

# Evaluation of the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD)

## Early Findings on Choice Mobility Implementation



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# **Evaluation of the Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD)**

## **Early Findings on Choice Mobility Implementation**

**Prepared for  
U.S. Department of Housing and  
Urban Development**

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## Executive Summary

The Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program, authorized in 2012, is designed to enable public housing agencies (PHAs) to convert public housing (and properties in other affordable housing programs) into project-based Section 8 housing. The intent of conversion is to address projects' short-term capital needs and preserve their long-term viability.

Program requirements include preserving the core rights of PHA residents (including the right to return to the rehabilitated project) and offering tenant-based assistance to residents after they have lived in the converted property for a period of time. This latter component is called choice mobility: All properties that convert assistance must provide residents the choice of moving with tenant-based rental assistance, typically using a tenant-based voucher (TBV), within an established time after conversion, with some exceptions. Residents living in a RAD property under the Project-Based Voucher (PBV) program can request a TBV after living in the property for 1 year, and those living in a project-based rental assistance (PBRA) property can request a TBV after 2 years.<sup>1</sup> Choice mobility does not mean that a voucher will be issued immediately upon request; rather, if TBV is not immediately available, the household is prioritized before households on the PHA's housing choice voucher (HCV) waiting list and receives a voucher when one becomes available.

This report is part of a broader evaluation of RAD's public housing component. The evaluation is organized around four study topics: (1) choice mobility, (2) long-term preservation, (3) asset management, and (4) PHA organizational change. This report addresses the first topic, which evaluates the implementation of the RAD choice mobility option and its impact on property outcomes, tenant outcomes, and the voucher program. Specifically, the report presents findings from 46 interviews with PHA staff, property owners, and residents across 13 PHAs. The purpose of those interviews was to understand choice mobility implementation and takeup, the experiences of RAD residents who request vouchers, and how the choice mobility option affects PHAs and property management.

Overall, the findings of this study include the following:

1. **PHA staff and resident interviewees noted relatively limited takeup of the choice mobility option.** PHA staff members noted that their newly converted RAD units are of high quality, which can serve as an incentive for residents to stay in the building. Although some residents who had not moved mentioned the high quality of the converted housing, others pointed to a lack of quality private-market housing that would accept a voucher as their reason not to move. Other challenges that staff and residents cited as deterrents to exercising the choice mobility option included residents' age or disability, lack of available transportation to search for housing, and difficulty navigating the housing search process. Those challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> The PBV program is part of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) larger HCV program, administered by PHAs and managed by HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing. The HCV program includes both PBVs and TBVs. PBVs are those that tie rental assistance to specific units in a property. TBVs are those that tie rental assistance to the voucher holder and can be used to rent any private unit that meets HCV program guidelines. The PBRA program, overseen by HUD's Office of Multifamily Housing, also ties rental assistance to specific units in a property. See [https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/RFS10\\_PBV\\_PBRA.PDF](https://www.hud.gov/sites/documents/RFS10_PBV_PBRA.PDF).

2. **PHA staff reported having enough voucher turnover to implement the choice mobility option.** PHAs included in this phase of the study did not exclude any RAD properties from the choice mobility option, but nearly all of them adopted a limit to the number of choice mobility moves permitted at each property to help manage turnover and vacancies. Staff reported that the number of choice mobility requests was below those limits. PHA staff expressed confidence in their ability to manage choice mobility requests at the pace they were received.
3. **PHA staff said they effectively communicated the choice mobility option to their residents. Residents who had used choice mobility reported mixed experiences, however.** PHA staff reported that they were able to communicate the option to all residents, including those who were non-English speakers and residents with disabilities. PHA staff said that they could track and respond to resident voucher requests. Residents' experiences varied across agencies, with some finding communications and steps clear and sufficient and others saying they were confused about the process. The 2019 RAD evaluation, which included a survey of RAD residents, found that almost half of residents were very interested in tenant-based vouchers, but had not been informed about the choice mobility option (Stout et al., 2019). A final report with the complete results of the choice mobility evaluation, which is expected in 2023 and also includes a resident survey, will provide more information about whether the lack of information about the choice mobility option continues to play a role in its limited use.
4. **Both PHA staff and residents mentioned that challenges in finding private-market housing served as a barrier to exercising the choice mobility option.** Most PHAs reported that they did not offer housing search assistance or support for residents who opted to move from a RAD development into private-market housing. Because the funding structure of RAD does not provide specific or additional support for choice mobility beyond the regular HCV program, PHAs generally do not provide targeted mobility services to RAD households. Further, none of the PHA staff interviewed said that they offered mobility counseling to RAD movers or other residents to support moves to higher-opportunity areas. A small number of interviewed residents who requested a voucher commented on long wait times to receive a TBV, although it was not clear whether wait times were due to the program requiring residents to live in the RAD development for a period of time or the PHA lacking available vouchers.
5. **PHA staff did not believe that the choice mobility option affected unit turnover or property management costs.** Some PHA staff reported other factors that affected turnover costs, including limited staff capacity, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some program administrators indicated that turnover costs for RAD units have increased because of the need to hire third-party vendors when faced with limited staff capacity, but overall, PHA staff still reported that turnover costs were lower after conversion because the units were newer.



## Introduction and Overview

The Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program was authorized under the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2012 to enable public housing agencies (PHAs) to maintain public housing stock while facing shortfalls in meeting long-term capital needs. RAD allows PHAs to convert public housing and properties in other smaller affordable housing programs (which this evaluation does not study) into project-based Section 8 housing via project-based vouchers (PBVs), which are part of the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, or via project-based rental assistance (PBRA). The conversions address a project's short-term capital needs and preserve its long-term viability. Program requirements, which are intended to protect residents' rights throughout the conversion process, include the right to return to a rehabilitated project without being subject to additional screening or other requirements. RAD has grown over the years from an original cap of 60,000 units to a current cap of 455,000 units, occurring at PHAs of all sizes and in all regions.

