

RAPID REHOUSING RECIPIENTS

SHARE THEIR STORIES

WHY VOCAL-TX IS ORGANIZING TO FIX AUSTIN'S RAPID REHOUSING PROGRAM AND WIN HOUSING FOR THE POOR

Stable and affordable housing is critical for individual and community health and safety. It is central to physical and mental health, employment, education, and much more. For unhoused Austinites, finding stable housing is fraught with challenges. Navigating the homeless response system is exhausting, the resources that exist to help people find housing often don't go far enough, and there is a lack of affordable housing.

Members of VOCAL-TX are low-income individuals affected by HIV/AIDS, the war on drugs, homelessness and mass incarceration, and all have navigated Austin's Homeless Response System. They joined VOCAL-TX to fight for changes in our city that will improve the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

Austin's Rapid Rehousing (RRH) program is being utilized to help people like VOCAL-TX members access stable housing. In fact, RRH is one of the City's primary tools to solve homelessness. However, VOCAL-TX members have shared stories that reveal a program in need of fixing. They talk about how difficult it is to find an apartment with RRH, how hard it is to earn enough income to pay rent in such a short time, and they have highlighted a need for more wrap-around services and case management.

To learn more about other people's experiences with RRH, our leaders led a survey project. In March they had dozens of conversations and spoke to 24 people with recent experience with Austin's RRH program.

Here are some of the themes they heard:

- **A majority of people they surveyed received RRH for less than a year, and then were expected to take over their rent**
- **Expectations for people to take over rent—or even a portion of the rent after a certain period of time—led to people being kicked out of their program, evicted, and/or not being able to take over their lease**
- **Many people reported being denied housing or struggling to find housing due to conviction histories**
- **Many other issues were mentioned as impacting housing access or one's ability to remain in housing: Family needs, child support payments, lack of access to reliable transportation, mental or physical health needs, lack of services or case management, discrimination**



POSITIVE EXITS: INDIVIDUALS WITH RRH WHO TRANSITIONED OR WILL TRANSITION TO PERMANENT HOUSING WITH A HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER

VERNON JARMON

In 2023, Vernon was housed with RRH for a year. His rent was \$1075 per month. His rapid rehousing covered 100% of the rent for 4 months, 75% of the rent for 4 months, and 50% of the rent for 4 months. When he first moved into his apartment with RRH, he had no idea RRH was temporary. Throughout his time there, he reported issues with his AC, pest control, broken windows, and a leak in his bathroom to his RRH provider, but the issues were never resolved while he lived there. Vernon has a disability, is on a fixed income, and could not work. He faced partial non-payment of rent, when his financial assistance was adjusted. Eventually, with advocacy through VOCAL-TX, his provider agreed to cover the rent that was owed. Then – days before his RRH was ending – Vernon and VOCAL-TX had to advocate so he wouldn't end up on the street again. He eventually got a Housing Choice Voucher and was moved into a new apartment.



“MY EXPERIENCE WAS GOING FROM THE INFERNO OF LIVING ON THE STREETS, TO WHAT I THOUGHT WOULD BE PARADISE OF HAVING MY OWN PLACE TO LIVE WITH RAPID REHOUSING. I THOUGHT I WAS GETTING A PERMANENT HOME WITH NO ISSUES, BUT I ALMOST ENDED UP ON THE STREETS AGAIN. NO ONE SHOULD END UP BACK ON THE STREETS IF THEY HAVE RRH. TOO MANY PROGRAMS AREN'T WORKING, AND WE NEED THESE PROGRAMS TO WORK.”

TAYLOR CARTWRIGHT

Taylor has been housed with RRH since November 2023 – her rent is \$1374 per month. When she first got her RRH, she worried she wouldn't find a job that paid enough to cover rent after the program ran out. She has a conviction history and struggled to find a job. Shortly after she got housed with RRH, her Housing Choice Voucher was granted. She has since been trying to find another apartment that will accept her voucher. She has a case manager but feels she has to find a new apartment on her own because her case manager is overwhelmed with other cases. She thinks RRH should last longer, and people in the program should be connected to services and vocational training for transitions.

