



## Barriers to leasing Emergency Housing Vouchers

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Emergency Housing Vouchers (EHVs) were created to assist households impacted by the effects of COVID-19. Its purpose is to provide housing stability to families or individuals at risk of homelessness, unhoused, or fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence. The Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles was allotted 3,365 EHVs in 2019, yet in 2022, only half of the vouchers have since resulted in the leasing up of a housing unit. This brief provides an overview of Emergency Housing Vouchers and some barriers to utilizing them. It also compares how housing authorities and FEMA addressed housing displacements from disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey.

### WHAT ARE EMERGENCY HOUSING VOUCHERS (EHVS)

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Americans, specifically people of color, low-wage workers, and immigrants, were faced with economic hardships brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic which prevented countless people from working. In an attempt to mitigate the detrimental impacts of COVID-19 in 2019, President Biden announced the American Rescue Plan. The American Rescue Plan aimed to provide direct relief to families and workers significantly impacted by COVID-19 (U.S Department of Treasury, 2021). The Emergency Housing Vouchers Program is one of the initiatives under the American Rescue Plan Act. The purpose of EHVs is to assist individuals and families who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, were recently homeless, or have a high risk of housing instability (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022). These housing vouchers aim to reduce homelessness and housing instability by providing families with better opportunities, and helps low-wage earners make ends meet by subsidizing their housing (Fisher, 2015).

### DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMERGENCY HOUSING VOUCHERS AND HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHERS

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While both voucher types focus their subsidies on low-income households, EHVs are unique in their specific targeted eligibility for people experiencing homelessness. The COVID-specific EHV program resembles one of the most prominent voucher programs — Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs), also known as Section 8 Housing. This federal voucher program assists low-income families in renting affordable, sanitary, and safe housing (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022). The program is also administered through Public Housing Agencies (PHAs). Public Housing Agencies are federally funded entities that are tasked with

developing long-term, sustainable housing strategies for the communities they serve and to help administer Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)-funded programs in a way that best serves the area. Eligibility for HCVs is based on the total annual gross income and family size of each household, and is limited to US citizens and non-citizens who have legal immigration status. Housing Choice Voucher holders have 60 days to use their vouchers and can apply for a one or two 30-day extension if they cannot secure housing within the 60 days time frame (Copperman, et.al, 2009) whereas EHV's resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be reissued after September 2023.

## **BARRIERS TO LEASING EMERGENCY HOUSING VOUCHERS**

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HUD allocated approximately 70,000 Emergency Housing Vouchers to public housing agencies nationwide to alleviate some of the impacts of COVID-19. Of the 70,000, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA) was granted 3,365 EHV's to be leased up by September 30th, 2023 (HACLA, 2022). The goal for these vouchers is to get to “lease up” — which entails a qualified voucher recipient finding and signing a lease for a housing unit that has been inspected and approved by PHAs. As of July 2022, HACLA has only leased up 325 of the 3,365 granted to the city of Los Angeles (HACLA, 2022). 641 of the 1,964 vouchers allotted to the Los Angeles County Development Authority (LACDA) have been leased up (Sheet, 2022). As of October 13, 2022, 50% of Emergency Housing Vouchers have been leased up nationally (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022) and Los Angeles has leased up less than a fourth of its vouchers (Kaur, 2022).