Public housing residents gain a new right following a RAD conversion called *choice mobility*. Most properties that convert must provide residents the option of moving, with continuing tenant-based rental assistance, typically using a tenant-based voucher (TBV), after they have lived on the post-conversion property for a minimum period of time established by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) rules. A limited number of good-cause exemptions from the choice mobility requirement—allowable for no more than 10 percent of units in the RAD program—enable PHAs with insufficient vouchers to support this housing option. Residents living in a RAD property under the PBV program may request a TBV after living at the PBV property for 1 year, and those living at a PBRA property can request a TBV after 2 years of PBRA assistance. Choice mobility does not mean that a tenant will receive a voucher immediately upon request; rather, if tenant-based assistance is not immediately available, the household is prioritized before households on the PHA's HCV waiting list and receives a voucher when one becomes available.

This report is part of a broader evaluation of RAD (limited to RAD component one, the conversion of public housing) conducted by Econometrica and the Urban Institute for HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research. The evaluation is organized around four study topics:

1. The implementation and outcomes of the choice mobility option.
2. The impact of RAD on the long-term preservation and financial viability of converted properties.
3. The adequacy of asset management for RAD conversions under PBVs and PBRA.
4. PHA organizational change.

This report focuses on the first topic, choice mobility, which evaluates the implementation of the RAD choice mobility option and its impact on property outcomes, tenant outcomes, and the voucher program. It provides an overview of the choice mobility option, the study approach, and a summary of the early findings, which are informed by a series of virtual site visits with eight PHAs that implemented choice mobility and interviews at five additional PHAs where choice mobility had not yet been used. The purpose of those interviews was to understand choice

mobility implementation and takeup, the experiences of RAD residents who request vouchers, and how the choice mobility option affects PHAs and property managers. The full report for the RAD Choice Mobility and Long-Term Affordability evaluation (expected in 2023) will include an analysis of administrative data and the results of a series of surveys with PHAs, property owners and operators, and residents.

The research questions guiding the choice mobility component of the evaluation include the following:

1. How are PHAs administering the choice mobility option?
2. What is the experience of current and former RAD residents with choice mobility? How do RAD residents assess the RAD choice mobility process?
3. Why do RAD residents request tenant-based vouchers?
4. Does the availability of the choice mobility option and residents' ability to move from the site affect property outcomes, including the responsiveness of property management, property turnover rates, and maintenance costs due to turnover?

The research team used Public Housing Information Center (PIC) and Tenant Rental Assistance Certification System (TRACS) data to draw a sample of PHAs that included small, medium, and large PHAs in all HUD-defined geographical regions of the United States. The sample included a mix of PHAs with lower and higher takeup of the choice mobility option—as informed by HUD administrative data and analysis of PIC and TRACS data—and a mix of conversion types (PBV, PBRA, or both). PIC and TRACS data was also used to create a sample of current RAD residents who were eligible for choice mobility but had not moved and former RAD residents who had moved using choice mobility.

The research team used a snowball sampling approach to identify interviewees who could answer all the questions necessary for this evaluation. PHA interviews began with a background call with high-level PHA staff to do the following:

1. Confirm the PHA's organizational structure.
2. Confirm administrative data on the number of units and voucher types in the PHA's RAD portfolio.
3. Request additional data on choice mobility usage and property management and identify staff members who could speak to both.

The research team then conducted virtual interviews on the choice mobility option and property management. If the PHA was not the owner or operator of the RAD-converted development, interviews with the third-party owners and operators were conducted separately.

For virtual resident interviews, PHA staff advertised the interview opportunity for current residents of their RAD developments and mail information regarding the interviews to former residents who had moved using choice mobility. Because of the low response rate from residents, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, the study switched the efforts to the administrative data approach discussed above and contacted residents directly from the sample using the contact information in PIC and TRACS data.

The research team conducted 46 interviews at 13 PHAs, comprising 32 staff interviews and 14 resident interviews (exhibit 1). At eight PHAs where residents had exercised their choice mobility option, the team conducted virtual site visits with PHA staff, property owners, and operators. The team also conducted interviews at five PHAs where residents had not exercised the choice mobility option. All interviews with PHA staff, property owners, and operators were conducted in 2020.<sup>2</sup>

The research team’s 14 interviews with residents included interviews with both current and former residents of participating RAD developments (5 interviews were conducted in 2020 and 9 in early 2021). Five of the interviews were with residents who had exercised their right to move using choice mobility (of whom two had lived in PBV units and three had lived in PBRA units). Nine were with residents who were eligible for choice mobility but had not moved (six who had lived in PBV units and three who had lived in PBRA units).

**Exhibit 1. Interview Counts**

Interview Type	Number of Interviews
<b>Staff Interviews</b>	
Choice Mobility (8 PHAs)	23
No Choice Mobility Moves (5 PHAs)	9
<b>Resident Interviews</b>	
Choice Mobility	5
Did Not Move	9
<b>Total Interviews</b>	<b>46</b>

Source: Research team interviews with staff and residents, 2020–21

<sup>2</sup> Under RAD, residents in RAD-converted properties have a set of rights at various stages of the conversion process—before conversion, at conversion, and after conversion. The full list of RAD resident rights in public housing can be found at [https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/Housing/documents/RAD\\_Resident\\_Rights\\_in\\_Public\\_Housing\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/Housing/documents/RAD_Resident_Rights_in_Public_Housing_Web.pdf). A supplement to those rights was added in September 2020 in response to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. That addendum can be accessed in PIH-2020-26.

## Findings

In the following sections, the report presents findings from virtual site visits and telephone interviews conducted with PHA staff, property owners and operators, and current and former residents of RAD developments.

Findings are organized around four major areas:

1. Implementation and use of the choice mobility option.
2. Resident experiences and assessment of the choice mobility process.
3. Tenant outcomes.
4. Property outcomes.

After describing the findings about choice mobility implementation, the report provides conclusions and lay out the next steps for the broader RAD evaluation.

### Implementation and Use of the Choice Mobility Option

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#### *How are PHAs administering the choice mobility option?*

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**FINDING:**

*The 13 PHAs included in this study did not exclude any properties from the choice mobility option, but nearly all of them adopted a limit to the number of choice mobility moves annually at each property to help manage unit turnover and prevent large numbers of vacant units. The number of choice mobility requests was below the limits that had been applied in each agency.*

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PHAs participating in RAD may select from a range of policy options when determining how to implement choice mobility. PHAs may choose to limit the number of choice mobility moves by setting a limit on the number of vouchers used for choice mobility to a percentage of its annual number of turnover vouchers (vouchers made available to a new household when a previously assisted household leaves the HCV program). This applies to both PBV and PBRA units. They may also set a limit on the share of choice mobility moves to 15 percent annually from any one PBRA property. PHAs that choose to implement a turnover cap are not required to provide more than one-third of their turnover vouchers to residents of converted projects in any given year. In limited cases, properties may be entirely exempt from the choice mobility option. Although some PHAs elected to limit the proportion of choice mobility moves in a year at a PBRA property, no PHAs reported that any families had to wait to receive a choice mobility voucher due to those administrative policy decisions.

