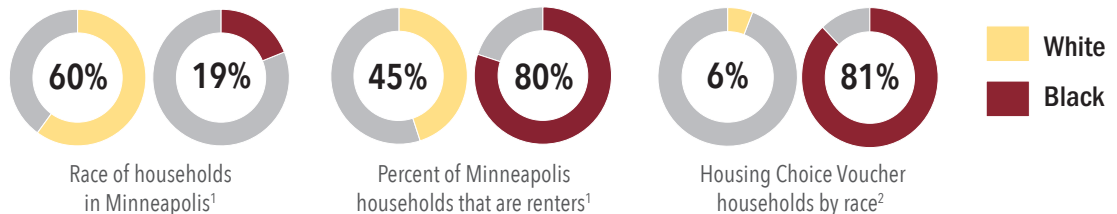


Building Capacity with Black Women

Action Research Findings & Recommendations for the Minneapolis Housing Choice Voucher Program

In 2019, under the leadership of Dr. Brittany Lewis, the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) worked to build and facilitate an inclusive participatory action research process that provided 10 low-income Black women in Minnesota the time, space, and tools needed to resume conscious control over their own housing stability. The project aims to support black women, who are disproportionately affected by the nationwide evictions crisis. Through strategic support, this research project allowed them to be co-collaborators in an action research project of their choosing. This brief report provides a detailed account of the action research project the cohort took on, emphasizing project findings and recommendations.

Black households are dramatically over-represented among voucher holders



Due to generations of exclusion from homeownership, 80% of Black households in Minneapolis are renters, compared to just 45% of white households. Black households are dramatically overrepresented among voucher holders (79%) and frequent movers (88%) compared to white households (6%).

What we heard from interviews with 56 voucher holders in Minneapolis



True housing stability is difficult to define

Because many voucher holders struggle to get their basic needs met, 60% of participants initially expressed uncertainty when asked what housing stability meant to them. In some cases, instead of describing what would help their families thrive, their visions for housing stability revolved around removing unsafe conditions or simply having a roof over their heads.



Unsafe and unhealthy conditions are common

From running water to walls that aren't falling down, voucher holders frequently shared a desire for housing conditions that most renters take for granted. Many said their Section 8 housing units were too small, dirty, or in disrepair, and 25% said they didn't feel safe or comfortable in their housing because of loitering in their building or violence in their neighborhoods.



Frequent rejections, too little time to search

Because of frequent rejections from landlords and limited time to search, voucher holders lack real housing choice and are typically forced into undesirable housing. More than 60% of participants said they encountered landlords who would not rent to voucher holders. While 43% said they did not have enough time to find adequate housing, Housing Choice Voucher program staff report only 20% of voucher holders request an extension.



Rents far beyond what a voucher supports

In cities like Minneapolis, rents continue to rise forcing many voucher holders into low-quality housing because the vast majority of apartments are too expensive to be supported by the Section 8 program. While vouchers are intended to ensure residents pay 30% of their monthly income on housing, rents are so high that nearly 40% of voucher holders pay more than 30% so they can live in decent housing.



Varied relationships with landlords

Participants believe that many landlords stereotype voucher holders as unclean, irresponsible and destructive —but their relationships were varied. On one end of the spectrum, 37% of participants described a healthy relationship with their landlords while 22% said they were currently dealing or had experienced negative relationships with landlords.



Challenging process for voucher holders

Voucher holders described the Section 8 process as “overwhelm[ing],” “scary,” and “a job.” With each HCV Program technician averaging a caseload of 350 households, voucher holders had challenges connecting with and receiving support from program staff. Handling up to 400 cases per month, inspectors’ workloads also make it difficult for voucher holders to attain

Recommendations

HCV program should provide training on tenants’ rights, leadership development, and navigating the Section 8 Program

Voucher holders should have access to tenant rights training that build participants’ power and knowledge. These trainings should create a sense of community and emphasize the value of forming or joining tenant associations. Trainings should not only help voucher holders understand how best to navigate the local housing market, but also provide specific knowledge about the HCV Program itself. In addition, HCV Program staff could do more to make voucher holders aware of existing trainings offered by local housing advocates such as HOME Line and Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid.



HCV programs should increase communication and support around voucher deadlines

False urgency or misunderstandings about time restrictions results in high stress among voucher holders and many families accepting housing that is unsafe, inadequate or does not meet their needs. Voucher holders’ awareness of the time they have to search is paramount and the HCV Program must do a better job of communicating time limits to voucher holders. To do this, housing coordinators must better understand the barriers being faced by voucher holders.



HCV program should undertake cultural competency training for its staff, and hold staff accountable

All MPHA staff or, at a minimum, the HCV Program staff should receive cultural competency training, such as the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI). Following the training, supervisors must hold staff accountable, monitoring the ways they are implementing what they learned. To gain critical insight from voucher holders themselves, it could be beneficial to circulate a survey to see if program participants feel the impact of the training. Do voucher holders feel heard and respected when interacting with program staff? Do they feel their needs are recognized?



Additional recommendations for HCV program

- » Doing more to help tenants locate housing
- » Conducting exit interviews when a voucher holder leaves a unit to create database that ranks or even blacklists landlords so voucher holders can make informed decisions when they apply to a property.
- » Improving the inspection process
- » Creating a point or a benefits system that could increase landlord buy-in and improve landlord-tenant rapport
- » Providing culturally tailored training to landlords and property management staff
- » Sustaining self-sufficiency and homeownership programs