

LRA Evaluation: Executive Summary

The Long-term Rent Assistance (LRA) Evaluation

In 2018, the Center for Outcomes Research and Education (CORE) was contracted by Northwest Pilot Project (NWPP) to conduct a longitudinal qualitative evaluation of the Long-term Rent Assistance (LRA) program. The evaluation had one main objective: **To explore the initial impacts of a long-term rent subsidy on a person's life and wellbeing.** Through interviews, we asked participants to tell us about how their lives have changed since joining the LRA program at six- and 12-months post receipt of their first subsidy, and to compare their current experiences to the time before joining the program. Most questions were open-ended and allowed the participant to discuss any type of program impact; however, we also asked some specific questions about housing stability, physical health, mental health, and financial impact.

The LRA program

Identifying the housing crisis as a need requiring immediate action, Northwest Pilot Project (NWPP) partnered with Home Forward, Meyer Memorial Trust, the Joint Office of Homeless Services (funded by Multnomah County and the City of Portland), JOIN, and CareOregon to pilot a new funding mechanism in 2017 called the Long-term Rent Assistance (LRA) program. LRA focuses on two vulnerable populations in Multnomah County: rent-burdened or homeless seniors, and others experiencing (or at serious risk of) homelessness. LRA started with as a small pilot of 45 participants to test the effectiveness of the model. We interviewed 22 participants between October 2018 and May 2019. The LRA pilot ran from January 2018 to June 2019 but the rent subsidies are ongoing.

The Executive Summary

The Executive Summary provides a high-level, concise overview of the full LRA Evaluation Final Report. It highlights the key findings related to the impact of the program on participants as well as additional findings, methods, and implications. For additional context, please refer to the full evaluation report. Questions about this summary or the full report? Contact Natalie Kenton, MS, MPH (Natalie.Kenton@providence.org), or Kayla McMenamin, MPH (Kayla.McMenamin@gmail.com).

Findings

We identified five themes of potential impact from the longitudinal interviews: **Housing Security, Financial Health, Mental Health, Health & Health Access, and Social Support & Leisure.**

Housing Security

The overall goal of the LRA program is to provide individuals with secure housing for the foreseeable future. For participants, this was an immediate and later sustained impact of the program. Initially, LRA gave participants “peace of mind” and confidence about maintaining their housing. Eventually, participants described housing concerns as being nearly non-existent. LRA also provided participants with the added benefits of housing choice and the ability to age in place.



Before LRA...

“I love my apartment complex. I've been here for years. And I was on the verge of losing it all and not being able to pay the rent [...] My rent was going up \$200 [...] I would have been homeless. Probably living in my car.”

After six months...

“[LRA] gave me an opportunity to have my own place to lay down at night [...] I wouldn't have to worry about if somebody is gonna steal something from me [...] I like the location. I'm close to shopping, and the Max lines and all that.”

After one year...

“The peace of knowing that, you know, just signing my lease again in February this year, is that I cried for days [...] It's like ‘okay, you've got another year.’ [...] It was something I was never sure of for many, many, many years.”

Financial Health

LRA gave participants facing difficult tradeoffs between housing and other expenses a financial buffer. Many participants now have money left over after paying rent to cover expenses that they would not have been able to afford prior to LRA like food and utilities, and some can now afford leisure activities every now and then. Additionally, some participants shared that they are now able to save for the future.



Before LRA...

“Anything that cost money was kind of a struggle, and occasionally I would get help, but that's one of the biggest things, just general things you don't think about, where I would have to go somewhere and gather this or that from maybe a pantry.”

After six months...

“It's allowed me to pay for my basic needs, which, before this, my family and friends were kind of pitching in [...] now I can pay my own utilities, and groceries, and, you know, go out to eat once in a while.”

After one year...

“We can go to Oaks Park. We can go to that waterfall, Multnomah Falls [...] We can afford, you know, weekends, and we go to [family member's] house.”

Mental Health

With a newfound sense of housing security and improved financial health, participants told us about improvements to their general mental health status. It was explained by several participants that LRA helped clear the “headspace” needed to start to heal from past traumas. Many participants also shared that feelings of stress and anxiety had reduced after joining the program, and some sought therapy.



Before LRA...

“I gave up. I actually quit. And I knew I quit. [...] I was getting myself prepared to move back into the streets. I didn't know how I was gonna survive out there [...] I was at the end of my rope and had nothing to grab onto.”

After six months ...

“[Mental health] is better today than it was. I was pretty depressed, like why am I even here? I know it wasn't the way to live. Just felt no purpose of being. And of course that brings other thoughts [...] [LRA gave] a sense of security.”

After one year ...

“I've been able to stay in a pretty good mental health state. There are some things going on that could get depressing. I do a lot better at staying out of depression.”

Health & Health Access

Because many of their unmet needs were now being addressed and covered, participants found that they could now afford healthy food and vitamins, alternative treatments not covered by insurance, and transportation to medical appointments – all things that they would have previously gone without in order to pay for housing.



Before LRA...

"It's hard. And so I was like really avoiding going to the doctor, and a lot of times when I even needed to, because it was just so stressful to go."

After six months...

"I'm getting more exercise and more movement and stuff, so actually I'm healthier now than I think I would've been."

After one year...

