up to seven years after the dates of their convictions—and sometimes longer—before they become eligible for public housing) along with landlord reluctance to rent to individuals with criminal backgrounds combine to make housing increasingly challenging to access for those returning home.¹⁹

¹² [Who Pays? The True Cost of Incarceration on Families, Ella Baker Center, 2015](#)

¹³ Private market housing, affordable to 60% of the area median income

¹⁴ [St. Paul Rental Housing Brief, HousingLink, 2021](#)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ [Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people, Prison Policy Initiative, 2018](#)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ [Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Research Findings from the Urban Institute's Prisoner Reentry Portfolio, Urban Institute, 2006](#)

¹⁹ [Finding housing is hard—but for people leaving prison and jail, it's almost impossible, Vera Institute, 2018](#)

Multifaceted issues require multifaceted solutions that are often overwhelming, expensive, and politically challenging for organizations and government entities to address. In her exploration of evidence-based strategies that promote improved outcomes in housing for individuals in re-entry, McKernan notes that “discharge planning, an expansion of transition services, and the provision of targeted housing for ex-offenders can play a critical role in improving housing stability.”²⁰ Around the country, however, local government and community-based organizations are working to address this issue. For example, the Housing Authority of New Orleans is updating its screening process to make it easier for formerly incarcerated individuals to get housing, while Seattle and Washington, D.C. have barred landlords from asking about felony convictions on rental applications.²¹ The Georgia Department of Corrections may be taking the most innovative approach: In August, it opened the Metro Reentry Facility in Atlanta, believed to be the first transitional state prison for offenders slated for release within 18 months. “Returning citizens” receive intensive counseling, vocational training, and housing support so they will leave with two things: a job and a home.²²

Here in Saint Paul, RHSP tackled a few pieces of this puzzle in a remarkably affordable approach, as is detailed in the preliminary learnings in this report. First, the program leverages the ability for one community organization in Saint Paul, Ujamaa Place, to provide case management to support those returning home in their search for housing. While limited research exists showing the effectiveness of case management programs on housing specifically, a recent evaluation of Ujamaa Place participant outcomes points to promising results: Despite multiple barriers to stable housing, the percent of participants renting their own housing increased from 12% to 57%, and the percent of participants who were experiencing homelessness decreased from 49% to 26% over the course of a year of participation with Ujamaa Place.²³ Furthermore, ample research shows that wrap-around service programs like Ujamaa Place are critical for positive outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals. Successfully connecting these services with other programs specializing in housing (like HousingLink) may be an effective approach.

Second, the RHSP program seeks to mitigate landlords' perceived risk through a financial safety net should their housing of formerly incarcerated individuals lead to negative outcomes. Research shows that criminal history is one significant aspect that landlords consider in selection criteria for tenants, and some landlords have blanket bans or lookback periods for certain convictions.²⁴

An effort like RHSP has the potential to begin to address the significant hurdle of accessing housing by supporting the development of a partnership between Ujamaa Place, HousingLink, and the City of Saint Paul. Research shows that community partnerships require a “backbone organization” to be successful.²⁵ Backbone organizations serve as “coordinating bodies that bring together a diversity of stakeholders and lead a synchronized effort to achieve a common goal.” These organizations should, “(1) guide the vision and strategy, (2) support aligned initiatives, (3) establish shared measurement practices, (4) build public will, (5) advance policy and (6) mobilize funding.”²⁶ Thus, the City of Saint Paul has the potential to increase the effectiveness of this program by amplifying its role as the backbone organization for the partnership.

²⁰ [Evidence-Based Strategies That Promote Improved Outcomes, VOA](#)

²¹ [Where ‘Returning Citizens’ Find Housing After Prison, Pew, 2019](#)

²² Ibid

²³ [Ujamaa Place Evaluation of 2013 and 2015 Participant Outcomes, Wilder Research, 2016](#)

²⁴ [Opening the Door, Family Housing Fund & Housing Justice Center, 2021](#)

²⁵ [Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact: Part 2, GCF, 2012](#)

²⁶ [What are Backbone Organizations? Altarum Healthcare Value Hub](#)

EVALUATION METHODS

The RHSP team is partnering with the [Minnesota Justice Research Center \(MNJRC\)](#) to measure, track, and report on program impact through quantitative outcomes and qualitative participant and landlord experiences.

