

# Mitigating Apprehension about Section 8 Vouchers: The Positive Role of Housing Specialists in Search and Placement

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## *Abstract*

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has found that Section 8 voucher recipients are often unable to secure apartments outside of high-poverty areas in tight urban rental markets. However, intensive housing placement services greatly improve the success and mobility of voucher holders. Drawing on ethnographic research in the housing placement department of a private, nonprofit community-based organization, I first describe how fundamental problems in implementing the public subsidy program in a tight private rental market generate apprehension among landlords and voucher recipients that can prevent the successful use of vouchers. Second, I demonstrate how housing placement specialists can dispel and overcome this apprehension through a variety of tactics that require extensive soft skills and a deep commitment to the mission of housing poor families.

These findings provide support for the increased use of housing placement services to improve success and mobility rates for Section 8 vouchers.

**Keywords:** Housing assistance programs; Mobility; Section 8 housing programs

## **Introduction**

In the 1970s and 1980s, amid concerns over the negative effects of concentrated urban poverty and suburban resistance to the encroachment of public housing, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) slowed the construction of new large-scale public housing projects and increased the use of Section 8 certificates and vouchers to subsidize low-income households in the private rental market. HUD eventually began dismantling many large dilapidated projects in the 1990s. Section 8 vouchers

have been seen as a way to transfer the costs of creating rental housing for the poor to the private market and to allow subsidized households to reside outside of high-poverty neighborhoods.

While research on employment and other quality-of-life outcomes has demonstrated that voucher recipients finding rental units in low-poverty neighborhoods benefit from the program (Ong 1998; Popkin et al. 2000; Rosenbaum 1995; Rosenbaum and Harris 2001; Rosenbaum, Stroh, and Flynn 1998; Varady and Walker 2000), research on the extent to which recipients achieve such mobility has revealed only limited success at the aggregate level (Pendall 2000). Moreover, HUD has found that the success rate of vouchers, or the “percentage of all families provided a voucher who lease a housing unit meeting the program requirements within the allotted amount of time,” has dropped to historic lows after substantial improvement in the late 1980s and early 1990s (2001, 1–1). This, together with other research, argues that increased income inequality, a shortage of affordable rental housing in low-poverty neighborhoods, persistent racial discrimination in the housing market (Pendall 2000), and administrative inefficiency at the local level (Basolo 2003; Katz and Turner 2001; Popkin and Cunningham 1999) have contributed to poor success and mobility rates.

However, measures that could improve declining success rates and the limited mobility of vouchers have been elucidated. For example, Turner (1998) recommends allowing exceptions to ceilings on fair market rents (FMRs) in special cases to address the shortage of affordable housing and providing financial incentives to local public housing agencies (PHAs) to improve residential mobility. Katz and Turner (2001) advocate restructuring the Section 8 program with regional rather than local administration to facilitate relocation across municipal and other jurisdictional boundaries. Also, Pendall (2000) recommends addressing discrimination in the rental market by increasing funding to HUD’s fair housing enforcement division to help black and Hispanic voucher holders (who made up 40 percent and 15 percent, respectively, of national Section 8 households in 1999) more easily find apartments in low-poverty neighborhoods. While these suggested reforms show promise, the only measure that research has demonstrated to lead to substantial improvement in success rates and residential mobility is intensive housing placement and counseling services for recipients (Goering, Kamely, and Richardson 1995; HUD 2001; Ladd and Ludwig 1997; Pendall 2000; Rosenbaum 1995; Turner 1998; Turner and Williams 1998).

Despite the demonstrated success of housing placement services and advocacy by proponents, relatively little is known about how these services facilitate the use of vouchers in the private rental market. Although there are a few

notable contributions (Popkin and Cunningham 1999; Varady and Walker 2000), a general shortage of in-depth, qualitative research on the practical implementation of the Section 8 voucher program has deprived policy makers of the unique insights afforded by such an approach (Rist 1994). Using qualitative research to examine the subjective experiences of a variety of actors in the housing placement process can shed light on critical factors that affect both landlords' and voucher holders' decisions about participating in the program. Further, analysis of the key social interactive processes involved in successfully completing a rental agreement involving a Section 8 voucher can illustrate strategies that have proven useful in overcoming barriers to participation. Ground-level research can then inform current debates about broad structural changes to the program to improve success and mobility rates, as well as aid in the development of guidelines for housing placement programs in especially tight urban rental markets.

In this article, I draw on qualitative data collected by participant observation and interview research in the housing placement department of a private, nonprofit, community-based organization (CBO) contracted by local Los Angeles PHAs to increase understanding of the problems associated with implementing a public housing subsidy program in a private market. I address two questions: First, what are the major problems that serve as barriers to the participation of voucher holders and landlords in the Section 8 program? I describe the housing search and placement process that voucher recipients must complete to secure a subsidized unit, the major problems that emerge, and the formal responsibilities of housing placement specialists. I find that although these specialists have practical tools to overcome some of the barriers, fundamental limitations generate such a pervasive and deep apprehension about the program that landlords abandon it and voucher holders give less than a whole-hearted effort.

Second, what tactics do housing placement specialists use to dispel apprehension among voucher holders and landlords? I find that housing placement specialists use a variety of strategies requiring extensive soft skills<sup>1</sup> and a deep commitment to the mission of housing poor families to deal with the friction associated with operating a public housing subsidy program in a tight private rental market. While improvements to the program that more directly address fundamental problems appear necessary to markedly improve success and mobility rates, my findings support the claim that extensive housing placement

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, soft skills are defined as receptive and influential behaviors, such as active listening, awareness of nonverbal communication, oral communication, empathy, persuasiveness, problem solving, decision making, and time and stress management, as well as proactive behavior such as taking initiative and responsibility.

services will remain crucial to efforts to improve the Section 8 program in tight urban rental markets.

I use the term “apprehension” to refer to the general set of emotions triggered among both landlords and recipients by limitations in the current implementation of the Section 8 program in many tight urban rental markets. It is important to note that apprehension is only one of many emotions that the program generates among landlords and voucher recipients. Others include frustration, demoralization, and depression among recipients and agitation, disgust toward the system, and prejudice among landlords. It is usually when problems with the program become extreme that landlords take refuge in blanket prejudice and voucher holders relinquish their hope of securing stable subsidized housing. Much of the day-to-day work of housing placement specialists involves mitigating apprehension about the program before it develops into intense adverse emotions. However, as I will demonstrate, this is not always possible, and housing placement specialists must often work hard to keep one or both parties from abandoning the program.