“PEOPLE COME FROM THE STREET—WE NEED PROGRAMS TO HELP PEOPLE GET TRAINING FOR JOBS AND WE NEED TO PROVIDE SERVICES TO PEOPLE COMING FROM THE STREET. PEOPLE ARE ALONE AND NEED HELP GETTING ON THEIR FEET.”

BACK TO HOMELESSNESS: INDIVIDUALS WHO HAD RRH AND RETURNED TO HOMELESSNESS AFTER THEIR RRH ENDED

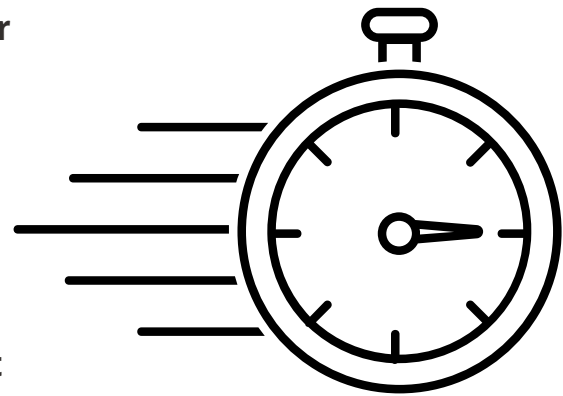
ANTHONY MOORE

In 2021, Anthony got RRH and a one-bedroom apartment for \$950 per month, and eventually found a job. After 6 months, his RRH ended and he was able to cover rent on his own. Having housing helped him get custody of his daughter, but he needed a bigger apartment for the both of them. He couldn't find an apartment that was affordable or an apartment that accepted people with a conviction history. Anthony is now living out of his car.

“I HAVE NO IDEA HOW PEOPLE ARE SUPPOSED TO SUCCEED AFTER RRH WITH HOW EXPENSIVE RENT IS OR WITH THINGS LIKE RECORDS. PEOPLE ARE REQUIRED TO MAKE THREE TIMES THE RENT IN MOST APARTMENTS—MOST PEOPLE CAN'T DO THAT! I CAN HAVE A GOOD JOB AND STILL END UP BEING HOMELESS. RENT JUST AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE.”

LAURA ANN MARTINEZ

In 2021, Laura Ann got RRH and moved into an apartment. Her RRH covered \$1200 a month in rent, and Laura Ann covered her utilities. She received \$1100 in Social Security Disability Income and was eventually asked to save more than half of her monthly income to put towards future rent payments. Eventually, her savings and her SSD income would need to cover the rent, when RRH ended. She could not save \$600 a month, so she was kicked out of the program for not cooperating with the rules. She ended up staying at her mother's house until it was no longer feasible, then ended up on the streets again in 2023. Eventually she went to a different service provider to renew her coordinated assessment, and learned HACA was searching for her because she had a Housing Choice Voucher. She is now living in a permanent apartment and pays rent with her voucher.



“I WAS EXPECTED TO SAVE MORE THAN HALF OF MY INCOME, PLUS I WAS TRYING TO PAY BACK CREDIT CARDS, AND SOME OF MY MONEY HAD BEEN STOLEN. I WASN'T CLOSE TO SERVICES OR FOOD LINES TO GET FREE FOOD EVERYDAY. I DON'T KNOW ANYONE WHO COULD LIVE ON \$400 A MONTH. WHEN I GOT KICKED OUT OF THE PROGRAM, I TOLD MY CASE MANAGER: “I WOULD LOVE TO SEE YOU LIVE ON MY SALARY AND SAVE \$600 A MONTH.” SOME MAY SAY THAT'S A RUDE THING TO SAY, BUT I THINK IT'S RUDE THAT I WOULD BE EXPECTED TO SAVE THAT!”

BACK TO HOMELESSNESS: INDIVIDUALS WHO HAD RRH AND RETURNED TO HOMELESSNESS AFTER THEIR RRH ENDED

ROBERT VILLAREAL

Robert Villareal: In 2020, Robert got RRH and worked with his case worker to find an apartment for \$990 per month. Robert told his provider that he owed child support, and he knew payments would have been taken directly from his paycheck when he found a job. He worried he would not be left with enough money to pay the rent. Due to the pandemic, he never found employment and when the program ran out, he was evicted and ended up homeless again.