Among the PHAs participating in virtual site visits, none had properties exempted by HUD from participating in the choice mobility option, but multiple PHAs had limited the proportion of units in a PBRA property that could be vacated due to choice mobility, reporting limits ranging from 10 to 20 percent (which would be beyond the 15-percent annual cap). PHAs chose to apply those limits to help staff manage property turnover and sustain the level of rental income necessary to maintain the property; in practice, the PHAs had not reached the limits they had imposed on choice mobility moves.

Because PHAs generally have all of their vouchers issued at all times and choice mobility does not grant PHAs new vouchers, interviewed PHA staff noted that residents wishing to make use of the choice mobility option were added to the voucher waiting list for a turnover voucher to become available. One staff member from a large PHA said that the agency had initially instituted a 15-percent limit on the proportion of units per property per year that could be vacated with choice mobility because they had expected takeup to be much greater than it has been. They thought that a lack of limit would impede the PHA's ability to keep up with mortgage payments for the property and turn over units in a timely manner. The demand for vouchers has been much lower than they anticipated, however:

*At first, we had several people that were interested. Now, there's a decline of people that are interested in the choice mobility. I think it's like with everything—when something is new, everybody wants it, and then they forget... We did decide to take the limit which is allowed ... because we have a mortgage to pay now. If they empty out the whole building, we won't be able to pay it.*

No difference seemed to exist in exemptions or limits between PHAs with low or no choice mobility use and those with more choice mobility use. This finding suggests that low or no choice mobility may not be a result of exemptions or limits on choice mobility but may reflect other factors.

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**FINDING:**

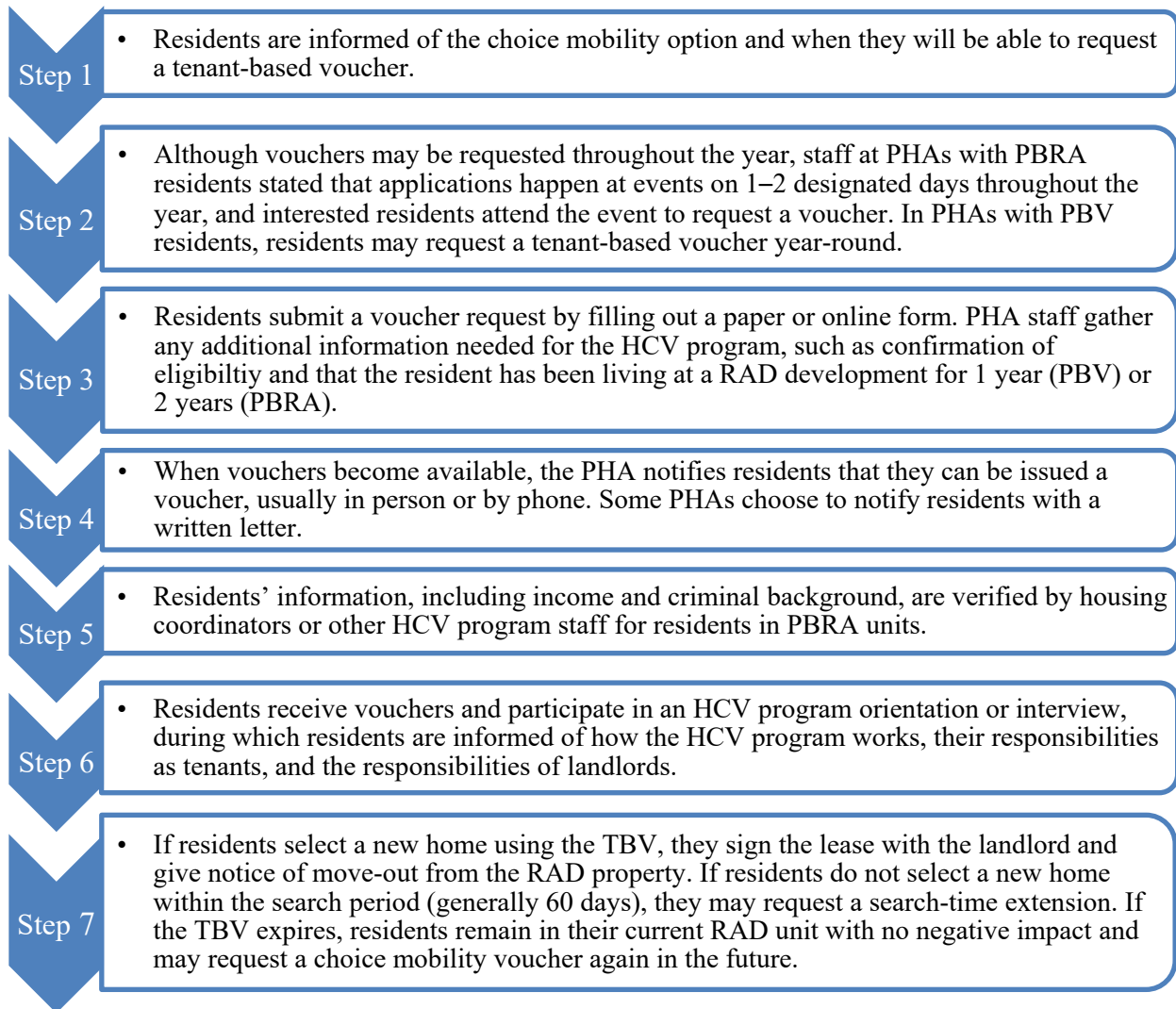
*The process for obtaining a voucher for choice mobility is similar across PHAs. It typically begins with residents being informed of the option. When eligible for a TBV, residents complete a choice mobility application. Residents then are placed on a waiting list or are issued a voucher immediately. During this time, property managers track voucher requests. If the PHA uses a third-party owner or operator, the third-party property manager will track choice mobility requests and moves at their properties. The process concludes with residents receiving a voucher and searching for housing.*

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After residents have been living at a RAD development for 1 year (in PBV units) or 2 years (in PBRA units), they are eligible to request a voucher for choice mobility. PHAs reported that they confirm if families are in good standing, as defined by the PHA, before processing the request. PHAs reported that residents cannot owe the PHA or property owner any funds for work orders, back due rent, or any other reason; cannot be undergoing eviction; and cannot be under lease violation. A few PHAs allow residents who meet the tenure requirement but are not in good standing to apply for choice mobility and be placed on the waiting list; the issue must be resolved by the time a voucher becomes available, however.