### **Research setting and data collection**

The data were collected during the spring and summer of 2001; for approximately five months, I observed participants at a CBO that had contracted to help the PHAs of Los Angeles city and county place poor families that had qualified for housing subsidies under two Section 8 programs. One was an ongoing special Section 8 program for families experiencing homelessness.<sup>2</sup> The other was a one-time program for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Welfare to Work program participants supported by surplus Department of Labor (DOL) funding and implemented in Los Angeles County in 2000–2001.<sup>3</sup> The CBO has integrated its housing

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<sup>2</sup> Eligibility for special Section 8 vouchers for families experiencing homelessness is determined by HUD’s working definition of homelessness. The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 defines a person experiencing homelessness as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence or who resides in a shelter, a welfare hotel, a transitional program, or a place not ordinarily used as a sleeping accommodation, such as the street, a car, a movie theater, an abandoned building, and the like. The CBO has agreements with both city and county PHAs to provide housing placement services for households experiencing homelessness free of charge in exchange for the PHAs’ making Section 8 vouchers available to the CBO’s clients. In 2002, the city PHA issued 158 special vouchers for families experiencing homelessness to the CBO’s clients, and the county issued 88. The CBO primarily uses the HUD Supportive Housing Program to fund these housing placement services.

<sup>3</sup> Participants in the Welfare to Work program were defined by DOL funding guidelines as the most difficult to employ and were long-time welfare recipients with formidable barriers to employment, such as the lack of a high school diploma, low reading and math skills, a substance

placement services with its other programs to help families experiencing homelessness or receiving welfare. Although these services are available to voucher recipients on a voluntary basis, staff at the CBO stress that the appropriateness and quality of services foster a relationship that binds the client and the CBO, thus facilitating housing placement services.

The CBO operates a “housing first” program that emphasizes placing families in permanent housing as soon as possible to minimize the deleterious effects of homelessness and to promote self-sufficiency. CBO clients who receive special vouchers for families experiencing homelessness participate in this housing first program. Recipients are encouraged to use the CBO’s supportive services, such as home-based case management; employment services; referrals to job training and placement; and domestic violence, mental health, and substance abuse counseling.

I mostly observed the CBO’s housing resources department, which at that time had one part-time and five full-time housing specialists who were responsible for providing Section 8 program information and orientation, helping clients locate and secure units, and navigating the Section 8 approval process with local PHAs. Twice a week I spent approximately five hours a day at the CBO. My role as an intern-researcher allowed me to collect qualitative data on the role of the CBO in the Section 8 housing placement process as well as participate in and contribute to the CBO’s efforts, albeit in a limited capacity. My data consist of ethnographic field notes, tape-recorded interviews with five housing placement specialists, and tape recordings of specialists conducting two orientations for voucher recipients.

After participating in and observing the efforts of the specialists, I prepared detailed ethnographic field notes of my experiences and observations, focusing on the problems that came up in the placement process and the measures used to overcome them. However, since human limitations on the ability to observe and remember details of complex interactions turn field notes into inscriptions shaped by the perspective of the ethnographer (Geertz 1973), I do not use quotation marks unless the speakers were tape-recorded with their consent. I also acknowledge the bias of this research toward the viewpoint of the housing specialists. Further ethnographic research centered around the viewpoint of recipients, landlords, and PHA staff is needed for a

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abuse problem, or a poor employment history (1999). This group was primarily made up of families living in unsubsidized apartments and spending much of their TANF cash benefit on rent with little left to pay for other needs. The county PHA contracted with the CBO to provide housing placement services to 150 TANF program participants for this one-time demonstration project; the CBO received \$2,500 from the PHA for each family it placed in subsidized housing.

complete understanding of the subjective experience of the process—specifically, of how problems emerge and how they can be overcome.

### **Fundamental problems and apprehension in the housing placement process**

In Los Angeles and other large urban areas with a limited supply of rental subsidies, poor families that receive Section 8 vouchers and aid from CBO housing specialists make up a small but fortunate group among an immense population in need.<sup>4</sup> However, the issuance of a voucher does not guarantee a family a subsidized unit, as HUD's (2001) report of the alarmingly low success rates of vouchers in tight rental markets indicates. To successfully use a Section 8 voucher, recipients must complete the three major steps in the housing placement process within the prescribed time period: attending the orientation and filling out the preapplication, locating a unit, and obtaining approval. In this section, I describe each step, highlighting the formal responsibilities of housing specialists, as well as the way the fundamental limitations of the program present major barriers that voucher holders and housing specialists must overcome to secure subsidized units. I argue that these barriers generate a deep and pervasive apprehension that can prevent both landlords and recipients from participating in the program.

#### *Attending the orientation and filling out the preapplication*

In addition to beginning the application for a Section 8 voucher, the main purpose of the orientation is to describe to potential recipients what the basic steps in the search process are, how the CBO will facilitate it, how recipients should search for housing, and what their rights and responsibilities are. Potential recipients are told which areas in Los Angeles County are in the jurisdiction of their issuing PHA. Housing specialists explain that CBO staff will be searching for housing and providing referrals, but that families must also search for units and are ultimately responsible for meeting with landlords. Recipients are instructed to show up at apartments in presentable fashion

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<sup>4</sup> In 2001, the city PHA managed 29,338 regular and 15,962 project-based and special Section 8 vouchers and certificates (Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty 2001). The estimated waiting period for the 150,000 eligible households seeking regular Section 8 vouchers in the city was eight years. The county PHA faced similar demand. In 2001, it managed 17,694 regular and 3,635 project-based and special Section 8 vouchers and certificates and had a waiting list of 113,874 eligible families, with a turnover rate of about 5 percent per year (Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty 2001).

without relatives or friends who will not be living with them in the subsidized unit. They are also given advice on how to avoid evictions, including advice on how to take care of an apartment, how to be discreet about subsidies to prevent complaints from jealous neighbors, and how to deal with requests for shelter from needy friends and relatives not authorized by the PHA to stay in the units.