The lack of success in issuing vouchers that lead to leases can be attributed to several co-occurring challenges in the Los Angeles area. First, the Los Angeles rental market is costly. As of October 22, the average rent in Los Angeles county is over \$2000, a 14% increase from last year (Santarelli, 2022). Additionally, HACLA and other housing agencies have experienced struggles with staffing, particularly in the wake of COVID. Doug Guthrie, Los Angeles City housing authority's president, stated that HACLA is to blame for the voucher program's low success rate, detailing the agency's staffing issues (Sheets, 2022). As of October, the HACLA website showed 23 jobs currently vacant, many of which have been posted for several months (HACLA, 2022). One voucher recipient in LA found a unit and submitted her paperwork in December 2021, requiring approval from HACLA, with part of the process being a unit inspection. According to the voucher recipient and the landlord, HACLA employees have yet to respond to any emails or phone calls for several months (Sheets, 2022). Lastly, landlord discrimination presents a barrier to nearly all types of government-issued housing vouchers. Research shows that landlords tend to deny housing to individuals with housing vouchers, and their reluctance stems from the “long lead times” between showing the unit to the tenant, going through the required inspection process, making necessary repairs, and obtaining the PHA sign off (Vesoulis, 2021). A Los Angeles regional study found that 76% of landlords refused to accept vouchers, and 81% of Los Angeles landlords in low-income neighborhoods refused to accept housing vouchers, despite discrimination based on the source of income being illegal (Cunningham et al., 2018). Voucher holders have expressed deep frustration with finding adequate housing as there is currently a substantial shortage of affordable housing units available (Vesoulis, 2021). Finding a housing unit and a landlord that accepts vouchers within the timeframe is difficult, and it has taken several individuals months or even years to lease their vouchers, including their long times spent on the Section 8 waitlist (Wyksta, 2019).

## **Influences of Race and Ethnicity**

Because homelessness and housing instability disproportionately affect People of Color (POC), EHVs present racialized systemic barriers. Research conducted by The National Alliance to End Homelessness highlighted potential issues pertaining to identity that can impact the efforts of POC from signing leases and getting into units. The research found structural challenges, such as redlining and zoning policies — racial practices to keep neighborhoods segregated — limited the geography where individuals receiving EHVs could potentially live. Additionally, landlords’ denial is often based on immigration status, criminal records, race, ethnicity, or nationality-based exclusion (Moses & Pagaduan, 2022). Research also finds that owners of rental housing tend to discriminate against vouchers as an income source, in order to mask their desired racial discrimination (Cunningham et al., 2018). These converging realities represent a particularly vicious cycle of white supremacy where POC are more likely to experience homelessness, and are more likely to become infected and die from COVID-19 than their white counterparts (DeSimone, 2022). Even when interventions specifically meant to undo the harms of COVID, such as EHVs, are utilized, racialized discrimination is employed to reduce the options of this vulnerable voucher-holding population, which is often of color.

## **COMPARING VOUCHERS FROM OTHER DISASTERS**

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The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was established in 1979 with the goal of coordinating with the federal government to ensure that the United States is equipped to prepare for and respond to disasters (FEMA, 2022). The primary mission is to reduce the loss of life and property from all hazards, such as natural disasters, man-made disasters, and acts of terrorism, by creating a comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation (CRS Reports, 2019). Several programs and vouchers within FEMA assist individuals with temporary or permanent housing. One prominent program is Sheltering and Housing Assistance. Under this program, there are four options for disaster survivors with damage to their primary homes. Those options are Rental Assistance, Transitional Sheltering Housing, Direct Temporary Housing, and Home Repair/Replacement.

### **Hurricane Katrina**

On August 23rd, 2005, Hurricane Katrina flooded the city of New Orleans, killing approximately 1,300 people. A New Orleans-based research organization estimated up to 600,000 (Plyer, 2019) households were displaced, making it the most destructive natural disaster in American history (Townsend, 2006). Congress provided over \$555 million to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to provide Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers to displaced families/households. HUD called this program the Katrina Disaster Housing Assistance Program (KDHAP). The primary goal for KDHAP was to support HUD and FEMA in smoothly streamlining the process of providing Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers to households that lost their homes as a result of Hurricane Katrina as well as relocate families that HUD already assisted. The eligibility of KDHAP is as follows:

1. The family must have utilized a HUD-housed support program in the disaster zone
2. Must be registered by FEMA and have a FEMA ID
3. Must be designated by FEMA as eligible for housing assistance or
4. Designated by HUD as suitable for housing assistance (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2005).