The MNJRC is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to driving meaningful change to Minnesota's criminal legal system through rigorous and community-centered research, education, and policy development. The MNJRC centers our work around exploring values like humane and fair treatment for all, safety, wellbeing, and trust. We provide our community and policymakers with information and tools needed to create a criminal legal system that truly delivers justice.

Once a participant is housed, the MNJRC research project lead conducts phone interviews with participants and landlords to better understand barriers to participating in the program, how the program is working for those who are enrolled, and what can be improved. Follow-up interviews are scheduled for the 6-month and 12-month time points following the signing of a lease through Returning Home Saint Paul. Initial interviews focused on each participant's background, their initial reentry experiences, potential barriers, their immediate and long-term goals, and other details. Follow-up interviews are conducted after six months of participation in the program and will include a focus on ongoing experiences, barriers they have encountered, and other potential issues. The third and final interview will be conducted after completion of one year in the program. Final interviews will again highlight any barriers or issues participants encountered as well as reflections on their experience in the program and reentry and their goals for the future.

In addition to these interviews, MNJRC engages in frequent check-in conversations with the partner organizations to gain a high-level perspective of participant and landlord experiences, partner experiences of the program, and how partner relationships can be better leveraged to achieve program goals.

As of February 2022, MNJRC researchers have conducted 12 interviews with participants and 3 interviews with participating landlords. Interviews with participants and landlords were semi-structured, approximately 30 minutes in length, and due to the ongoing pandemic were conducted either via phone or the digital platform Zoom, depending on interviewee preference. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed by the research project lead and/or via the transcription service Scribie.

The MNJRC research team also collected descriptive quantitative data, including the number of participants currently enrolled in the program, number of calls made to landlords by participants, the number of units managed by participating landlords, and the fund amount accessed by each participant and landlord during the duration of the program. Quantitative data was shared via a streamlined data collection process, with HousingLink and Ujamaa Place delivering monthly reports to the City of Saint Paul, which was housed in a secure Sharepoint drive by the City. Data was then shared through a password-protected link to the MNJRC research team. Participant names were replaced with de-identified codes throughout this process. Data shared between partners included monthly landlord surveys, emergence of any tenant-landlord issues including unpaid or late rent, and demographic and enrollment data from HousingLink, and enrollment changes and updates on barriers to participation from Ujamaa Place. Interview data from participants, landlords, and partners collected by the MNJRC were stored securely in a password protected Google Drive and was not shared outside of the MNJRC research team.

PRELIMINARY LEARNINGS

The following section details preliminary learnings from the start of the pilot up to this one-year check-in point. The evaluation period will run through spring of 2023, when a final report with further in-depth data analysis and concrete recommendations will be presented.

BY THE NUMBERS

“It feels good to be in my new place, because it’s in my community.” - Housed Participant

The program set the goal to house 20 participants over the course of the 18-month pilot. As of February 2022, **11 participants have been successfully housed** thus far. **2 of these participants were housed in Minneapolis** through RHSP program efforts. Participants housed in Minneapolis did not have access to RHSP funds and were not included in the subsequent data collection of the program.

A full 41 interested landlords have been added to a Saint Paul-specific pipeline to help house participants. **8 landlords provided housing** to participants, and **6 landlords are housing participants in Saint Paul**. Of those 6, 1 landlord has housed 3 participants, and 1 landlord has housed 2 participants.

Partners estimate that **for every 10 landlords contacted, about 30% (3) are definitely interested in the program** and may be able to be connected to a participant, while 40% (4) will say ‘no’ or not respond, and the other 30% (3) will be somewhat interested but then will lose contact.

Even with the support of the program, participants have to work extremely hard to secure housing. Participants made an average of **18 calls** to different landlords before finding housing (max: 38).

Finding housing takes as much time as a part-time job. Partners have reported spending **up to 20 hours per week** working to find housing for RHSP participants. This includes searching for new listings, communicating with partners, meeting with participants, and cold-calling landlords.

Participants stick with it: It has taken an average of **2.5 months** for participants to find housing after enrolling in the program (max: 6 months). Moreover, many participants reported searching for housing for months or even years on their own before enrolling in the RHSP program.

YEAR-TO-DATE PROGRAM DATA SUMMARY		
Landlords Interested	41	Number of landlords expressing interest in the program that have been added to the Saint Paul-specific pipeline to house participants.
Landlords Housing Participants	8	Number of individual landlords housing a pilot participant. 6 landlords are providing housing in Saint Paul, and 2 in Minneapolis. Landlords in Minneapolis were not eligible to enroll in the RHSP program and were therefore not included in the subsequent data collection of the pilot.