After this initial instruction, housing placement specialists go over the preapplication, in which households must specify the number of persons who will be living in the subsidized unit and provide identification for each of them. The PHA uses this information to confirm eligibility and to determine the number of bedrooms that HUD will subsidize for the family. When these preapplications are complete, housing specialists submit them to the PHA and families wait for a voucher to be issued; this can take from a few weeks to several months. Once a voucher is issued, recipients are instructed to begin their search and approach potential landlords about renting a unit. At this point, the clock begins ticking, and the actual housing search and placement process begins. Now apprehension among landlords and voucher holders about the process comes clearly to the forefront.

### *Locating a unit*

As emphasized by HUD (2001), a fundamental problem impeding the successful use of Section 8 vouchers is particularly tight rental markets that can make locating and securing an apartment extremely difficult for low-income families.<sup>5</sup> Such a market has likely played a major role in Los Angeles County's dismal 2001 success rate of 47 percent for Section 8 vouchers, well below the national threshold of 61 percent for very tight housing markets and down dramatically from a local average of about 72 percent in the late 1980s (HUD 2001). Although local PHAs attempted to address the problem by providing lists of apartments, voucher holders often called the CBO to complain that these units were already rented. CBO housing placement specialists provide voucher holders with leads to apartments that they have located through

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<sup>5</sup> In 2000, the vacancy rate for rental units in Los Angeles County was 4.7 percent, compared with an average for all U.S. metropolitan areas of 7.7 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). While there were 54 affordable rental units available for every 100 poor families in Los Angeles in 1985 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987), by 1998 the supply of affordable housing had dwindled to 33 units per 100 poor households (HUD 2000). This shrinking pool of affordable housing has resulted in 401,000 households in Los Angeles County described by HUD (2000) as having worst-case needs for rental assistance, denoting households earning less than half of the area median income and spending over half of their household income on rent.

contact with landlords already participating in the program, “pounding the pavement” or driving through neighborhoods looking for units, and engaging in outreach at meetings of rental property owners’ associations. However, since the rental market is so tight, housing placement specialists report that many landlords who are approached are immediately averse to participating in the program. These landlords most often report having an ample pool of applicants who can pay more than the local FMR.<sup>6</sup>

Also, as noted by Popkin and Cunningham (1999) in their interview study of voucher recipients who were unable to secure subsidized housing in Chicago, the lack of funds to cover move-in costs serves as a formidable barrier to many recipients, especially those with very low incomes. The dearth of move-in funds contributes greatly to the low “renter capital” of many recipient households. Renter capital is a term I use to refer to the set of assets that a renter brings to a potential landlord; the lack of such capital can prevent the successful use of vouchers. In many instances, the CBO can access emergency funds to help cover move-in costs through the county welfare office or its own rental assistance program, which draws on federal funding such as the Emergency Food and Shelter Program; the Emergency Housing Assistance Program; local funding from the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority; and private funding.<sup>7</sup> Although such financial assistance partially ameliorates voucher holders’ renter capital problem, low incomes, poor credit, previous evictions, a history of substance abuse and/or homelessness, a lack of knowledge of appropriate renter behavior, and the presence of teenage children, who are often thought to cause trouble, can make landlords apprehensive about renting units to voucher holders.

In addition to the problems posed by the tight rental market and low renter capital, negative stereotypes of the Section 8 program among landlords, sometimes rooted in experience, pose additional barriers to families trying to locate units. Stereotypes of irresponsible voucher holders and a troublesome bureaucracy cause many landlords who own affordable units to fear delayed payments as well as drug- and gang-related activity if they rent to voucher holders. Further, for black and Hispanic recipients in the rental market,

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the problems associated with implementing the Section 8 program in tight rental markets, the CBO has developed relationships with about 500 landlords throughout Los Angeles County since it began operating the special Section 8 program for families experiencing homelessness in the late 1980s.

<sup>7</sup> The county’s Rental Assistance Program allows families that are homeless to access a one-time grant of up to 70 percent of their monthly TANF benefit to cover move-in costs. The CBO-operated rental assistance program provides up to \$1,500 and can be accessed once a year.

discrimination based on source of income (Popkin and Cunningham 1999) is often exacerbated by pervasive racial and ethnic discrimination (Yinger 1998).

Even after voucher holders overcome the unfriendly rental market and locate an appropriate unit owned by a landlord willing to participate in the program, they may still confront the problem of determining whether the unit is within the right jurisdiction. Although legislative changes to the Section 8 program in the late 1990s formally guaranteed recipient households the right to “port out” or use their vouchers outside of an issuing PHA’s jurisdiction, billing and other administrative burdens associated with inter-PHA collaboration have served as a prominent barrier to full mobility of vouchers as mandated by law (Basolo 2003).<sup>8</sup> In Los Angeles, some PHAs discourage recipients from attempting to do so, thus violating the spirit, if not the letter, of the law. It is usually only in instances where two or more PHAs have portability agreements that recipients can port out of the issuing jurisdiction, and even in these cases there are restrictions. For example, during my observation of the CBO, only households that were issued special Welfare to Work Section 8 vouchers by the county PHA and were living or working in the county were eligible to port out, while those who were issued identical vouchers but were living or working in other jurisdictions were told that they could not.

Given the structure of jurisdictional boundaries in Los Angeles, the problem of locating a unit in an appropriate area is generally more pertinent to county than to city voucher holders. The jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County PHA includes all areas of the county not covered by municipal PHAs, including all unincorporated areas. The jurisdiction of the city PHA is much more simply defined as only the area that makes up the city of Los Angeles. Grasping PHA jurisdictions within the county can be especially difficult because some larger cities such as Long Beach, Santa Monica, and Pasadena have their own PHAs, while smaller cities such as Signal Hill, Gardena, and Covina do not and thus fall under the jurisdiction of the county PHA.