Once a resident becomes eligible for choice mobility, the process for requesting a voucher is similar across most PHAs in the study. Exhibit 2 describes the reported choice mobility request process, including differences in the process for some of the PHAs in the study. Steps one, three, four, and six are activities completed by residents. Steps two and five are activities that are completed by PHA staff and do not require any action by residents. Step seven notes the end point for the process, when residents either lease up in their new home, request a search-time extension, or remain in their current RAD unit.

**Exhibit 2. Reported Choice Mobility Request Process**



HCV = housing choice voucher. PBRA = project-based rental assistance. PBV = project-based voucher. PHA = public housing agency. RAD = rental assistance demonstration. TBV = tenant-based voucher.

Note: This exhibit is based on PHAs, property owners, and residents’ reporting.

According to the staff interviewed, residents receive updates throughout the voucher request process by (1) calling the PHA to request updates on the status of their voucher request or their place on the waiting list or (2) receiving notification by phone, in person, or with a letter from the PHA when the TBV is available and ready to be issued.

PHA staff reported using various tracking systems to manage the number of incoming choice mobility requests. Most often, PHAs reported that they used their voucher waiting list as a mechanism for tracking choice mobility requests. RAD residents requesting a voucher under choice mobility were flagged so that PHAs could contact them when a voucher was available.

Beyond using the waiting list to track choice mobility requests, PHA staff described using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to track the date of property conversion, the date on which

residents become eligible for choice mobility on the basis of tenure, and additional information on residents:

*First, we make a list of [requests] based on the order that we receive them. Then between the administrator and the supervisor of intakes, there is an Excel spreadsheet that tracks the day-to-day—[when the resident] went through orientation, the day they received their voucher, the day that the units passes inspection, and there's a status or comment section that we can put notes back and forth to each other.*

Staff at three of the eight PHAs reported that once residents decide they are interested in moving using choice mobility, they call either the property management office or their housing coordinator and express interest in moving, and the PHA issues a voucher if one is available or places the resident on the waiting list. The PHA where residents notify property managers of their interest in choice mobility also relies on the third-party property managers to track choice mobility requests.

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**FINDING:**

*PHAs most often inform residents of the choice mobility option during orientation, which takes place when residents are moving into RAD developments. After move-in, PHAs remind residents of the choice mobility option by distributing newsletters and flyers or at annual recertification meetings.*

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HUD provides guidance on communications and outreach to PHAs participating in RAD. PHAs are required to conduct multiple meetings with residents before RAD conversion to explain the program and residents' rights, which include the option to request tenant-based assistance using choice mobility. PHAs often conduct meetings with new residents after RAD conversion. The goal is for PHAs to conduct outreach and inform residents of their right to request a voucher during the initial orientation after moving into a RAD development.

All the PHA staff interviewed reported using resident orientation meetings as the primary communication method to inform residents of the choice mobility option, typically when the resident is moving into the RAD development or before RAD conversion. When moving into the property, residents participate in an orientation that takes place online or in person, depending on the PHA (although the COVID-19 pandemic has limited PHAs' ability to offer an in-person orientation option). During the pandemic, some PHAs offered orientations in smaller groups so that residents could socially distance themselves from one another, and others switched to telephone or online sessions.

When undergoing a RAD conversion involving rehabilitation, PHAs are required to host multiple meetings for residents living at the targeted developments. Two of the PHAs in the study reported using regular resident meetings to discuss the choice mobility option and provide updates on the conversion process. At the meetings, information was shared using slide decks, HUD factsheets, and flyers:

*Initially, we had countless resident meetings ... through every phase, right? Before we even started, we had resident meetings ongoing, especially—even more at the properties where there was [temporary] displacement. At every*

*meeting, we addressed it; we had PowerPoints with information. Later, when HUD had their factsheets, we actually handed [out] the choice mobility [one]. "Have you seen the HUD factsheet, the choice mobility?" "Yep."*

Five of the eight PHAs included in the site visits reported continued efforts to inform residents of the choice mobility option after they moved into their unit at a RAD property. Distributing flyers, either by posting them throughout RAD developments or leaving them at residents' doors, was the second-most common communication method, after communication during orientation. To a lesser extent, PHAs also provided the information using newsletters, electronic communications (including emails and text messages to residents), and word of mouth.

PHA staff were asked whether materials used to inform residents about choice mobility were translated into multiple languages, tailored to represent diverse racial and ethnic groups, or tailored to be accessible for older adults or individuals with disabilities. Most often, PHAs offered flyers and other communication materials in English and Spanish. One PHA also offered materials in Haitian Creole. In addition to translating written materials, some PHAs had interpreters present during orientation. Most PHAs offered Spanish interpreters, and one PHA offered interpreters for Tagalog as well. One PHA, serving a predominantly Spanish-speaking population, reported that nearly 90 percent of its staff spoke Spanish fluently. PHAs did not report proactively producing materials providing other accommodations (such as for residents with disabilities or older adults), but some noted working with property managers to identify resident needs and being responsive to those needs during the orientation.

Finally, PHA staff mentioned using annual recertification as an opportunity to remind residents of the choice mobility option. At the annual recertification meeting, a housing coordinator or other PHA staff member would remind residents of the choice mobility option and inform them of their eligibility. One PHA staff member described how the option has been helpful when residents are having challenging experiences with neighbors or feeling unhappy with their housing, even after efforts had been made by property staff to satisfy the tenant:

*When they come in for recertifications, we always tell them, "You know that you can take a voucher if you would like." When we have discussions about—with neighbors who are not getting along, we reemphasize that, "You don't have to live here if you're unhappy; you can take a voucher." Generally, the neighbors want the other neighbor thrown out as opposed to them moving. It's made clear to them [that] if they don't like the units that they're in, they have options pretty regularly. That's also seen in many ways from the resident as some kind of threat that we're throwing them out, so we're careful about that process, about how we have that discussion with them.*

The same respondent also indicated that communicating with residents about the choice mobility option has led some residents to fear they are being evicted (this issue did not come up in other interviews, however).