Families Housed	11	Number of individual families housed. 9 families were housed in Saint Paul, and a further 2 families were housed in Minneapolis, and thus are not counted as current participants of the RHSP program.
Participants Searching for Housing	1	Number of participants actively searching for housing. This number has fluctuated: A participant's housing search may move between active and inactive based on income and employment, mental health situation, or other factors that necessitate a revision of supportive services planning and prioritizing.
Rental Application Fees Paid	\$58 for 1 participant (total)	Amount of funds used to support participants with application fee costs. Each participant is awarded up to \$60, which can be adjusted based on need. All but 1 current participant paid their own application fees.
Security Deposits Paid	\$4,342.50 across 6 of the 9 housed participants in Saint Paul	Amount of funds used to support participants with security deposit costs. Each participant is awarded up to \$500, which can be adjusted based on need. 3 participants did not use RHSP assistance in paying their security deposits.
Other Participant Housing Fees Paid	\$589.50 for 1 participant (total)	Amount of funds used to support participants with housing costs outside of application fees and/or security deposits. One participant paid his own application fee and security deposit as part of his case plan with Ujamaa Place, and then was supported with \$589.50 in RHSP funds for half of his first month's rent to secure this housing opportunity.
Access Funds Disbursed to Landlords	\$0	Amount of funds paid out for claims against the access fund. A report of \$0 is a positive indicator meaning no claims or funds have had to be used to mitigate a loss.
Incidents of Reoffence	1*	Identifies the number of participants who have re-offended during their participation in the pilot. Over 90% of participants have <i>not</i> been re-incarcerated since enrolling in the program.

**At the time the report was finalized, we were notified that one participant had been briefly re-incarcerated for a probation violation. This individual has since returned home. Final recidivism outcomes will be explored in more detail in the final report.*

Data presented in the above table show some of the key progress points of the program thus far, including the number of families housed (9 in Saint Paul, 2 in Minneapolis), the number of landlords housing participants (6 in Saint Paul, 2 in Minneapolis), the number of landlords interested in learning more about the program and/or housing a participant once a unit becomes available (41), and the direct cost of housing participants so far. The data show that **housing participants is impactful yet incredibly inexpensive**, with under \$5,000 being used to help cover security deposits and application fees. Importantly, at the one-year check-in point **\$0 of the access fund available to landlords has been requested** through the claims process, and **over 90% participants have *not* been re-incarcerated** since entering the program.

BROAD IMPACTS

Taken together, the RHSP program had a significant positive impact on participants. Participants reported feeling hopeful and supported, safer and more stable, and like they were members of the community. Finding housing

was an emotionally exhausting experience but participants ultimately felt a sense of joy and accomplishment. In addition, landlords reported a reduced sense of risk and strong rapport with partners.

Participants report that the financial support and case management offered through the program has helped them **feel hopeful** and **supported** by the Saint Paul community.

“When I went through the program, I had a counselor, I had a spokesperson, I had a voice. That’s what made things different for me, because I had someone to speak for me, instead of just looking like the regular stereotype and not get taken serious. That made things a lot better, because I had someone to represent me.”

- Housed Participant

“Because of my background, I had to do a double deposit as well as the rent, so the financial support was really helpful. I didn’t know how I was gonna get it. I was thinking, ‘If I gotta spend this money, we’re not gonna have a bed or nothing.’ That was super, super helpful. I was blessed with that.”

- Housed Participant

“The financial support was the best thing the housing program did for me. When you don’t have a family or wife or something like that, you’re out there by yourself. Sometimes you need a little support like that. There’s always a chance you might fall down, so it’s good to have someone looking out for you.”

- Housed Participant

Finding housing through the support of the RHSP program has increased feelings of **safety** and **stability** for participants.

“Now my daughter can run around in her little walker and not run into anyone or anything. I think my girl is a lot more comfortable to be at the end of her pregnancy and to be in her own space and home. That takes a lot of weight off my shoulders. Having that happiness at home has given me a lot more stability.”

- Housed Participant

Being able to move into market-rate housing – in Saint Paul specifically – has helped participants feel like **part of the community**.