"When I have an unforeseen medical issue, I'm not going to be homeless. [...] This is the first time in 20 years I didn't have to think about being homeless in an emergency situation."

Social Support & Leisure

LRA provided a space for participants to re-engage in past hobbies and participate socially once again. Participants were able to partake in social activities that they had once cut-out due to financial hardship, and some shared that they can now volunteer in their community or pursue interest in housing advocacy work.



Before LRA...

"[With LRA] you feel that you can [do social activities]. I mean, I've gotten used to not doing a lot of stuff I did before."

After six months...

"I can get out and do more. I can find valued citizen and go to places [...] As opposed to having to stay here and stress and worry."

After one year...

"I started [a social group] at my church [...] [LRA] gives you the security you feel that you need to be a normal person, to be able to be active in different situations."

Additional Findings

Past experiences with instability and resource scarcity

For many participants, experiences of instability and resource scarcity were prominent long before LRA. Many had experienced homelessness in the past, struggling to find affordable and safe places to live. Additionally, all participants shared that they experienced at least one unmet basic need prior to joining the LRA program, with an average of three needs going unmet prior to the program (**Exhibit 1**).

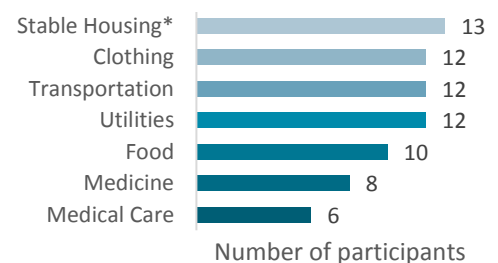
Hope for the future

For many, there was a clear shift in outlook since receiving assistance from LRA. Many reported gaining feelings of optimism, hopefulness, and excitement for the future, and some described this as a shift from "surviving" to "living." Many talked about decorating, cleaning and getting organized, buying new furniture, or getting a pet, demonstrating longer-term thinking about housing permanence and the future.

High Program Satisfaction

Participants described LRA as a "bright spot" during what would otherwise have been very difficult times. While participants were very satisfied with the program, some reported that they were unsure how they qualified. More communication and explanation about program eligibility and how the program works could be beneficial to current and future participants.

Exhibit 1. Number of participants reporting unmet needs prior to LRA (n=22)



*This reflects participants' subjective answer to the question "In the year before LRA, did you have to go without stable housing or shelter because you were struggling to make ends meet?" All participants were experiencing housing instability; however, many participants answered "no" to going without stable housing likely because they did not go without housing in general.

Implications

Housing assistance programs need to be long-term. Overall, the initial impact of the LRA program appears high, with participants describing multiple ways that their wellbeing improved (as seen in the “Themes”). However, because participants’ needs and resources continuously fluctuate over time, rent assistance programs that are long-term, like LRA, carry a greater potential than short-term programs to sustain participants’ wellbeing over time.

Housing assistance programs alone do not pull people out of poverty. LRA did not singlehandedly eliminate all financial burden, and many still face challenges associated with poverty. Even a year after receiving their initial subsidy, many participants struggled to adjust to fluctuating government benefits (e.g. SNAP) and had trouble affording some needs. Program staff should consider educating new participants about these potential transitions and fluctuations in order to help them to prepare and budget appropriately.

Social determinants of health and wellbeing are connected and interrelated. We heard about many ways that social factors impact participants’ wellbeing during the interviews. For example, constant worry about losing housing lead to stress that affected mental health. The inability to afford healthy food made it difficult to adhere to a doctor’s recommendations for improving physical health. Providing long-term stable housing is a positive initial step for stabilizing other areas of a person’s life, but participants benefit the most when programs can connect them to complementary programs and services that address other needs as well.

Social service agencies provide support for participants without re-traumatization. One crucial factor in participants’ experience with the program was the reliable and safe connection to the social service agencies that implemented LRA. These partners helped participants navigate systems, troubleshoot issues, and reduce cumbersome steps to getting support without re-traumatizing participants. This is not the typical level of support participants felt when working with large government housing programs in the past. Without the heightened level of support, it is possible that participants’ LRA experience would not have been as positive.

Methods

We conducted longitudinal interviews with participants six months after receiving their first subsidy and again at 12 months. Interviewees had to be current LRA recipients to participate, have been in the program (and using the subsidy) for at least six months by October 2018, speak English, and be considered the “head of household.” In total, 18 completed both interviews (**teal people icons**), while two were lost to follow up after the six-month interviews (**gray icons**) and two additional people were added for the 12-month interviews (**orange icons**) (**Exhibit 2**). We developed a mixed-method interview guide that included open-ended, semi-structured questions, as well as a handful of closed-ended, structured (survey-like) questions. At the end of the interview, we asked participants if they would allow us to take photographs of their homes to include in our reporting, which was voluntary. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

To analyze the data, we used a three-step approach:

- Step 1.** Use the framework analysis approach to create an analytic framework based on data from the interviews to understand the common ways the program is impacting participants’ lives (“themes”).
- Step 2.** Use trajectory analysis to understand how the themes unfold over time and across participants.
- Step 3.** Use descriptive analysis to support the themes uncovered in Step 1 and Step 2.

Exhibit 2. Interview Sample