Residents interviewed brought up other miscommunication issues, particularly around the choice mobility process and requirements and whether the choice mobility option led to automatic voucher issuance or being put at the top of the waiting list for a turnover voucher. For example, one resident who lived in a PBRA unit before the RAD conversion and who had moved to



another PBRA unit at the time of the interview reported thinking that the choice mobility voucher would be automatically granted after they had lived on the renovated property for 2 years:

*Well, they said after the renovation, if you stay on the property for 2 years, you will automatically get the voucher. That's what they said, and they said it was nothing that we had to do, that we—but we could choose—these were the options. We could choose to stay in the unit that we were in, the house that we were in ..., or we could transfer to another house on the property, or we could transfer to another property. Those were the three options. I picked to stay on the property and transfer to the housing—house that's across the street [on the] condition that if I stayed there for 2 years, I would get a voucher. That's how that was.*

This respondent noted that other residents had also been under the impression that choice mobility led to automatic voucher issuance and not waitlist priority. Another resident, who lived at a different property but had secured a voucher, reported receiving a similar message regarding choice mobility:

*Everybody didn't have to move, but so then the people who stayed, they were supposed to get Section 8 later on. It never panned out at first that way. We didn't see that, and then, so, I had heard that if you ask them if they have any vouchers that are left over, that you could possibly be accepted and get one if they had leftover vouchers from the promise that they made, I guess. That's what I did. I just wrote a letter and said I was interested, that I had been in my apartment for 6 years, faithfully paid rent, and I would like to be accepted to be on the Section 8 program.*

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**FINDING:**

*Residents moving from RAD developments tended not to receive any mobility counseling, such as information on available housing options in a range of neighborhoods, beyond what is required in the HCV program. In addition, residents moving from RAD developments received limited support from the PHAs. Some PHAs reported not having the funding to offer substantive support for residents exercising the choice mobility option.*

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The PHA staff interviewed offered limited or no mobility counseling to residents. Staff at one large PHA encouraged residents to move to areas with low concentrations of poverty, as required under the HCV program for voucher briefings. This staff member did not report offering consistent interventions needed for comprehensive mobility counseling, however:

*We encourage them to live in low poverty areas. We have a map of—we talk about deconcentration and the benefits of that in the orientation. We explain how we calculate the subsidy, what their rental portion will be.*

Housing search coordinators, case managers, and other PHA staff reported offering residents limited housing search assistance. Residents would be given a list of local properties available to rent through housing search websites such as Craigslist.org, AffordableHousing.com (previously GoSection8.com), and Apartments.com. Staff at one PHA went further by working with private-

market landlords in the area to offer more direct housing search support for residents interested in exercising choice mobility.

If residents do not find housing during their initial limited search-time period, they may ask for a search-time extension, which allows them to extend the time they can look for housing before losing the voucher. A number of PHA staff members described the process for requesting a search-time extension and offering extensions in extenuating circumstances. Most respondents reported that their residents apply for search-time extensions through their PHA's housing manager or HCV coordinator.

PHA staff members interviewed noted that the lack of dedicated funding for search assistance from HUD limited their ability to offer more comprehensive housing search support. Although PHAs receive administrative fees for PBVs and other HCVs from HUD to fund general voucher program administration costs (this fee is not provided for the administration of PBRA properties), none of the staff at the PHAs interviewed reported using those fees to cover housing search assistance for residents exercising the choice mobility option. Staff at one PHA noted that the lack of direct funding for housing search support from HUD resulted in their search assistance efforts being limited and ad hoc:

*HUD does not fund the Section 8 program for any housing navigation or supportive services. What we do is we try our best to have our caseworker act as a quasi-housing navigator while they're working with their participants, maybe referring them to things like GoSection8.com. If we know that there is a new construction property coming up that is looking for applicants, we would try to guide them to that, but there are no formal housing navigation services because this is not a component that HUD provides any funding for at all.*

Although most PHAs said they did not provide search assistance, two of them described some modest support by way of their standard practices for residents who are issued vouchers. For example, staff at one PHA described the voucher briefing process, including a 30- to 40-minute overview of everything residents need to do and know to move with their voucher. The overview covers what the new landlord will expect, the process for leaving public housing assistance, and how to search for a rental unit.

At one PHA, a housing services specialist is assigned to individual voucher holders to provide support during the housing search process. The specialist reaches out to residents after they have had their voucher for a few weeks to see how their search is going, asking if they have run into any unforeseen circumstances that may require a search-time extension and assisting with those steps if necessary. Another PHA staffer similarly described providing light search support before and after a family receives a voucher. A housing coordinator meets with the family to review potential location options. After tenants receive the voucher, they can continue to work with the coordinator if they have trouble finding a new qualified unit:

*We would have set up a meeting with our [HCV] manager or coordinator. They would sit down with them and go through options of where they could go, what the options are, if there's vacancies at those sites. It would be a preliminary meeting with this particular client when [they] get their voucher*

*issued to them. Then the tenant gets the voucher. If they have any problems finding a place, they continue to call and work with the coordinator, who helps them place at a qualified—in another unit.*

None of the PHA staff interviewed reported providing direct assistance to pay for security deposits or application fees. However, a few PHAs' housing coordinators, housing specialists, or housing case management staff provided residents with referrals to other local organizations for support with moving, including security deposit assistance. At one PHA, interest-free loans of up to \$500 for security deposits were previously offered to residents but are no longer available due to budgetary constraints. Staff at another PHA mentioned that their residents often did not have the resources to pay for application fees:

*I think some of the problems you have with the voucher is the fact that they just don't have the money to pay for the application fees. [You're talking] about an extremely poor population. Every application per person is \$35 to \$50 to run background checks and everything else. It's just very difficult for these families to do that. If they don't get the "yes" from the landlord, they can't get into the property. It's just they don't have the money to pay for those types of applications.*

Residents interviewed reported that they did not receive mobility counseling, housing search assistance, or financial assistance for application fees and security deposits from their PHAs. Instead, they conducted their own searches on the internet or through newspaper listings. One resident told us that they received information on how to look for apartments during a meeting held by the PHA but did not receive any assistance searching after they had the voucher. Another described the search process this way:

*A lot of footwork; once you receive your voucher and landlord package, it's up to you to get out and find something.*

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**FINDING:**

*The prioritization of choice mobility households presented a potential challenge for PHAs to manage their overall voucher waiting lists, although PHAs reported having enough voucher turnover to meet the low demand for choice mobility. At the time of the interviews, PHA respondents indicated that the RAD choice mobility option was not having an effect on waitlist times for non-RAD households.*

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This study included understanding any challenges PHAs faced in meeting the demand for choice mobility and whether giving priority to households requesting a choice mobility voucher over HCV waiting lists (required as a part of RAD) affected the work of staff and wait times for households on the regular PHA waiting list.

