

Early Implementation Lessons from CMTO Phase III: Adapting a Housing Mobility Program to Serve Existing Voucher Holders

SEBI DEVLIN-FOLTZ, JENNY LE & SARAH BIRKEBAK

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Early staff observations on the implementation of a third phase of the Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) program provide insights on how to operate a mobility program that serves families who already have housing vouchers. These early learnings indicate that programs serving “mover” families should be adaptable to a wide range of service timelines depending on different families’ personal housing scenarios. Additionally, programs should prepare supplemental financial resources or processes to address the unique financial constraints families face when making a subsequent move with their voucher (e.g. overlapping rents, landlords requiring first + last month’s rent, etc.). Also, staff encountered some challenges in enrolling mover families in this phase of CMTO because these families did not have the same structured contact points with program staff compared to those getting a voucher for the first time.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

In fall of 2020, the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) and King County Housing Authority (KCHA) began a new phase of the Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) program. CMTO’s goal is to increase geographic choice for families with children who receive Housing Choice Vouchers (HCVs) and improve access to neighborhoods that can increase economic mobility. CMTO involves customized housing search assistance, landlord outreach, and supplementary financial assistance all meant to reduce barriers that prevent families with vouchers from leasing up in neighborhoods with higher rates of upward mobility.

While the first two phases of CMTO provided housing mobility services to families with young children coming off the HCV waitlist, CMTO “Phase III” pivoted to focus on how housing mobility services can support families who already have a voucher (also referred to as “mover” or “existing voucher” families) who decide to make a subsequent move using their voucher. Phases I and II were implemented as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to determine the causal effects of the CMTO program on families’ move outcomes. Phase III was run by SHA and KCHA as a non-RCT exploratory pilot that was not focused on quantifying causal effects, but rather on piloting a new program approach for movers that was informed by CMTO RCT results.

The existing voucher population is especially relevant to conversations around bringing mobility programs to scale, as only 11% of general-purpose Housing Choice Vouchers turn over each year, meaning 89% of annual HCV funding goes to families who already have a voucher¹. Additionally, about 90% of families who will participate in the upcoming Housing Choice Voucher Mobility Demonstration Program will be mover families, making this service context even more important². While HCV eligibility requirements mean that mover and new voucher families are similar in many dimensions, there may also be distinct differences between these two groups that warrant additional consideration. For example, mover families bring prior experience with the HCV program, may experience different operational timelines and constraints, may have distinct preferences around changing neighborhoods, and/or may be more comfortable staying in their current voucher-subsidized unit than families coming off the waitlist.

Based on PRAC’s most recent [Housing Mobility Programs in the U.S. 2020 report](#), approximately 20 programs around the country serve mover families. There is limited RCT evidence on which housing mobility strategies are most effective for these populations. [A study from RAND](#) evaluating a pared-down program in the Chicago metro area that provided a \$500 grant paired with mobility counseling found that this service bundle largely failed to increase moves to opportunity neighborhoods among existing voucher families compared to a control group. However, qualitative [lessons from Baltimore’s BRHP program](#), Housing Choice Partners in the Chicago area, and the Inclusive Communities Project in Dallas suggest that generous financial assistance, personalized counseling services, and robust landlord engagement contribute to successful outcomes for existing voucher families. Given nascent evaluation results on mobility best practices for serving mover families, it is salient to elevate staff’s early implementation insights from CMTO Phase III so as to inform broader program considerations.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND TIMELINE