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<sup>8</sup> Basolo (2003) outlines the portability process, its problems, and the ways agreements between PHAs can ameliorate these problems. In general, receiving PHAs can process port-outs either by absorbing households into their caseloads and issuing vouchers from their own HUD allotments or by accepting 80 percent of the administrative fees from sending PHAs and performing most of the administrative tasks (i.e., inspections), with the sending PHA making monthly subsidy payments to landlords. However, since absorbing a household requires a receiving PHA to use a voucher that could otherwise be allocated to a household already within its jurisdiction, many receiving PHAs elect to accept administrative fees from sending PHAs instead. This places additional burdens on the accounting departments of PHAs. Although recent legislation mandated that PHAs process vouchers issued in other jurisdictions, HUD has not provided additional funds to cover the associated costs. As a result, many PHAs have resisted portability, and some administrators have called on HUD to end it entirely.

Like most households, many Section 8 voucher holders prefer to live in particular locations (such as middle-class, upwardly mobile neighborhoods, among co-ethnics, or in a culturally diverse area) close to places of employment, children's schools, or relatives and friends. However, the requirement that voucher holders reside within fixed but complex boundaries makes finding any apartment, but especially one in a low-poverty neighborhood or close to work, school, or relatives, very difficult. Families unable to find apartments in nearby eligible areas must relocate, uprooting themselves and their children. This can break up important social networks and render them useless in housing searches.

Below, at a periodic home visit required by the county's special Section 8 program for families experiencing homelessness, a CBO client expresses the difficulty that finding an acceptable unit posed in her housing search. For four months, Naomi,<sup>9</sup> the client, stayed with relatives and a former boyfriend and then "shelter-hopped" with her two daughters as she struggled to locate an apartment in the county's jurisdiction.

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When I ask about her housing search, Naomi smiles and lets out a quiet but exasperated laugh. Dee, her case manager, rolls her eyes and sighs. Naomi says, Oh, it took a long time. It was hard. I had to save up money for move-in (costs). It was hard finding a place and then I'd find something but it wouldn't be in the county so I couldn't rent it. At first, I found a place on 87th and Normandie (in the city of Los Angeles), but I couldn't rent it. Then, when we finally found this place (in the city of Hawthorne), we had to wait around for the county to come out and inspect it and the landlord was getting all antsy. For a while we were worried he might back out. It was real hard.

Dee chimes in, That's why you should think twice about moving—wait until you have the time and resources to move!<sup>10</sup>

In this case, four different fundamental barriers—the tight rental market, the lack of savings to cover move-in costs, difficulty in finding a unit within the appropriate jurisdiction, and delays by the county PHA in giving final approval for the unit—generated apprehension about the program among a voucher holder, a landlord, and even a CBO caseworker. Although Naomi persisted in her search despite the toll of living with her children in a variety

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<sup>9</sup> To preserve anonymity, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

<sup>10</sup> HUD allows Section 8 voucher holders to move from their original unit to any PHA jurisdiction in the country after residing in it for a year.

of precarious arrangements, some voucher holders facing similar difficulties become frustrated, discouraged, and even demoralized. In the most unfortunate cases, they abandon the process entirely, search half-heartedly, or persist unsuccessfully and watch their vouchers expire.

### *Obtaining approval*

Once an appropriate unit and a landlord willing to rent to a voucher holder are located, three steps must be completed before voucher holders are officially allowed to move into subsidized units and landlords can begin receiving payments from HUD. First, the client must complete a request for lease approval (RLA) form, which requires the signature of the landlord indicating that he or she is willing to participate in the program. Second, once the PHA receives the RLA, it schedules an inspection of the unit. Third, after the unit has passed inspection, the PHA issues a contract to the voucher holder, who must get it signed by the landlord and then resubmit it to the PHA. Once the contract is signed and submitted, families are legally allowed to move into their unit. However, the contract must still be submitted to and processed by HUD before landlords begin to receive the subsidized portion of the rent, which is paid retroactively to the date on which the contract was signed.

Housing placement specialists often complain about delays in getting the necessary paperwork from all parties involved in the rental agreement—voucher holders, landlords, and local PHAs. Although HUD's (2001) report on the success rates of Section 8 vouchers found that 70 percent of the time between issuing the voucher and signing the lease is taken up by searching for an apartment and submitting an RLA rather than by administrative activities, delays by the PHAs in the housing placement process were not uncommon during my participant observation. In periodic meetings between CBO housing placement specialists and the county PHA, one of which I observed in person, PHA administrators acknowledged the delays and committed to speeding up paperwork. The difficulty of locating, securing, and obtaining approval for rental units is exacerbated by the limited time CBO staff and voucher holders have to complete placements. As with the regular Section 8 program, recipients of vouchers for families experiencing homelessness must secure housing within a six-month period that includes two 45-day extensions that require submission of proof of efforts to find an apartment.<sup>11</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>11</sup> There was a single HUD deadline for all vouchers issued through the Welfare to Work program. The majority of eligible TANF benefit recipients were issued their vouchers by the county in the spring of 2001 and had to find housing by the end of June of the same year, leaving some voucher holders with only 90 days to find a unit.

at each step of the placement process, housing specialists often physically carry forms between voucher holders, landlords, and the PHA to minimize delays.

This overview has revealed several important limitations of the Section 8 program: the tight and unfriendly local rental markets in many areas, the low rental capital of voucher holders, negative stereotypes of the program and its participants, confusing jurisdictional boundaries, and the sometimes slow movement of local PHAs. These barriers can limit vouchers' success directly as well as indirectly by generating pervasive apprehension about the program among landlords and voucher holders. HUD (2001) has commended the common practice of PHAs in urban areas with tight rental markets of compensating for low success rates by over-issuing vouchers to maximize utilization. However, on a national scale, this practice has had the unintended effect of raising the hopes of thousands of poor families that they will secure subsidized housing only to have these hopes dashed by largely unchecked limitations in the program.

### **Mitigating apprehension about Section 8**

In this section, I explore how housing specialists overcome pervasive apprehension about Section 8 among landlords and recipients. In doing so, I demonstrate that housing specialists have several strategies that they apply in interactions with recipients and landlords to address complications in housing placement.