Overall, PHA staff indicated that they were able to meet choice mobility demand; staff from all but one PHA indicated that they had enough vouchers to meet the number of choice mobility

requests, even when they had an HCV waiting list.<sup>3</sup> As one respondent put it, the choice mobility preference had not affected their voucher waiting list “in any way.”

PHA staff indicated that the lack of impact of the preference on the HCV waiting list was due to low demand for choice mobility. As one PHA staffer indicated, their agency had enough vouchers to meet the demand for choice mobility because their residents tended not to want to move, describing the RAD units as “the nicest units on the market right now that are below market rent.” Approximately one-half of the residents interviewed who had not moved using the choice mobility option agreed that the RAD housing was better than other local housing options. (This topic is discussed in more detail in the Tenant Outcomes section.)

PHAs are currently able to meet the relatively low choice mobility demand, although discussions with staff suggest that increased demand would present challenges. When probed, some PHA staff respondents noted they had not considered what they would do if they were to receive more choice mobility requests than available vouchers beyond adding people to a waiting list. One respondent indicated that it would be helpful to develop a policy for responding to potential voucher shortages in the future.

Although all but one of the PHAs interviewed reported having enough voucher turnover to meet choice mobility demand, approximately one-half said that they often faced challenges in managing waiting lists. The most common challenge was the prioritization of households requesting a voucher using the choice mobility option (although staff from the smaller agencies reported fewer issues with prioritizing choice mobility movers). One respondent described how a number of HUD programs, including RAD’s choice mobility option, extend the wait time for other households on the list:

*You’re getting into this specialty, and everybody wants a preference, whether it’s homeless, whether it’s RAD ... just the specialty programs. Your average person, and—it’s not that I disagree with this, I do want the choice mobility, I do. I look at it from the standpoint of your average family who would have qualified years ago and would have received a voucher—they’re the ones that are getting pushed to the bottom. You just don’t see those folks receiving a voucher. ... I find it regressive rather than being progressive.*

## **Resident Experiences and Assessment of the Choice Mobility Process**

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### ***What is the experience of current and former RAD residents with choice mobility?***

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#### **FINDING:**

*After being issued a voucher, residents participate in a required orientation for the HCV program. They are usually provided with a list of housing options by a housing coordinator, and then they begin the housing search process. As with the broader voucher population, choice mobility users face tight rental markets and multiple upfront expenses, such as application fees,*

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<sup>3</sup> The respondent who told us that they did not believe their agency had enough vouchers to meet the number of choice mobility requests said that the reason for the shortage was budgetary and that HUD had advised the agency not to issue any additional vouchers.

*security deposits, and first month's rent; credit represents an additional challenge. Residents who find housing still face challenges related to the surrounding neighborhood.*

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According to interviews, after RAD residents complete the voucher request process and a voucher becomes available, the PHA issues the voucher. As discussed above, residents using the RAD choice mobility option receive little or no housing search support. Once residents successfully find a unit to lease, they give notice to the RAD development and work with the HCV program coordinator to schedule an inspection of the new unit.

PHA staff interviewed noted multiple barriers that prevent residents from finding housing and using their TBV pertaining both to those using the choice mobility option and to the broader voucher population. Nearly all PHA respondents said that paying security deposits, application fees, and first month's rent presented barriers to residents using their vouchers. One resident addressed this challenge by working with the landlord to develop a payment plan for the security deposit. PHA staff said that high rents, especially in major metropolitan markets, are another barrier.

Credit was also a commonly cited barrier to successful lease up. One resident reported finding an apartment in a preferable neighborhood could not pass the credit check. In one extreme case, a former RAD resident who moved using a choice mobility voucher reported experiencing a brief incidence of homelessness due to a delayed inspection and an inability to contact the case manager during the moving process.

In housing markets with high rental demand, the challenges are even steeper because property owners can offer housing for rent at higher prices than usual and may see the additional paperwork required for renting to voucher holders as a burden. Finding a unit may take longer than expected or prove to be unattainable. As one PHA staff member said—

*The way I look at it is that you're a landlord and you have a unit for rent. ... You put an ad out and you get 25 people that call you, like, in 2 days, who are just market renters—they want to rent your unit—that are credit-qualified and everything. But then you have a housing choice voucher participant, a Section 8 participant that wants to rent, and they may be a great tenant, but you have to go through stuff like a housing quality standards inspection. You have to fill out all this additional paperwork. Some landlords with a hot rental market are just not interested in participating. It's like a feast or famine industry, right?*

Some residents who moved from RAD developments reported seeking particular unit types, which, in a tighter housing market, contributed to a longer search-time for one resident who had moved from RAD housing:

*The challenge was finding something that was decent enough. ... It was a little more challenging for me because I was looking specifically for a house, and then I had a one-bedroom voucher. It was kind of hard to find a house within my voucher range.*

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have compounded search challenges by further slowing residents' progress toward finding housing using their voucher. With fewer landlords placing their properties on the market, PHA staff noticed that residents were taking longer to secure housing and needed voucher search-time extensions of 30 days or more. Several PHA respondents said that their agencies had become more lenient in granting search-time extensions in response to those kinds of challenges.