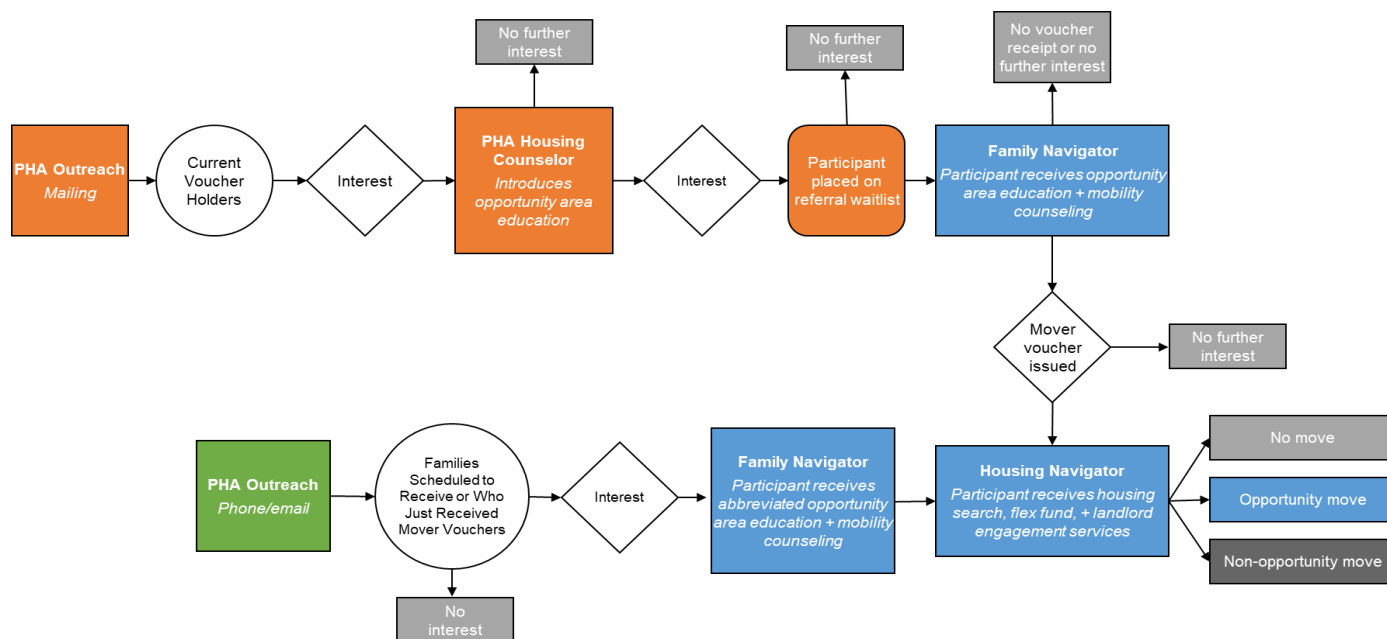
The Phase III intervention adhered closely to the comprehensive service structure tested in the [first](#) and [second](#) phases of CMTO, with staff providing a combination of customized housing search assistance, landlord engagement, and direct financial assistance. Families in Phase III could work with both Housing and Family Navigators to prepare for moves to units in opportunity areas and could access up to \$2500 in financial assistance to cover costs associated with the move (\$2,000 for moving costs + \$500 additional for rent overlaps). Phase III began

1. [2010 estimates](#) by the Department of Housing and Urban Development found that nationally, 11% of vouchers turn over each year to be reallocated to new participants. Additionally, HUD has not appropriated funds for new incremental general-purpose vouchers since 2003.
2. This number was calculated based on the enrollment totals in Table 2 of the HUD Notice [Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers: Implementation of the Housing Choice Voucher Mobility Demonstration](#).

enrollment in September 2020 and engaged a total of 159 families across both PHAs through April of 2021³.

Families could enroll in Phase III either before they informed their housing authority about their desire to receive a mover voucher⁴, or after they'd elected to receive / recently received their mover voucher. Figure 1 below outlines the different process flows. The upper path shows the Phase III service process for families who enrolled prior to receiving their mover voucher, while the lower path shows the process for families who enrolled in the program after receiving their mover voucher.

FIGURE 1: CMTO PHASE III SERVICE FLOWS



This diagram highlights an important operational characteristic of mobility programs that serve mover families: participating families are not following a set service timeline tied to the new voucher issuance process. Instead, CMTO Phase III staff had to adopt a more flexible service timeline that could support a family’s housing search regardless of how much time the family had before their current lease expired. Some families received CMTO outreach materials far before their lease end date or their receipt of a mover voucher. This gave CMTO staff more time to introduce the program and provide pre-search services like opportunity area education but could also result in drop offs in engagement since the family could not take immediate action until their current lease period expired. Other families received CMTO outreach only after they had received their mover voucher, meaning families were highly engaged but there was less time for Family and Housing Navigators to provide CMTO services and for families to consider new neighborhoods before the family felt time pressures about entering into a new lease.

EARLY IMPLEMENTATION INSIGHTS

While this phase of the program was not run as an RCT or formal evaluation, program staff felt it was important to synthesize early qualitative takeaways related to program implementation. While still early, staff noted several key patterns based on the families who engaged in any Phase III services through early 2021. It is important to note that these findings are preliminary, do not include observations from participating families or property managers, and do not focus on where families chose to move.

