

# Study of PHA's Efforts to Serve People Experiencing Homelessness

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# Goals of the study



- Examine the extent to which PHAs are making efforts to serve people experiencing homelessness by:
  - **Using their preference systems** to provide access to mainstream housing assistance for people experiencing homelessness
  - **Removing barriers** that may make it difficult for homeless people to use housing assistance programs
- Describe approaches PHAs and partner organizations are using to serve homeless households



# PHA preference systems



- PHAs may prioritize households on waiting lists for the Public Housing and the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs
- Before 1998, federal preferences gave priority to households with severe rent burdens, living in substandard housing (including homeless), and displaced.
- Following QHWRA (1998), PHAs set local preferences.
- Preference systems may be complex:
  - Layers of preferences with different rankings
  - Several household characteristics with equal weight
  - Different preferences for different PHA programs



# Two-part data collection process



## Web-based survey

- All PHAs (3,988)
- 80% response rate (3,210 PHAs)
- 86% of all HCV units and 82% of public housing units reflected in responses
- Questions were largely close-ended: yes/no or check from a list
- Questions focused on how preference systems work, where homeless households fit. Some questions about barriers and policies.

## Telephone survey

- 125 purposively selected PHAs
- 75 PHAs with efforts and 50 without efforts
- 120 respondents
- Questions with open-ended responses
- Discussions focused on how PHAs and partners are making special efforts to serve people experiencing homelessness or why they are not.



# Types of efforts to serve people experiencing homelessness



1. General preferences: Ordering the PHA's waiting list to ensure that housing resources reach specified populations ahead of those who also may be eligible for housing assistance.
  2. Limited preferences ("set-asides"): A defined number of units or vouchers for which homeless people may get top priority
  3. Modifies screening: Modified application of screening or changes to other policies or procedures to reduce barriers homeless people face in using PHA programs
- **Overall, 24% of PHAs, controlling 53% of all assisted housing units, make at least one of the efforts.**





# Competition for general preferences for housing assistance



- 32% of all PHAs have some general preference for homeless household, but only 10% have a strong general preference
- Types of households to which PHAs often give the *same* preference as people experiencing homelessness
  - Current residents of the jurisdiction
  - Victims of domestic violence
  - Households with elderly heads or spouses
  - Households in substandard housing
  - Households displaced by public action or natural disaster
  - Veterans
  - Households with severe rent burden