One resident, whose voucher expired after an extended housing search, was juggling health issues while searching for housing during the pandemic:

*To be honest, this has been very stressful. Right now I'm doing okay, but in April, right before my voucher expired, I had to go to the hospital because I was having chest pains, and I had a lot of anxiety. ...It's the middle of COVID and, you know, our housing—the housing market shot up, the prices.... Because of the housing prices, whatever's going on, nothing was affordable.*

Interview participants who did move with a voucher tended to meet their priority objectives—finding the home they wanted or a location near social support. One resident who had moved using choice mobility was pleased with the amenities in their new home:

*All of my appliances when I moved in were brand new—my air conditioner, my refrigerator, stove, and since I've been there, they've had to switch out my refrigerator. They went from a standard refrigerator to the double door refrigerator with the ice maker and the water. I love it.*

However, one-half of the residents who had moved noted some type of dissatisfaction with their new neighborhood. Another resident who had moved using the choice mobility option was concerned about safety:

*I do not like where I live. I really hope that I can find something in the near future to move. It's just really hard because I ... already invested quite a bit into the landscaping myself here. These people are just—it's scary. It's scary. I live upstairs. The people that have lived downstairs, ... they don't clean their yard. [They have] a dog out there.*

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**FINDING:**

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, some residents said that they faced challenges locating a suitable rental unit due to office closures, a tight rental market, and limited access to public transportation to view units.*

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PHA staff and residents noted COVID-19-related challenges to finding and viewing suitable units. The challenges mirrored those faced by staff and residents in the broader voucher program (and the rental market more generally). Some PHA staff noted that their residents are having trouble finding an apartment because rental offices are closed, public transportation is not safe, or landlords are not willing to lease:

*The other thing you have is that public transportation is also a no-go right now, with COVID. A lot of our people don't have vehicles, and public transportation has now created barriers. You have many more people that are not as willing to*

*make the shift at this point. You also have quite a few landlords that are just not leasing. They're just not going to put themselves or anybody else at risk. They would rather just not do the lease ups.*

Two residents who attempted to use their choice mobility voucher said that tight housing markets were an impediment to using their voucher. One of those residents shared that the inability to access and view units during COVID-19 ultimately led to them giving up their voucher:

*I had to let my voucher go because I was unable to find a place to move to, but I communicated with everyone and let them know that hey, it's the middle of COVID. No one wants you to go out to see their house. Before I even go out and see the house, they want to check my credit. They want to know everything about me, so they turn me down before I even get to see the house.*

### ***How do RAD residents assess the RAD choice mobility process?***

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#### **FINDING:**

*Residents reported learning about the choice mobility option through flyers or newsletters sent by the PHA. After residents obtained a voucher, their understandings and experiences varied by agency.*

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Residents reported learning about the choice mobility option through a variety of means, with most reporting learning about the option through flyers or newsletters either placed in residents' mailboxes or hand delivered (this corresponds with information collected through interviews with PHA staff). One resident lauded her property managers' regular distribution of newsletters to communicate updates to residents, sharing that they "do a good job of getting them out." A few residents also reported learning about choice mobility directly from property management, from a meeting at the local PHA, or from others living in the development who had applied or were interested in applying.

Resident experiences in obtaining a voucher seemed to vary by agency; as discussed previously, residents' understanding of the choice mobility request process varied despite their awareness of the option. A few residents felt highly informed about the process and requirements for obtaining a voucher, while others did not feel confident about the steps, explaining that they were aware of the option but could not recall details about how it worked. One respondent who used the choice mobility option reported experiencing no challenges with the request process. Another former RAD resident said that although they were informed about the option during the property's initial conversion process, they were not updated about their eligibility during their annual recertification process, and they had to ask about it explicitly.

Despite these challenges, residents interviewed who used the choice mobility voucher typically were able to find an apartment or house within the search timeframe. Those residents understood the process of gaining the PHA's approval of the unit and passing inspection. As noted above, credit checks were the most commonly cited barrier to successful lease up.

### **Tenant Outcomes**

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#### ***Why do RAD residents request tenant-based vouchers?***

During interviews with PHA staff and residents, the research team discussed the reasons that residents chose to exercise their choice mobility option.

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**FINDING:**

*Based on the perspectives of PHA staff and residents, RAD residents who request a voucher tend to be younger and have children, and they move to neighborhoods with more social support or access to higher-quality schools.*

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According to PHA staff and residents, RAD residents who request a voucher often view the transition to private-market housing as an opportunity to move to other cities or neighborhoods; to move to a unit of a different size; to move closer to family, medical facilities, or higher-quality schools for their children; or some combination of those reasons.

Some respondents noted that families and younger residents were more likely to move. According to PHA staff and residents, those residents usually wanted to move to areas where they had more social support nearby or access to higher-quality schools for their children. Some movers desired a home that was more spacious than their RAD unit. One resident moved back to their childhood neighborhood to be near family and a familiar area and have access to stores:

*The area was a neighborhood or area that I grew up in. I was familiar with the area. ...not a lot of friends because a lot of friends moved away—but I used to live in this area, and I had family also in this area. Like I said, it was familiar to me, the area. To me, it's convenience. The convenience is for me because I'm not far from the stores and stuff, and you know? ...When you go back to the neighborhood where you grew up, you see a lot of childhood friends, people that you remember, so it was easy for me to just get right in and feel at home.*

Although it was not mentioned often, a few residents requested a voucher because of an issue with the housing unit or the area surrounding the RAD development. One resident requested a voucher (but had not yet received it) because water damage in the RAD unit had not been addressed, and they were concerned that their child would become sick from it. Another resident reported requesting a voucher to move to a safer area. In this way, choice mobility provides residents with some measure of control and options that would not have been available without RAD and while in public housing.

***Why don't RAD residents request tenant-based vouchers more frequently?***

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**FINDING:**

*According to PHA staff and residents, most RAD residents do not want to move because RAD properties are in better condition and have lower rents than private-market units. Those residents who have no plans to move tend to be older adults or have been living at the same property for many years. COVID-19 and shelter-in-place orders seemed to further curb residents' interest in moving.*

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PHA staff noted that although all residents are eligible for a choice mobility voucher if they are in good standing and have stayed the minimum required time in their unit fewer residents than they expected exercised the choice mobility option.