“A lot of guys are originally from Saint Paul. So, when they get housed and they’re in the areas that they grew up in, they feel a sense of community, and now they’re paying rent and they’re like, ‘Hey, I’m a contributing part of the community.’ Most of the participants are specifically wanting to look in Saint Paul because that’s closer to their family.”

- Andre Knight, Life Coach at Ujamaa Place

Partners and participants have also noted that the process of finding housing has been an incredibly **emotional process**, one that has led to participants feeling defeated when they received rejections from landlords.

Once the participants signed their leases, their tangible **sense of joy and accomplishment** inspired other participants who were still searching.

"I would say it's worth it, to be honest. There may be a few sacrifices you have to make as far as educating yourself or working or whatever. You can really tell the people who put it together care and they care about getting good results."

- Housed Participant

"I feel wanted. I feel like the situation I was going through is not stopping the great expectancy of life, like I can actually still live a life. It gives you hope."

- Housed Participant

As intended, landlords report that the program **reduces their sense of risk** and allows them to **build rapport** with partners.

"Ujamaa Place is great because they vouched for him and gave me security about having the case manager be there in case I have any problems to bridge that gap. It's just great giving back to the community, to some person in need."

- Landlord

"It's a great opportunity to build rapport with Ujamaa and the City of Saint Paul, and connect some more. I want to continue to get more properties and give a hand to whoever needs it."

- Landlord

PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES

In the interviews with the MNJRC research team, participants shared their goals and dreams, the challenges they faced as they searched for housing, and the impact the program has had on their lives, relationships, and perspectives. While each participant's experience is different, there are several themes that appeared throughout the interviews.

Program enrollment

Participants were introduced to Ujamaa Place and the Returning Home Saint Paul program in varying ways: **Prison career days, parole officers, family members, friends, and internet searches all served as entry points** into the program.

Family and relationships

Fatherhood motivated many of the participants to make positive changes in their lives, but resources for men – and especially for fathers – are scarce. Ujamaa Place serves as one of the few local resources available specifically for men returning home from incarceration.

"I have three kids. Being involved in incarceration and all that stuff, I missed out on their lives. Now, I get an opportunity to actually be in one of my kids' lives from start to finish, so that's one of my goals: just to make sure that I'm here for him every step of the way."

- Housed Participant

“Being able to see my kids run around my house, that’s what I want.”

- Housed Participant

Participants want to be there for their families, own their own homes, and many have dreams of owning businesses. From cooking to fashion, participants have wide ranging interests and dreams they want to turn into realities. Many of their dreams are rooted in family, community, and giving back to young people so they can have better futures.

Participants are motivated to give back to their communities. Several participants expressed a strong desire to give back to the youth and young people in their communities by providing mentorship and safe spaces for them to grow up, be inspired, and have more opportunities to thrive.

“I want to open a recreation center before I’m gone because I just want to have something to say that I helped out the community.”

- Housed Participant

“I want to find some type of way to be involved with Ujamaa or another community outreach program. Maybe I could mentor some young guys once a week. I want to inspire guys who are like me.”

- Housed Participant

Relational support is important. Participants who had relational support through family, partners, and friends were more likely to be able to save money and have more financial stability to rent at market-rate.

Financial stability

Budgeting for renting a market-rate housing has been new and challenging for many participants. One of the major challenges participants faced was their limited experience searching for housing, paying bills, and renting an apartment. For many participants, Ujamaa Place’s transitional housing and educational programming has served as an important foundation in this area, but **several participants have still struggled to maintain a budget plan that allows them to pay rent on time** once housed.

“I was just sitting here earlier trying to get all of my bills calculated, because now, with having a place, it’s phone bills, and there’s diapers and all this stuff, and that’s not even including extra expenses. That’s just what you have to do. So, you have to learn a whole different way of budgeting.”

- Housed Participant

PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

Below are the program experiences of two participants who have been housed through RHSP. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality. Participants provided input into their final written narratives and chose their pseudonyms.

Derrick

“To have a mayor supporting the program – and a Black mayor at that – that makes me feel important. It makes me feel like even though you might have made a decision that wasn’t the best, the fact that I’m home now makes me feel like I have someone who believes in me, someone who’s rooting for me.”

Derrick is a young father of two who considers his family the most important motivator in his life. Derrick’s parole officer recommended that he connect with Ujamaa Place upon returning home, and through this connection, Derrick was able to go to school to get his welding certification and earn a stable income. Since returning home, Derrick has taken several courses on entrepreneurship and financial literacy, and even started a podcast which earned him an award from the community.