#### *Instilling a balance of realism and optimism in voucher holders*

The first tactic is to prevent apprehension from developing among voucher holders by instilling a balance of realism and optimism about their prospects. An important part of the housing specialist's job is to serve as the voucher holder's coach and guide through the housing placement process. A core function of this role is to encourage holders to be optimistic to ensure that the barriers they confront will not make them abandon the process. However, it is also important for housing specialists not to mislead voucher holders into being overly optimistic or half-hearted in their search. Therefore, a balance must be struck in which the holder is optimistic about securing subsidized housing but remains realistic and aware of the obstacles and the need for persistence to overcome them. Housing specialists begin the effort to instill a balanced perspective at the housing orientation, often before the barriers discussed earlier emerge.

Next is a tape-recorded dialogue from a housing orientation conducted by Del, a housing specialist at the CBO, for the county's special Section 8 program for families experiencing homelessness.

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Del: "If [it seems like] I'm trying to scare you, that's the whole point. We're gonna send you out there and when you walk out that door, Mr. Rejection is gonna hit you in your face so much in that first two or three weeks, you're gonna come back and say, 'Look, give me a place. Just give me a place and I'll take care of it and I want the place.' You'll take the place and that's it."

Voucher Holder #1: "So do you help us find places?"

Del: "Yeah, we do. We help you find places. But if you give me...."

Voucher Holder #2: "But it's not gonna be what you want."

Del: "It's not always gonna be what you want, no."

Voucher Holder #2: "I'm not trying to be picky, but...."

Del: "Don't get me wrong, we got good folks [here]...there are some people [housing specialists] that go out and find places and they're nice. They're there. But they might not always be in the area that you want. For instance, if you tell me that.... Where do you want to live?"

Voucher Holder #3: "I want to live in West Covina."

Del: "Okay, that's a good example. Let's say that you want to live in West Covina and James [housing specialist] comes back and says, 'I know you wanna live in West Covina, but guess what? I was able to find a place in Glendora, in an unincorporated place.' What are you gonna say?"

Voucher Holders: (Laughter)

Del: "See what I'm saying? In other words, it might not be in West Covina. It may be... 'cause if you tell Sandra [housing specialist] or myself that you wanna live in Arcadia, we're not gonna look in Arcadia.... That is just a waste of time. Now what I might do is...okay, let's try Temple City, or you know, San Gabriel. I might try, or she might try to look in those areas. But she's not gonna try to look

in areas that have high rent. If you call and say, ‘I absolutely, positively have to live in South Pasadena,’ I’m just gonna laugh. Okay? I’m gonna say, ‘I’m not gonna look in South Pasadena for you. There are million dollar homes over there.’ We can all pool our money together and we still can’t buy a house over there.”

Voucher Holders: (Laughter)

Del: “So, there are certain areas that you can’t move to right now. That doesn’t mean that you can never go there, because you can never say that. You might walk out this door tomorrow, land a job, before you know it, start doing well...and you can move in that area. We can’t say where you’re gonna be in the next five years.”

Although Del bluntly tells clients that they must be realistic in their expectations, he encourages them at the end of this excerpt to remain optimistic about the future and not to underestimate their potential for upward mobility. Like many CBO housing specialists, Del uses humor to facilitate clients’ acceptance of the cold reality that securing subsidized housing will likely be extremely difficult. This approach prepares voucher holders for rejections but also assures them that if they are diligent and practical in their search, they will succeed. As will be evident in other excerpts from field notes, housing specialists promote a balanced perspective to clients throughout the placement process.

### *Selling Section 8*

The second tactic is to use an array of common sales tactics to address landlords’ apprehension about the Section 8 program. A necessary skill of the housing specialists, as expressed by Andrew in an interview, is “to be able to sell a box of matches, so to speak.” In searching for potential apartments, housing specialists must often work as salesmen, including “buddying up” to landlords by talking to them about their hobbies and complimenting their clothing, car, or property. Perhaps more fundamental, housing specialists must convince skeptical landlords that the CBO’s supportive services distinguish the special Section 8 program from a program they envisage as plagued with problematic renters and bureaucratic red tape. Next, Del explains the sales strategy that housing specialists use to try to convince landlords to participate.

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“We try to sell the clients as people who are working with us as an agency. We sell the idea that if they run into financial trouble that we

have a case manager that's working with them and we also sell the idea that we do have funding available here through other programs for where, if the family is in a situation, we can pool some funds to help that family out. That's part of it because most of it is usually about money a lot of the times. And a landlord will work with them sometimes if they see that an agency, 'Oh, that agency will pay their rent if something happens.' And then we have programs where we pay the first three months' rent from the beginning so that's another incentive. We say, 'Okay, we're gonna pay the first three months and then, you know, we're gonna be working with them.'"

When selling Section 8, housing specialists must directly address and dispel the landlord's apprehension about the program, which is often a concern about nonpayment of rent. The CBO's practice of helping voucher holders access emergency funds to cover move-in costs and providing supportive services such as case management greatly improves the "product" that housing placement specialists have to sell. Follow-through is essential to the CBO's ability to build a network of landlords who own properties that might be available to future clients. Such networks are crucial, as indicated by HUD's (2001) finding that landlord outreach was the core component driving the positive effect of housing placement services on voucher success rates.

However, more skeptical landlords require additional attention. Later in the same interview, Del explains that part of the sales tactic is to dispel landlords' stereotypes about the program and educate them about some of the causes of homelessness.

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"One of the things that we're trying to do is we're trying to educate the landlords on how Section 8 actually works. If you ask most landlords, [they'll say], 'Oh, I know what Section 8 is. I understand it.' But the rules have changed. Section 8 is not the same as 20 years ago, or as 10 years ago. It's just a different program now. You have Section 8 [for the City of Los Angeles] now whereas to apply you have to be working or in school. You know, landlords need to know that to kill that stereotype that these people don't want to do anything....

"[Also,] what we try to tell the landlords is, 'These are people who lost a job and were forced into this situation. These are people whose husband left them [or who experienced] domestic violence.' Try to get them to see that homeless people are not homeless because they just don't want to work. There's actually some social factors that cause

homelessness—in other words, loss of a job, a domestic violence situation, you know. But just to get them to see that there are some factors that cause the homelessness and what we're trying to do is help house the person so they can get started with the other things and we show them that, 'Okay, once we get them in housing, then we work on the client. Then we work on, you know, developing their skills....' So we try to help the landlord see that there is a whole process and it works, so the clients who follow through, but they can't follow through if they're not given the chance to get housing. So we try to show them the bigger picture to sort of kill some of the stereotypes."