Katrina housing vouchers lasted 18 months from the disaster declaration (Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2005), and approximately 700,000 applicants received rental assistance (McCarty, 2008). Many participants stayed for as long as they could, and a survey conducted by HUD showed that the reason participants left the program was because the program was ending (Buron et al., 2013). FEMA stated approximately 60,000 apartments were leased by the local and state government and participating PHAs on the behalf of evacuees of Katrina (FEMA, 2006). The Housing Authority of New Orleans in particular was authorized for 17,000 vouchers and leased up to 13,500 (Tuggle, 2007). While many factors differentiate the COVID pandemic response from Hurricane Katrina, we can make some limited observations. Whether due to a newfound sense of community service sparked by the disaster, or the understanding that vouchers would be relatively stable income for potential renters, landlords were more willing to lease to voucher holders than in the Los Angeles COVID setting. While we can only speculate on landlord motivations, one observable difference is that the eligibility criteria to receive aid for Hurricane Katrina was less restrictive. The lack of income restrictions could have casted a wider net and enabled more people to be served by vouchers.

### **Hurricane Harvey**

On August 25th, 2017, Hurricane Harvey, a category four storm, struck Texas. Over 792,00 households applied for disaster assistance from FEMA. FEMA provided financial and direct housing assistance, such as rental assistance, lodging expense reimbursement, and home repair assistance. 45.8% of property owners received “some form” of financial assistance, while 34.5% of renters received aid. A report by the Institute for Urban Research argued that renters received less financial support from FEMA because they do not own the building (Institute for Urban Research, 2018). To qualify for the direct housing program, applicants must have been homeowners before the disasters and have FEMA verified loss of up to \$17,000. Renters are required to have FEMA assess property damages. The Department of Housing and Urban Development made available unoccupied units for HUD-assisted and disaster survivors (FEMA, 2022).

For households ineligible for FEMA assistance, a program called Housing for Harvey was created a week after the hurricane to repurpose federal funds to rehouse displaced families. Housing for Harvey partnered with FEMA and the Houston Apartment Association to secure over 1,000 rental units; and the Houston Housing Authority negotiated holding fees with landlords to secure six-month leases (Housing for Houston, 2019). Housing for Houston rehoused approximately 334 households during the course

of the storm. This approach is reflective of Los Angeles' Project Roomkey, which utilized federal funds to secure underutilized hotel beds for COVID-vulnerable housing. The key difference, however, is that Houston utilized public funds and landlord negotiations for permanent housing placements.

## IMPROVEMENTS

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The Emergency Housing Vouchers aids in reducing homelessness and alleviates the number of individuals at risk of falling into homelessness. The program, however, falls short of its intended outcome as many individuals face several barriers, such as voucher and race discrimination and difficulty in leasing a rental unit before the deadline. The Emergency Housing Voucher program could help secure higher housing placements for participants if:

- The program (or housing authorities) allocated funding to aid in rental search assistance
- The program (or housing authorities) created more substantial incentives to encourage landlords in high-cost markets to work with both voucher holders and the housing authorities
- Housing authorities focused on providing prompt unit inspections to all voucher holders who have located potential housing
- Housing authorities emphasize hiring and employee retention, particularly in roles supporting the EHV program

Rental search assistance would provide crucial expertise in locating available housing units and relieve some of the burden faced by participants at risk of homelessness; with this additional support, participants could be more likely to secure a lease with their voucher much quicker than if they were looking on their own. For example, San Diego, CA—despite a similarly tight housing market like Los Angeles—was able to issue and lease 100% of its COVID-19 related EHV's (Kaur, 2022). The city's housing commission states that San Diego's success with leasing EHV's was hiring in-house specialists to assist with housing searching support (Kaur, 2022). Creating more effective landlord incentives would also bring more willingness to rent units to voucher holders, particularly in high cost housing markets. When landlords know that they can raise rents in an open market, they are less likely to accept a lower rent price for a renter they might feel is "risky." Having additional incentives on hand, perhaps tying incentives to local rental rates, could help overcome this barrier. A prompt and timely unit inspection from public housing authorities would aid landlords in being less wary of accepting individuals with housing vouchers. In order for unit inspections to be completed in a timely and prompt manner, HACLA and other housing authorities would need to invest in hiring and retaining more employees who possess the expertise necessary to quickly manage the influx of requests.

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