Before finding housing through RHSP, Derrick was living with family members. Though he was satisfied with the situation, he wanted to leave to provide a private living space for his pregnant partner. Although Derrick had secure employment, he faced additional unexpected healthcare costs which ate into his savings. At times he found it difficult to get to work since he did not have his driver’s license. Derrick, like so many individuals in re-entry, was experiencing the multitude of collateral consequences that accompany a period of incarceration.

Derrick’s parole officer, whom he calls one of his key supports in addition to his coach at Ujamaa Place and his family, told him about the RHSP program. Derrick was enrolled in the RHSP pilot for approximately 4 months before securing housing. In that time, Derrick and Coach Andre completed 22 calls to individual landlords.

During this process, Derrick reported that many landlords were not willing to house him given the type of crime he had committed. He was told he would have to wait at least 10 years to be housed in some places. Derrick also reported that it was harder to make contact with larger complexes where a receptionist did a lot of the screening process before being able to connect with someone with the authority to make a decision about his application. Derrick also shared that unfamiliarity with the housing market, how to pay bills, and what is expected in terms of rent, deposits, and contracts, were challenges for himself as well as fellow participants going through the program. Despite these many challenges, Derrick displayed an incredibly resilient and optimistic outlook. Derrick’s drive to persevere through the roadblocks in his way ultimately inspired other participants to begin the process of searching for housing, as well.

Derrick expressed that moving into his own apartment afforded more stability and feelings of security for himself, his partner, and their newborn child. He reported that his experience in the program was a positive one, and that the financial support throughout the application process was incredibly helpful. Derrick described himself as resilient, and Coach Andre highlighted that Derrick served as a role model and motivation to other participants throughout the process.

Derrick hopes to continue to build his financial security and open savings accounts for his children. He eventually hopes to buy and/or build his own home, and ultimately he looks forward to being able to give back to the community through volunteering with Ujamaa Place and mentoring other young men.

Junior

“I’m just trying to find daycare and be a good father right now, that is really my main goal. Everything I’m doing right now is for my baby.”

Junior is the sole caretaker of his newborn child. When Junior’s child was born, he was living in less stable housing, including sharing rooms with multiple people, and his child was placed in foster care. This drove Junior to find a way to secure his own housing so he could raise his son.

Prior to enrolling in the RHSP program, Junior had been searching for housing for over a year, and had been living with friends, in parks, and in his car when he couldn’t find another place to stay. Junior heard about Ujamaa Place through the in-prison job fair and again from a friend who had returned home from incarceration and connected with Ujamaa Place. Once connected with Ujamaa Place, Coach Andre told him about the RHSP program, and together they were able to get Junior into stable housing that would allow him to care for his child.

Junior was enrolled in the program for approximately six months before he secured housing. As the participant who was enrolled in the program the longest, he also made the most calls in partnership with Coach Andre: 38 calls were made to individual landlords before Junior signed his lease. But Junior and Andre never gave up.

Junior faced many emotional challenges while dealing with rejection in both employment and housing due to his background. Although he felt disheartened and wanted to give up several times, he was encouraged by people in his life to write letters of appeal for these situations. Eventually, these denials were reversed, and Junior was able to secure employment and housing through the appeal process. Junior has often been described as persistent, and he notes that this persistence and support from his network and Ujamaa Place have helped him succeed.

Like most of the other participants, Junior found success with a landlord who already had an interest in working with formerly incarcerated individuals. After meeting with Junior, his now landlord helped him get his denial reversed with the property management company. Junior also felt that the financial support of the program was extremely helpful, especially as he is the sole caretaker of his newborn child.

Junior’s primary goal is to be a good father and raise his son. Music also plays an important role in his life and is one of his inspirations. Eventually, he would like to own his own home and to start a recreation center for youth. He notes that growing up in Saint Paul he was involved in rec centers, and he wants to provide a similar space in the community where children and young people can feel safe.

The above quotes and narratives from participants demonstrate how impactful this program has proven to be for residents returning home from incarceration and their families. Securing housing through this program has provided the opportunity for several participants to step more readily into their roles as fathers and provide safe spaces for their children to thrive. Overall, participants have noted feeling hopeful after long periods, often many years, of feeling defeated and hopeless. The process has not been easy for participants, and in speaking with two of the pilot’s key partners “on the ground,” a clearer picture emerged of what *has* worked for participants and landlords, and what opportunities for program improvement remain.