Sometimes residents decided not to move after examining the options; interviewed PHA staff said that even when residents requested a voucher, they often ended up not moving once they realized the limited options available in the private housing market and the resources and effort required to move:

*If we have residents that opt out of taking the voucher, [it's] generally after they're out doing the search for the apartment, having to pay the security deposit, having to physically move themselves with their family or what have you, not having the support system or someone helping them with resources or a crisis. All of those things—they realize that they're giving them up. It might be a physical hardship for them, a financial hardship for them, and they generally say, "Thank you, but no thank you."*

Nearly all PHA staff respondents told us that the quality of RAD housing was the main reason that eligible residents choose not to request a voucher or move. According to staff, RAD housing units were in better condition than most local private-market housing options that would accept a TBV. Residents also said that RAD housing was newer and in better condition than other nearby properties.<sup>4</sup> RAD developments have been recently renovated or, in some cases, are completely new units with wood floors, new appliances, and updated communal spaces, such as computer rooms and community facilities (although communal spaces were closed at the time of interviews due to COVID-19 restrictions). PHA staff and property managers reported that owners prioritized maintenance of the properties and saw this level of service as a draw for current RAD residents to continue living there.

Residents' age and length of tenancy also appeared to play a role in why residents do not request a voucher. Most of the PHAs in this study—some of which were RAD-converted developments—provide dedicated housing for older adults or individuals with disabilities, and the older residents interviewed usually preferred not to move from their RAD unit because they were satisfied with the quality of their housing, had settled in after living there for a substantial amount of time (sometimes up to 30 years), or both.

PHA staff said that the COVID-19 pandemic also deterred residents from requesting vouchers to exercise the choice mobility option. Once shelter-in-place orders were enacted, local property management offices closed, landlords leased units more slowly, and public transportation was limited. Further, respondents reported that residents seemed to be afraid of moving into new housing because of the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

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<sup>4</sup> The final evaluation report will include findings from a survey of residents that will examine these issues more systematically.

## Property Outcomes

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*Does the availability of the choice mobility option and residents' ability to move from the site affect property outcomes, including the responsiveness of property management, property turnover rates, and maintenance costs due to turnover?*

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**FINDING:**

*PHA staff did not suggest that choice mobility increases unit turnover. Some PHAs indicated that turnover costs for RAD units increased when they hired third-party vendors to address turnover, when staff capacity was limited, but overall, PHAs reported lower turnover costs after conversion because the units were newer.*

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According to PHA staff, choice mobility has not increased the number or rate of unit turnover. Rather, on the basis of the low takeup of choice mobility across all RAD-participating PHAs, choice mobility seems to have had little or no impact on unit turnover.

A few PHA and property management respondents reported increased turnover costs for RAD units compared to public housing because they hired vendors to prepare units for new tenants, not because units required more repairs than usual. That situation may have been exacerbated because PHAs reported that they sometimes used RAD as a mechanism to decrease their staff, which may have resulted in reduced internal staff capacity to turn over units and subsequently created a need to contract out such work.<sup>5</sup>

Because property management has an incentive to limit turnover, the existence of the choice mobility option could lead to management being more responsive to resident concerns. Interviews with PHAs did not reveal whether the existence of the choice mobility option has this positive effect on property management responsiveness in practice, however.

When RAD residents receive a voucher and secure private-market housing, PHA staff instruct them to inform the PHA or property management of their intent to vacate the RAD unit. Upon receiving that notification, the property manager can plan the necessary repairs to prepare the unit for the next tenant. Although low demand for choice mobility limited logistical problems, in some cases, demand in a given project posed hurdles; multiple PHA staff reported challenges in turning over units due to limited staff capacity, particularly when several units at the same property were becoming vacant within a short time. One respondent stated that limited maintenance staff responsible for turning over vacant units resulted in units on the property being vacant for much longer than usual—sometimes for months. In response, the PHA in question hired more maintenance staff and started using a third-party company to help with the repairs necessary to prepare properties for prospective residents.

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<sup>5</sup> The larger evaluation includes an assessment of PHA organizational change, which will shed more light on the mechanisms that cause such staffing decreases and the effects associated with staff reductions.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The information in this report is based on a small number of qualitative interviews conducted with PHA staff and residents from 13 PHAs. The residents were all eligible for choice mobility and were split between those who had moved and those who had not moved. Although the PHA staff and residents interviewed may not be representative of those in all PHAs, findings drawn from the interviews offer insights into how agencies and residents are making use of the choice mobility option.

Choice mobility usage was minimal across the PHAs because of the quality of the newly renovated properties and tight rental markets that offer few attractive alternatives. Residents also cited the quality of their current RAD units, housing market challenges, and mobility limitations as disincentives to moving. PHA staff respondents stated that the limits they had set for choice mobility usage were higher than the number of requests. PHA staff informed residents of the choice mobility option first during orientation for those moving into RAD-converted developments and again during annual recertifications. PHAs reported that the processes for requesting choice mobility vouchers were also explained during an orientation, during annual recertifications, or both.

Interviews with PHA staff and residents indicated that younger residents with children tended to request vouchers because of their interest in living near social support and gaining access to higher-quality schools.

PHAs offered residents limited or no mobility counseling, housing search support, or direct assistance in paying security deposits and application fees, citing a lack of available funding. The limited support from PHAs is consistent with what PHAs offer to residents who receive a voucher from the PHA's standard waiting list. Current and former RAD residents were informed about the choice mobility option but reported varying levels of understanding and mixed experiences with the process for requesting and obtaining a voucher; some residents said they felt well informed about the voucher process and requirements, whereas others could not recall the details of how the voucher request process worked. As noted previously, one resident who successfully leased up using a choice mobility voucher reported no challenges during the voucher request process, yet another reported not being updated about their eligibility during annual recertification and had to ask the property manager explicitly.

Finally, the effect of the choice mobility option on property management varied. Although, in general, PHA staff indicated that they were able to handle the prioritization of choice mobility requests given the currently low takeup, the staff had concerns (particularly at larger agencies) about the negative effects that increased choice mobility demand might have on the regular HCV waiting lists. In addition, some PHA staff noted that staffing constraints reduced their capacity to turn over units quickly.

The final RAD evaluation includes surveys of PHAs, residents, and property owners and operators that will provide additional information about the implementation and outcomes of the choice mobility option to supplement the findings identified in this report. Those larger data collection efforts should provide a broader, more systematic picture of choice mobility implementation and outcomes across RAD PHAs. The research team will detail early findings from the PHA survey, the resident survey, and the survey of property owners and operators in the final report of the RAD Choice Mobility and Long-Term Affordability evaluation, expected in 2023.

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