- **Enrolling movers in a housing mobility program presented noticeable challenges.** CMTO staff remarked that enrolling families in Phase III was more difficult than in the previous Phases that targeted new voucher holders, as it was harder to perform program outreach outside the standardized new voucher issuance process. The staff working on Phase III had all worked on the earlier phases of CMTO, which gave them a helpful point of comparison. Staff noted that the lack of standard check-in appointments (e.g. family intake meetings, voucher issuance briefings, etc.) made it harder to engage with potential participants before they had either decided to move or had already chosen their next apartment. Staff posited that a more formal check-in point earlier on in the process (something like a briefing for movers, or another formal check-in) could improve enrollment outcomes for mobility programs targeting movers.
- **Staff saw a need for quick service response and turnaround for some movers.** Staff noticed that certain families moved through the program very quickly, specifically those who enrolled in services after receiving their mover voucher. Navigators reported that some families were under tight deadlines as they approached the end of their lease terms. For a few families, staff reported a one-week

3. The program has continued to enroll families between April 2021 and June 2021, but the bulk of the findings in this report come from the September 2020 to April 2021 period.

4. In this report, a “mover voucher” refers to the voucher a participant receives when they make a subsequent move under the HCV program. This process is initiated by the family, and uses a different process than when a family comes off of the HCV waitlist and receives their initial voucher.

turnaround between a family's referral meeting and when they applied to their first unit, with unit approval coming shortly after that application. In these situations, Navigators could only provide limited housing search assistance and connect families with financial assistance in the time provided. This quick turnaround contributed to a manageable caseload for Navigators, but also meant that some families received a different service experience given their accelerated timeline. This experience might not be the case in other mobility programs with a more rigid service timeline.

- **Families' familiarity with the HCV program largely streamlined implementation.** CMTO staff noted that families making a subsequent move with their voucher were more informed about the details of the HCV program. This meant that Navigators could spend more time delivering rental application coaching, opportunity area education, and housing search assistance and less time getting families up to speed on the intricacies of the voucher program. One notable exception to this pattern that Navigators observed is that some families (particularly in KCHA) weren't aware that they were covered by Source of Income Discrimination (SOID) protections. This points to the importance of clearly messaging these protections to both new and existing HCV participants, and is especially important in King County given the recent enactment of statewide SOID protections as of 2018.
- **Staff encountered issues with higher lease-up costs that exceeded program resources.** Given the voucher program's prohibition on covering a family's rent for two units at once in the event of overlapping lease windows, staff reported that some families encountered significant financial difficulties at the time of lease-up. Navigators also noticed more landlords requesting first and last-month's rent at the time of lease-up, which the available financial resources couldn't cover. While the issue of overlapping leases isn't new, the higher at-lease costs could be the result of changes in the rental property market brought on by the COVID-19 crisis. Further research is needed to better identify which of these costs are specific to the COVID period and which are more likely to affect mobility programs going forward.
- **Several families required financial assistance from non-CMTO sources.** For families who encountered steep pre-move costs, Housing Navigators often turned to additional funding from other community organizations that could pay for the costs not covered by the voucher or CMTO assistance. Navigators note that many of these agencies were stretched thin during the COVID-19 crisis, and that helping families navigate these external programs added to the Navigators' workload.
- **Some families preferred to wait and search later.** Due to both the COVID-19 pandemic and individual family preferences, staff reported that some people wanted to participate in CMTO Phase III but did not want to search for housing until late spring/summer 2021. This pattern had implications both for staff caseloads, and for the full program timeline given that there might not be enough program funds over the summer to provide services in line with each family's preferred move timelines.
- **Families tended to appreciate the services compared to their unsupported move(s).** Navigators indicated that many families expressed appreciation for the supports under CMTO, especially given their past experiences using the voucher. Staff reported that families appreciated both the Navigator support and the additional financial assistance and noted that these services helped smooth the housing search process.

These findings should be taken as preliminary given the early stage of the program process, and the relatively small sample of participating families. This document is also distinct from ongoing qualitative work being led by Dr. Stefanie DeLuca on family and landlord experiences with CMTO Phases I and II, and from implementation research done by MDRC on earlier Phases of CMTO. Despite these qualifiers, this synthesis of CMTO Phase III preliminary insights is a unique opportunity to elevate practice-based learning that may be helpful toward broader programmatic and evaluation considerations on scaling mobility services and broadening families' geographic choices.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CMTO

[Read the full paper evaluating CMTO Phase I](#)

[Explore more research and implementation resources](#)

[Watch a video summary](#)