PARTNER VOICES

This program is made possible in large part by the support, expertise, and efforts of community partners Ujamaa Place and HousingLink. The Minnesota Justice Research Center conducted several interviews with partners Andre Knight (Ujamaa Place) and Kahari Smith-Brewer (HousingLink) to better understand how participants and landlords have been experiencing the 2020-2021 housing market. Andre is a Life Coach at Ujamaa Place and serves as the case manager for RHSP participants, providing an essential link between participants and landlords. Kahari is an Outreach Coordinator at HousingLink, and in this role works to establish and maintain relationships with landlords, creating a pipeline of interested landlords for Andre to connect with participants. In this section, Andre and Kahari share their insights and recommendations for the program based on their daily interactions with program participants and Saint Paul landlords.

What's Working

The very presence of a Saint Paul-specific program working to house residents returning home from incarceration helps participants feel seen and supported by their community. Andre Knight has a deep understanding of the population he serves daily and the critical challenges they face upon returning home. Andre works one-on-one with program participants to help them search for housing, secure other resources they may need, and make a budgeting plan to set them up for success. He notes that many participants are originally from Saint Paul, and that this is where they want to live in order to stay connected to their family, friends, and community.

The presence of the program has helped landlords feel more secure renting to residents returning home from incarceration. Participants and partners report that landlords have been more willing to move beyond a participant's background and listen to a participant's story of how they have changed their life when they hear that there is a City of Saint Paul-backed program supporting the participants. Having Ujamaa Place involved as case management and having access to the housing access fund has also helped landlords feel more secure in housing residents returning home from incarceration.

The program has created a successful communication loop that has proven instrumental in securing housing. Facilitating connections between participants, case managers, and landlords has been key to finding housing in a market that moves quickly. Before the start of the program, participants were largely on their own when it came to searching for housing and spent extensive amounts of time, energy, and application fees on processes that ultimately ended in rejection. Landlords are currently able to notify HousingLink that they are interested in housing residents returning home from incarceration, and Saint Paul-specific leads are then sent by Kahari (HousingLink) directly to Andre (Ujamaa Place) immediately as new units become available. This three-way communication loop between Kahari (HousingLink), Andre (Ujamaa Place), and the participants has been an important feature of the program that has resulted in participants securing housing.

"I find that, when that chain of communication is quick and efficient, clients tend to get housed faster. This is consistent throughout all of the programs [at HousingLink] that we operate under Beyond Backgrounds: When there's a consistent flow of communication between myself and the case manager and the participant in some capacity, usually that aids greatly in getting the individuals housed quickly."

- Kahari Smith-Brewer, Outreach Coordinator at HousingLink

“The communication with HousingLink and myself has been great because what I’ve noticed is the leads that Kahari has sent me have been the landlords that are saying ‘yes.’ What I do is reach out to Kahari and he’ll check in with me; it’s been very effective working with him. His leads have been the landlords we’ve had success with.”

- Andre Knight, Life Coach at Ujamaa Place

Continuing Challenges

“One of the major challenges is our demographics. We have guys here that are coming from homelessness, we have guys here who have never lived on their own. We have guys who don’t have stability in their lives in any area.”

- Andre Knight, Life Coach at Ujamaa Place

Landlords’ subjectivity and risk aversion continue to make finding housing hard for residents returning home from incarceration. The most frequent reason landlords have given for not renting to a program participant is the 8-10 year arbitrary time limit for renting to someone with a background. Some landlords may be more lenient but will exclude candidacy from people who have certain crimes on their record, including person-related crimes, gun-related crimes, and sexual offenses.

While landlords managing fewer units have often been more willing to speak with program participants and consider renting to them, this group of landlords also tends to feel financial risk more acutely than larger property management companies. While larger property management companies may be better equipped to absorb risk, these companies often have strict (and as the research demonstrates, unnecessarily restrictive) policies that do not allow for the individual discretion of landlords working under the company umbrella.

Some landlords have voiced confusion about the program and what their responsibilities may be if they participate. In conversations with landlords, Kahari (HousingLink) has heard that several landlords’ first impression of the program is that they will be matched to a participant and that they will not have a choice whether to rent to that individual. Many landlords have also expressed the concern that if a participant is having trouble finding housing, they must be “the worst of the worst.” Kahari notes that **additional landlord outreach** would be hugely beneficial to inform Saint Paul landlords of how the program operates and how it can support them in housing a resident returning home from incarceration. Once the landlords have been informed how the program really works, they have been more interested in participating, even renting to multiple participants. As noted above, one of the landlords is now renting to three participants.