“A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE UNHOUSED BECAUSE THEY OWE CHILD SUPPORT. MY CASE MANAGERS KNEW ABOUT THE CHILD SUPPORT I OWED BUT INSISTED THAT I WOULD BE ABLE TO FIND EMPLOYMENT THAT WOULD STILL COVER THE RENT. I ALWAYS KNEW I’D NEVER BE ABLE TO PAY THE RENT WITH CHILD SUPPORT I OWED, TAXES, AND OTHER EXPENSES.”

SHAWN SHEPARD

Shawn was housed with RRH for about a year, but when it was time for her to take over the rent, she could not. She was facing a high risk pregnancy at the time, supporting her family, and leaving a domestic violence situation. When her RRH ended, she moved in with her grandmother and then eventually she got connected to another case worker who helped her get a Housing Choice Voucher. She found housing in Fort Worth and moved, but was still expected to pay \$250 of her rent, and her only source of income was food stamps. She lost her apartment again. She is now back in Austin staying between her car, grandmother's house, and friends.



“I HAD SIX MOUTHS TO FEED AND I NEEDED HELP THAT I DIDN’T GET WHEN I HAD RAPID REHOUSING. I NEEDED SOMEONE TO CHECK IN ON ME, WHILE I SUPPORTED MY FAMILY, WENT TO SCHOOL, AND TRIED TO WORK.”

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT: INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE RRH BUT DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'LL DO WHEN IT ENDS OR ARE WAITING FOR OTHER PERMANENT HOUSING OPTIONS

TONY CARTER AND JENNIFER MILLER

In 2024, Tony and his partner Jennifer got housing with RRH at an apartment that costs \$1700 per month. Tony and Jennifer had trouble finding resources because they are a couple. They understand that their RRH will end after 12 months, and they're not sure what they'll do after. Even with Tony working two jobs, it's not going to be enough to cover \$1700 monthly rent at his current apartment. Their case manager recently told them that based on their current income, they will need to start looking for a different apartment because they won't be able to afford the one they're in.



“I THINK RRH NEEDS TO BE UPFRONT ABOUT EVERYTHING. YOU GET A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO GET ON RRH, AND THEN IT BLOWS UP IN THEIR FACE BECAUSE IT’S NOT AT ALL WHAT THEY SAY IT IS. I THINK IT’S AN INJUSTICE THAT THEY DON’T TELL THE PEOPLE HOW LONG IT’S GOING TO LAST. ALSO, IF YOU’RE GOING TO DO A PROGRAM LIKE THIS, THEN IT NEEDS TO BE PERMANENT. THERE’S TOO MANY VACANT PLACES ACROSS AUSTIN AND THEY NEED TO BUILD PERMANENT HOUSING, INSTEAD OF TEMPORARY VOUCHERS.” -TONY CARTER

ALFREDO REYES JR. AND DEREK CORTEZ

Even though they had applied separately, Alfredo and Derek got RRH and moved into an apartment in February 2024. They believe they were put together out of convenience sake, and were told it was “a lot less paperwork.” They pay \$1495 per month, and their RRH will cover 100% of their rent through October, then 75% of the rent in November, and then 50% of the rent thereafter. To move in, they were charged the first month rent, a deposit, and a second deposit for their service dogs. There was no washer, dryer, or fridge when they moved in. Their case worker told them not to complain about conditions, or they might lose their place. Currently, Derek has a job and Alfredo is applying for work. They don't want to stay in their current apartment, and if their plans fall through they don't know what they'll do.



“EITHER YOU TAKE THE RRH OR YOU GET NOTHING. I WAS PROMISED PERMANENT LONG TERM HOUSING. I HAVE A DISABILITY AND I HAVE CANCER. SOMETIMES I HAVE TO BE IN A WHEELCHAIR AND SOMETIMES I USE A CANE. THEY DID AN ASSESSMENT OF ME WAY BACK WHEN I WAS IN JAIL AND SAID I QUALIFIED FOR PERMANENT HOUSING. LIKE ANYONE ELSE, YOU LITERALLY GRAB WHATEVER IS FASTEST BECAUSE YOU WANT TO GET OFF THE STREETS. THIS IS WHAT THEY’RE WAVING IN FRONT OF ME” -ALFREDO REYES JR.