## Efforts to serve homeless people through set-asides and modifying screening

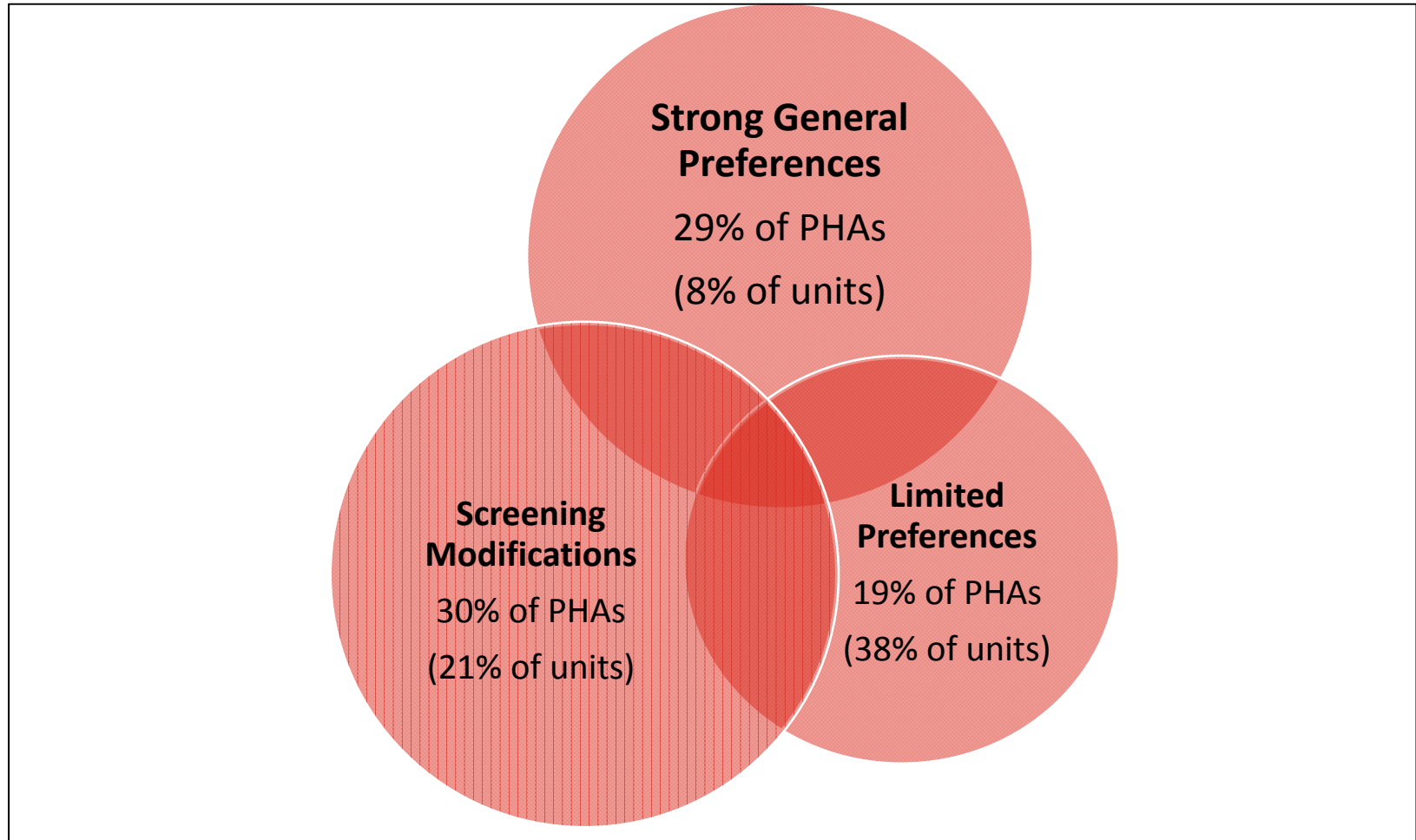


- 9% of PHAs have set-asides for homeless households. These PHAs have 36% of all assisted housing units.
- 11% of PHAs modify screening or other program rules. These PHAs have 24% of all assisted housing units.





# PHAs making more than one type of effort



## PHA program characteristics that help explain efforts



- Larger PHAs are much more likely than smaller PHAs to have set-asides or to modify program rules.
- Smaller PHAs are just as likely to have strong general preferences that put homeless households at or close to the top of waiting lists.
- PHAs with HCV programs are more likely to make efforts than PHAs with just public housing.
- Many PHAs that project-base some vouchers (14% of PHAs administering HCV) have set-asides (31%) or modify screening (24%)



## PHA location characteristics that help explain efforts



- PHAs in metro areas have 80% of program units and are much more likely to make efforts...but not through strong general preferences.
- PHAs serving areas with large numbers of homeless people (based on the CoC PIT counts) are much more likely to make efforts than PHAs in other areas.



## PHA participation in the homeless services system that helps explain efforts



- Participation in the CoC makes PHAs more likely to have set-asides or modify screening
- Administering programs targeted to homeless people—e.g., Shelter Plus Care or VASH—has a positive effect on efforts to serve homeless households with HCV or Public Housing.
- Administering special purpose vouchers such as NED, mainstream vouchers, and FUP also has a positive effect.



# Reasons for not participating in the CoC



- 75% of PHAs do not.
- In follow-up survey, PHAs identified various reasons:
  - PHA's mission is to operate housing for seniors
  - PHA is geographically remote from the center of the CoC
  - PHA does not want to make policy changes implied by participation in the CoC—for example, bump people on current closed wait lists to a lower status



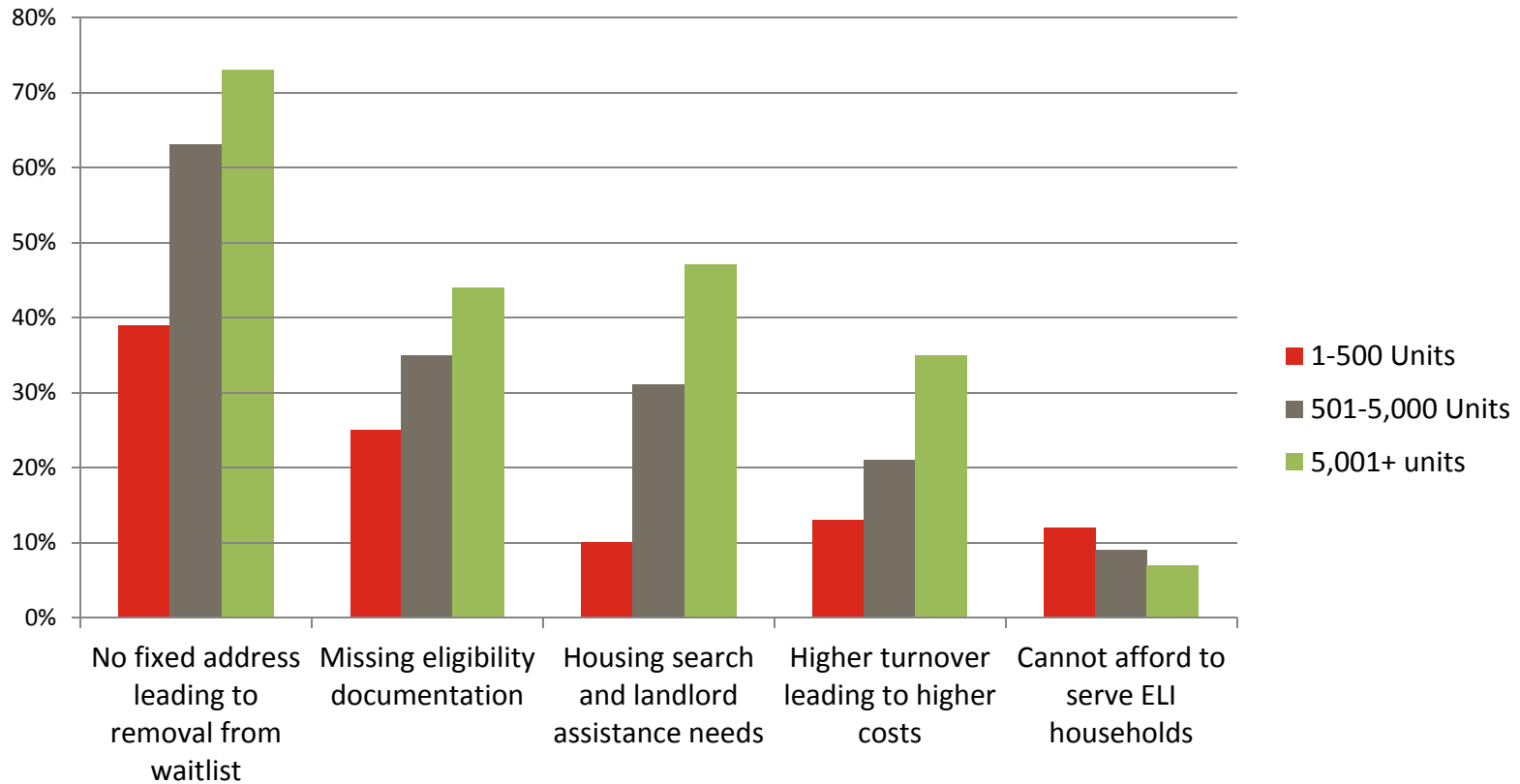
# Identifying and addressing household barriers