Del emphasizes how housing placement specialists attempt to dispel apprehension about the generally low renter capital of voucher holders. This component of the sales tactic often involves soliciting landlords' understanding and compassion, which can require active listening and persuasiveness in addition to a detailed understanding of the structural causes of homelessness.

Selling Section 8 also involves coaching voucher holders on how to approach landlords so as not to trigger or exacerbate apprehension. Although the coaching begins at the housing orientation, it becomes more intense and individualized when families prepare to meet with landlords. Voucher holders often call the CBO housing department to let them know that they will be meeting with landlords, to express concern about the meeting, and to seek advice on how to present themselves. Andrew explains how he generally approaches such inquiries.

6/25/01

"Sometimes no news is good news and what I mean is that without getting too personal, be as honest as you can. And what I mean by getting too personal, you know, say you want to form a relationship, but it should [be], 'I am a candidate for this particular unit, so what do you think about me? This is what I'm all about, this is how I carry myself, this is how I present myself, these are my children, so what more do you want to know?' You know? 'This is my rental history, and this is where I am today.'

"[B]ut like I was telling her [a client on the phone earlier], I don't put any labels on our families and I don't accept the fact that owners want to put labels on our families. They are families. They aren't drug-involved families. They aren't ex-drug-involved families. They are families. You know, you don't know anything about this person's past

and I'm not gonna tell you. If you want to know, it's the client's responsibility and I tell 'em, 'You only give 'em enough to work with.' There is a point where you can be too honest that you can talk your way out of a situation like that and most owners don't want to hear that, uh, 'I used drugs and I lost everything....' They want to hear that, you know, say, 'I was in a situation that I needed some assistance in getting out of and now I've been successful in moving from where I was to here, so I can only move higher and higher and higher given the opportunity and the right environment.'"

Most often voucher holders seek advice about how to respond to landlords' concerns about aspects of their low renter capital such as poor rental or credit histories; the presence of many children, especially teenagers; or of past substance abuse. By discouraging the use of stigmatizing labels and teaching clients how to present potential liabilities in a positive light by emphasizing progress, housing placement specialists provide voucher holders with the means to address or even dispel landlords' apprehension on their own.

### *Going the extra mile*

Another strategy that housing specialists use is to expend extra effort to overcome limitations such as the low renter capital of voucher holders, the poor quality of units owned by landlords interested in participating in the program, or the sometimes slow movement of overburdened PHAs. This most often involves getting funds to cover the first and last month's rent while the landlord waits for the PHA to arrange direct payments from HUD. In addition to providing supplemental funds, housing specialists will often preinspect a unit and make the necessary repairs to ensure that it passes the HUD-required inspection. These repairs are also undertaken to impress a landlord who has agreed to rent a unit to a Section 8 voucher holder, but might remain skeptical of the benefits of participating in the program or may have other units available. In interviews, housing specialists described doing repairs such as fixing a hot water heater, replacing window screens, plastering, fixing sinks, replacing door panels and frames, changing locks, cleaning apartments, and painting the interior. Given their limited expertise, housing specialists draw the line at major structural work, however.

Next is a description of an incident where the housing specialists were able to please a landlord by making repairs and improvements that ensured that the unit passed inspection.

6/29/01

Richard enters the CBO housing department office after fielding a call from a client whose prospective unit had recently been repaired by James and David. Richard says, James, you're not gonna believe this....[S]he [the client] went and got the contract and she's already signed the contract, so everything's done. Clearly pleased, James exclaims, All right! See, we got it to pass! James says that the inspector showed up as he and David were making repairs and he describes their conversation. He says, The inspector was like, How long is it gonna take y'all to finish? I said, To tell the truth, it's gonna take a couple days. He was like, I never seen an agency that come out just to fix a place up. He was all impressed with that. He said, I'll tell y'all what. You fix this, this, and this, and I'm gonna come back and I'm gonna pass it and y'all can fix all the rest later on.

Everyone laughs and appears happy that the client was able to secure the unit, especially with the impending deadline (June 30) with the county for its special Welfare to Work program. Richard tells James to enter it into the database as a housed client. Richard says, This lady [the client], right now she was blessing me and saying, Thank you for your help, and this and that. She was all happy. James chuckles and Richard says, Yeah, thank God for you guys because the owner wasn't going to do anything to the unit. James says, He could have come out there and did some work. Richard echoes, He could have done something. We paid for the repairs. Sandra asks, Did he do the carpet? James responds, No! He didn't do anything to that unit. Me and David did everything.

In addition to bringing units up to HUD standards, pleasing a skeptical landlord, and therefore possibly expanding the CBO's network of landlords willing to rent to voucher recipients, these extra efforts also serve to increase the likelihood that rental agreements will receive HUD approval before vouchers expire. As HUD (2001) has noted, voucher holders in PHAs where most units pass the housing quality inspection on the first attempt had higher success rates.

Extra effort is also undertaken for the direct benefit of clients. Housing specialists occasionally accompany clients who are searching for apartments or meeting with landlords, drive them out to look at apartments in faraway or inconvenient locations, and, as they did on one occasion during my observa-

tion, baby-sit for clients who are out looking for an apartment. In addition to the practical effects of facilitating the successful use of vouchers, these extra efforts demonstrate to recipients that the CBO cares about their welfare. Such knowledge can spur optimism and diligence in the housing search in the face of multiple barriers and pervasive apprehension among landlords.

### *Turning to advocacy*

Housing specialists often use advocacy to expedite the various approval processes with PHAs, although they also advocate for individual clients when selling Section 8 to landlords. Advocating to the PHA allows housing specialists to mitigate apprehension by obtaining information on the status of cases to relay to voucher holders and landlords, smoothing out bureaucratic problems, and helping expedite tenuous cases. Given different channels of access to the PHAs, the specific methods used for the two different Section 8 programs varied. The county PHA set up weekly meetings with the four CBOs under contract for the Welfare to Work program to address problems in the placement process. Consequently, at these meetings, housing specialists would advocate for action in processing specific cases as well as more general problems with the program. Through these meetings, the CBOs and the county PHA were able to agree (1) that the PHA would resolve problems in an individual voucher holder's application and approval within two days of an initial inquiry by a housing specialist and (2) that landlords would get their initial rental payments one month after the final contract was signed.