Participants and partners report that financial stability has been one of the greatest challenges to securing market-rate housing. Of the eight housed participants, half have reported having trouble paying their rent on time since being housed. While this can be due to health issues and employment disruptions, Andre (Ujamaa Place) has heard from participants that, more often than not, the issue comes down to participants’ limited experience and training around financial budgeting.

Andre stresses that **increasing wraparound services** for participants, including career services, financial and housing market literacy support, and rental assistance programs, would make a huge difference in participants being able to find employment and housing, and then maintain both.

CONSIDERATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Through interviews with participants and landlords, and meaningful and consistent engagement with program partners, the Minnesota Justice Research Center has identified several points of consideration that have surfaced from the data at this one-year check-in point.

Together, the considerations below can be summarized broadly as follows:

- Increase participant support.
- Increase the pipeline of participants and landlords.
- Improve relationships and communication among all partners.

Provide additional support for participants, particularly fathers. Connecting participants with existing resources for fathers as well as advocating for additional father-specific resources at the city, county, and state levels could be key to supporting participants and their families as they move into permanent housing. Additionally, increasing wraparound services for participants, including employment support and financial education, can help them achieve the financial stability they need to support themselves and their families as they move into market-rate housing and work towards their short-term and long-term goals.

To reach the original goal of the program, 20 housed participants, aim for enrolling triple the participants, or 60 enrolled participants in the program. This would entail increasing both the pipeline for entry into the program and the resources available to participants in the form of wraparound services and case management. Partnering with additional community organizations which serve broader formerly incarcerated populations and/or partnering with another city like Minneapolis could help to deepen the pipeline of both participants and potential landlords.

Increase landlord outreach and invest in relationship building between organizations and landlords. Increased landlord outreach and engagement could help to maximize a Saint Paul-specific pool of interested landlords. Creative and meaningful outreach can also clarify certain points of the program that may seem unclear or particularly risky to landlords. Approaching landlord connections from a 'quality' in addition to a 'quantity' perspective could also be a helpful strategy. Cultivating personal relationships with landlords has proven to be a strong entry point to getting participants housed. Continuing to provide the human resources necessary to build and maintain relationships with landlords could be impactful going forward.

Explore implementing rental assistance to support participants as they transition into market-rate housing, and to provide a safety net for landlords who are interested in the program. Property owners with fewer units are more likely to rent to residents with barriers in their backgrounds. However, these landlords also feel the impacts of late rent much more keenly than larger property companies. Both participants and landlords need support when it comes to rent, and implementing a rental assistance program could help support all parties, making participants more likely to succeed in the rental market and encouraging landlords to continue to participate in the program.

Establish and facilitate frequent communication loops between all partners. Increasing communication between the case manager, participant, and landlords is essential to successfully house participants. While allowing community partners to take the lead of projects is an important aspect of collective partnership and social change initiatives, nonprofit partners often do not have the same levels of resources that government entities do, making it harder for these partners to spend the time to identify and then meet the needs of a program. Therefore,

programs can greatly benefit when government entities like the City of Saint Paul take a more prominent role in ensuring that partners have the support they need and that the program is functioning as intended.

NEXT STEPS

The data collected up to this one-year check-in point have provided us with preliminary learnings and considerations as we end enrollment in the pilot and continue data collection and analysis through the end of the evaluation in spring of 2023. In 2023, we look forward to presenting an expanded data landscape that can deepen our understanding of the final quantitative and qualitative data specific to this program as well as the broader data context surrounding these stories and numbers, including but not limited to:

- Final costs to house each participant through application fee and security deposit support.
- Final costs of the program, including case management and partner staff time, per participant.
- Impacts for participants and across families of 12 months being housed through the program.
- Final housing outcomes and recidivism outcomes for participants.
- Impacts for landlords across 12 months of housing a participant.
- Final amount of access fund dispersed to landlords at the end of the 12-month period for each participant.

Enrollment for the pilot will end in March 2022. The program is designed so that existing housed participants receive support from RHSP for 12 months after their lease signing date. Evaluation is anticipated to continue through spring of 2023.

Learn more about the RHSP pilot program: <https://www.stpaul.gov/departments/financial-empowerment/returning-home-saint-paul>