Barrier	Percentage of PHAs that agreed with barrier statement
<b>Homeless applicants with no fixed address often get removed from the waiting list</b>	46%
<b>Homeless households do not have the needed eligibility documentation</b>	28%
<b>Because of their barriers, homeless households need housing search and landlord negotiation assistance in the HCV program</b>	16%
<b>There is higher turnover among homeless households, resulting in higher administrative and/or operating costs</b>	16%
<b>Our PHA cannot afford to serve homeless households that are zero income or extremely low income (ELI)</b>	11%



# Household barriers by number of units in PHA



## PHA relationships with homelessness service providers



- 30% of PHAs indicated that they have formal relationships (e.g., MOUs) with organizations that serve homeless people
- This is a larger percentage than the 24% of PHAs that make efforts to serve homeless people





## PHA and partner approaches to serving homeless people



- PHAs and their partners provide assistance to homeless households at various stages in the process of gaining access to housing assistance
  - Outreach
  - Eligibility screening and verification of homelessness
  - Providing housing through different types of programs
  - Providing assistance locating housing in which to use vouchers
  - Promoting housing retention



# Outreach



- Homeless people already served by partner agencies often are referred to the PHA
- Partners help people experiencing homelessness prepare their PHA application and gather documentation needed to establish eligibility
- Sometimes PHAs that have no slot available refer homeless households to partner agencies for temporary assistance



## Eligibility screening and homeless verification



- PHAs must determine eligibility, but they often rely on information gathered with the assistance of partner agencies.
- Among PHAs with a general homeless preference, 77% rely on an outside organization to verify homeless status; 83% PHAs with set-asides do so.



# Placement into housing



- Choice between HCV and Public Housing often depends on relative availability
- PHAs stated in the telephone survey that partner organizations usually request vouchers rather than public housing units
- PHAs that use project-based vouchers to serve homeless households may target specific sub-populations among people experiencing homelessness
- MTW agencies have additional flexibility for sponsor basing and use of block grant funding



## Assistance locating housing in which to use vouchers



- PHAs may have a relationship with a partner organization to help homeless people find HCV qualifying units.
- Partners also may provide assistance with security deposits, utility deposits, first month's rent, furniture, appliances.



# Promoting housing retention



- Among PHAs with some type of special effort to serve homeless people, two-thirds have a partner organization providing services to formerly homeless tenants
- Even among PHAs without special efforts, almost half have partners that provide services to formerly homeless tenants
- Case management is the most common service provided
- PHAs report that case management can help address tenancy issues and prevent eviction or termination of assistance



## Encouraging PHAs to make greater efforts to serve homeless people



- New guidance from HUD in Notice PIH 2013-15 (HA)
  - Information and strategies outlined in the Notice are confirmed by the findings of this study.
  - Study suggests need for further training PHA staff on definitions of homelessness, what types of preferences and policy changes are permitted.



## Based on the study findings, HUD could consider



- Encouraging large PHAs to create limited preferences for homeless households, make current set-asides larger
- Encouraging all PHAs to modify screening and other policies, consistent with the guidelines set forth in the Notice
- Encouraging smaller PHAs to create strong general preferences for households experiencing homelessness
  - Use a narrow definition of homelessness
- Redoubling efforts to encourage PHA participation in CoCs
- Requesting funding for additional special purpose vouchers