However, for the ongoing voucher program for families experiencing homelessness, there are no formal weekly or periodic meetings of PHA and CBO staff. Therefore, housing specialists advocate for clients and landlords either over the phone or at the PHA when delivering or picking up paperwork. Although housing specialists are sometimes able to speak with PHA staff when making these visits, they must rely on chance to find the appropriate person since there is no formal venue for advocacy. When dropping off or picking up paperwork, housing specialists wait in line with everyone else, sometimes spending as much as an hour in line just to pick up an individual client's RLA. Sometimes, they will spot a familiar face behind the glass window separating the staff from the public and be invited to move to the front of the line or to a side door to pick up or drop off paperwork. When follow-up fails and housing specialists cannot get adequate responses from PHA front-line staff, more veteran specialists will turn to personal connections with higher-level staff or knowledge of the power structure. They will either call or threaten to call

higher-level staff directly to have a particular issue addressed. Housing specialists share these connections and knowledge of the PHA when teaching clients and landlords how to advocate for themselves.

In addition to using advocacy to engender movement in the application and approval process, housing specialists also intervene in voucher holder, landlord, and PHA interactions to sort through confusing and sometimes contradictory information. Like clients, landlords can become frustrated when they try to communicate with the PHA to receive updates on inspection or payment schedules or other issues. Because landlords are in effect their customers, housing specialists must do all they can to keep landlords satisfied to prevent them from abandoning the Section 8 program. Landlords often do not have time to repeatedly call the PHA or may become frustrated if forced to do so. Therefore, housing specialists often take on the responsibility of communicating with the PHA and advocating on their behalf. The most common issues that housing specialists attempt to address for landlords are the scheduling of inspections, inquiries about why a unit failed inspection, other delays in the approval process, and delays in the payment of rent by HUD through the local PHA. When advocacy and other tactics fail to mitigate apprehension about Section 8, housing specialists then deal with frustration on the part of various parties through more direct forms of caring work.

### *Engaging in caring work*

Caring behaviors fundamental to the success of social service and health care professionals include communicating, respecting, informing, giving comfort, empathizing, aiding, and being accessible (Issel and Kahn 1998). Housing placement specialists use these behaviors to ease the apprehension, anxiety, frustration, depression, and anger felt by all parties in the housing placement process. Caring work often proceeds in tandem with other tactics and sometimes even by means of these tactics, but there can be cases when it is engaged in more directly and in isolation. Housing specialists engage in caring work with clients in myriad ways—through listening to their complaints about problems, suggesting tactics to overcome these problems, encouraging optimism and perseverance, and occasionally counseling them on personal problems. It is in the performance of caring work that strong soft skills such as active listening, empathy, persuasiveness, and stress management are necessary. In the next excerpt, Andrew engages in caring work with a frustrated client to help alleviate her frustration and encourage her to persevere.

6/06/01

Andrew is on the phone with a client who has become frustrated after being unsuccessful in finding a two-bedroom apartment for her daughter and herself. She has been turned away by a few landlords and is now thinking of lowering her sights and looking for a one-bedroom apartment. Andrew says, No, don't give up on the two-bedroom. Keep at it. He pauses as the client talks on the other end, then goes on, No, no, so you were in substance abuse recovery, that's a good thing. I am impressed that you have been able to remain sober long enough to graduate from a program! That is what that says to me and that is how you should think about it when you approach a landlord. The only thing that might hold you back is your [previous] eviction, but, you know, we've put a number of people with two and three evictions in housing, so don't let that discourage you either.

Here, Andrew is engaging in caring work together with other tactics such as encouraging optimism and teaching clients how to sell themselves by pitching their personal histories in terms that emphasize recovery rather than a decline into substance abuse and extreme poverty.

When asked in an interview whether he thinks that being compassionate is necessary to be a good housing specialist, Del responds

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"You have to be. Like I said, there are times when you have to be compassionate, a lot of times. Because you know you are trying to help a family. But then, there are times when your families are just messin' up. And that's when the compassion goes to the side and you say, 'Look, we're not gonna get this housing thing done unless you do this.' Sometimes you have to take a more hard-line approach and say, 'I know you're homeless. I know you're having problems, I know that. But if I give you this paper and you take two months to get it filled out, that doesn't look like you need housing. You know if you need help, you can call me, you can call your case manager.' So sometimes we have to make the reality available that 'You have help if you can't get a paper, you can call your case manager and ask for help, you can call me and ask me for help.' But sometimes we have to be stern and that's to get them to the goal, to get the housing, you know."

As Del emphasizes, encouragement and understanding often prove useful in boosting the spirits of voucher holders and encouraging them to persist, but

circumstances sometimes demand a less sensitive approach to push voucher holders who are not searching hard enough. Just as they balance realism and optimism, housing specialists must also balance compassion and “tough love” when engaging in caring work with their clients.

In addition, to prevent landlords from abandoning the process and maintain good relations with potential repeat customers, housing specialists must often absorb and dispel their frustration. Next is an excerpt from field notes on a phone conversation between a landlord and Andrew at the end of his 10-hour workday. Ms. Miller, a Welfare to Work Section 8 voucher holder, called Andrew to express concern about the landlord’s becoming impatient with the delay in receiving the housing subsidy. To help alleviate this concern, the voucher holder and the landlord discussed informal payment of funds in addition to the plan specified in the contract with the PHA. Concerned about this arrangement, as well as the danger of the landlord’s abandoning the program, Andrew makes the call.

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Speaking slowly and directly, Andrew says to the landlord, I know you are concerned about when you will get a payment. You will get it within the next 30 days. Once you sign your contract, that starts everything. Everything works in a cycle; once the information has been processed, a check will be issued to you.... The reason your payments in the past have taken so long is because you were working with a different program, the homeless families Section 8 program.... The Welfare to Work program has a new payment process that they created because we went down and raised hell with the county after landlords were getting upset. Based on our meeting with the county last Wednesday, you will have your check within 30 days of submission of your contract. If you don’t have your money within two weeks, give me a call so I can advocate on your behalf.... That’s why I called you today—to assure you that you will get your money and if you don’t, then I want you to know that we’ll be there to advocate for you.

Despite Andrew’s attempts to express empathy, understanding, and willingness to advocate, the landlord continues to complain about issues that extend beyond Andrew’s control and that of the CBO. Consequently, Andrew’s ability to engage in emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), control his own emotions, and lend an ear to ease the landlord’s concerns is tested.

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The landlord apparently asks Andrew how he is supposed to pay the mortgage on the property as he is waiting for his check. Andrew responds, I can't deal with issues between you and your bank. You know I can't tell the bank to do anything.... You have a mortgage problem? That's your part. My part is to explain the program, follow up, and deal with any problems that you have with the Section 8 program. Andrew sighs and pauses as the landlord apparently continues to complain. Andrew responds, speaking at a much more rapid pace and in a raised voice, Look, you're trying to out-talk me now. You are asking about your bank and I don't know anything about that.... No, I don't think your credit is going to be damaged.... Well, if your unit passed inspection the first time, then it wouldn't have taken so long.... No, I don't think it's fair that you have to wait for your money.... Yes, if I were an owner, then I would want my rent within 30 days.... Look, this program does work and has been working for a long time. What you don't understand is there is a procedure and it takes time. We will help you if you have issues with the program. All you have to do is let me know your concerns and I will do my best to address them. In fact, we have a meeting with the county tomorrow, and I will be sure to bring up your case specifically.

Although Andrew raises his voice, he reins in his irritation before allowing the conversation to deteriorate into direct conflict and he expresses his empathy by acknowledging that it is reasonable for the landlord to be concerned about his rent. Andrew parries another attempt by the landlord to fight by explaining that the program has worked for a long time and reiterating that although he cannot help with the mortgage, he is always there to provide other assistance.

After he hangs up, Andrew is able to express his views about the landlord frankly to his colleagues, who may share his perspective. The following statement demonstrates that although Andrew will engage in caring work and emotional labor by being pleasant when speaking with the landlord, he is not unaware of the possibility that the landlord may be using him as an emotional punching bag in the absence of similar access to the PHA.

6/19/01

Andrew hangs up the phone and turns to the rest of the housing department staff and says, Oh man, this guy is griping, giving me the same old story.... He's sayin', How am I gonna pay my mortgage?

Well, how have you been paying your mortgage? With a chuckle and a smile, Andrew turns to me and says, He should know better than to try to hoodwink me...ya know?

## **Conclusion**

Examining the housing placement process at the ground level provides additional support for fundamental changes that have been recommended to improve voucher success and mobility rates for the Section 8 program in tight urban rental markets. For example, the difficulty that voucher holders experience in locating units, especially in low-poverty areas, could be greatly eased by encouraging the production of affordable housing and allowing more flexibility on FMR ceilings in the tightest markets (Katz and Turner 2001; Turner 1998). Also, given the low renter capital of many voucher holders, noted here and in Popkin and Cunningham's (1999) interview research among recipients who failed to secure subsidized housing, increased access to emergency funds to help cover move-in costs would likely greatly improve the success rate for the most disadvantaged households. Next, the difficulties and delays in locating units in appropriate jurisdictions suggest a need to either restructure the administration of the program at the regional level as suggested by Katz and Turner (2001) or to encourage formal inter-PHA collaborations as recommended by Basolo (2003).

Finally, while I witnessed no incidents of racial or ethnic discrimination in voucher holders' searches, this could be the result of my limited contact with the holders themselves, my racial and gender distance from most of them, and the difficulty associated with unequivocally attributing denial of one's application to such discrimination, especially when it is implicit and aversive. Popkin and Cunningham (1999) did find racial discrimination, thus providing support for increased funding for fair housing enforcement to improve the success and mobility rates of vouchers (Pendall 2000; Yinger 1998).

In addition to these changes to the program to substantially improve success and mobility rates, my research supports previous research that found extensive housing placement services to be crucial to efforts to improve the program in tight urban rental markets (Goering, Kamely, and Richardson 1995; HUD 2001; Ladd and Ludwig 1997; Pendall 2000; Rosenbaum 1995; Turner 1998; Turner and Williams 1998). My research builds on these findings by fleshing out how these services facilitate the successful use of vouchers, namely by balancing optimism and realism among voucher holders, selling Section 8, going the extra mile, and engaging in advocacy and caring work.

To minimize the friction associated with operating a public subsidy program in a private market, housing placement specialists must engage in skilled salesmanship of a unique kind, one that simultaneously addresses the program's negative stereotypes, appeals to landlords' compassion and understanding, and effectively delivers on its promise of prompt, regular payments from responsible renters. Housing placement specialists must also be willing to engage in extra effort, advocacy, and caring work, including dealing with complaints from frustrated landlords to secure and retain their participation. These efforts are important not only to bring new landlords into the program, but also to maintain and expand the CBO's base of satisfied customers on which to draw in the future. Indeed, research showing the importance of landlord outreach (HUD 2001; Popkin and Cunningham 1999; Varady and Walker 2000) suggests that the ability to develop amicable relations with landlords is the most crucial factor in efforts by housing placement services to improve voucher success rates.

However, it is not only the landlords who become apprehensive about the Section 8 program. Voucher recipients facing an unfriendly rental market must be coached, helped through extra effort and advocacy, and provided with caring services to ensure that they remain diligent in searching for units and filing the necessary paperwork.

Other research has found that housing counseling services must be intensive to significantly affect voucher success and mobility rates (Popkin et al. 2000; Varady and Walker 2000). Also, research has suggested that the benefits of coupling housing placement with nonhousing supportive services, including appropriate self-sufficiency services, can not only improve recipients' housing situations, but also positively affect the development of landlord relations by eliminating negative stereotypes (Katz and Turner 2001).

Finally, in applying the various strategies to mitigate apprehension about vouchers among both landlords and recipients, housing placement specialists rely on a broad range of soft skills—empathetic listening, persuasive communication, and a proactive stance, as well as a deep commitment to the mission of securing stable housing for very poor households.

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