



STOP THE CLOCK: FIX AUSTIN'S RAPID REHOUSING PROGRAM & WIN HOUSING FOR THE POOR



We believe housing is a human right yet more than 6,500 people are homeless every night in Austin.

Why? Affordable housing is scarce, the cost of living is high, and our homeless response system is forced to rely on band-aid programs to fix long-term problems. We know when rent goes up, so does homelessness, and the rent is too damn high in Austin!

THE PROBLEM

As the cost of living in Austin has skyrocketed, the number of people experiencing homelessness has also increased substantially. Since 2010, rent has more than doubled, from \$688 in 2010 to \$1519 in 2024 for a studio apartment. In 2024, the Homeless Strategy Office reported that 6,683 people are experiencing homelessness in Austin. Although likely an undercount, the City's estimate in 2010 was only 2,087 people.

Although some progress has been made to expand shelter capacity and permanent supportive housing, those initiatives have not kept pace with the rapidly increasing cost of living. In addition, the City continues to sweep encampments, causing harm and displacement, and relies heavily on rapid rehousing programs when many people need permanent housing and supportive services.

Austin uses Rapid Rehousing (RRH) rental assistance as one of the primary tools to house individuals experiencing street homelessness. While RRH works for some, too many people exiting RRH are returning to homelessness. To better understand people's experiences with the program, VOCAL-TX leaders decided to hit the streets to survey unhoused Austinites about RRH. Our leaders spoke to dozens of people, and across the board, people reported that **RRH is too short and access to permanent housing when RRH ends is too scarce**. We heard from people who are back on the streets, living out of their cars, and staying with family members. For more information on our survey project, visit vocal-tx.org/campaign/stop-the-clock.

Through this process, VOCAL-TX leaders identified that RRH needs fixing. **While it's a vital intervention that we need in Austin, RRH can be improved to help more people**. The program is too brief, and is often used for people who need a higher level of care, such as permanent supportive housing. Once enrolled, people wait for months to move in, but then often only have six months to one year of rental support, resulting in hundreds of individuals back on the streets and in shelters. No one should become homeless again after having rapid rehousing.

"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."

- VERNON JARMON, VOCAL-TX LEADER



WHAT IS RAPID REHOUSING?

Rapid Rehousing (RRH) began as a federal program that provides short-term rental assistance using market rate housing. RRH comes after an intentional period of divestment from public housing in the U.S. and a shift towards the private market. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides the bulk of funding for RRH, coordinated by the local Continuum of Care. In 2021, Austin approved a plan to invest over \$40 million of the one-time American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds into RRH programs as well.

In Austin and across the U.S., the program design varies depending on the provider. Once someone is enrolled, they have access to short-term rental assistance (a “voucher”) if they can find a place to live. Some programs offer help with referrals and landlord recommendations, while other programs let the individual do the work to lease an apartment. Either way, criminal records, eviction records and the source of income can all lead to discrimination and many months of continued homelessness. Some individuals simply never find an apartment. **But those that do move-in start a countdown – they will have 3-12 months of rental assistance, which tapers off during that time, before they are 100% responsible for their market rate rent.** The City connects some individuals to Housing Choice Vouchers and other long-term programs, but affordable housing and long-term options are too scarce and many people in the program are left without financial support when the program ends.

For these reasons, some RRH program participants and advocates across the U.S. have been raising concerns about the program. The Dallas Observer and NPR recently published stories that share struggles of RRH recipients finding permanent housing before their RRH ends in Dallas and Los Angeles. In 2017, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless published the report, Set Up To Fail: Rapid Rehousing in the District of Columbia, which discussed challenges with the program and called into question discrepancies in the data. D.C. has since passed policy reforms through the City Council to improve their rapid rehousing programs, though advocates have continued to call for further reforms. In 2022, 50 organizations signed a letter urging the Mayor to end arbitrary time limits of RRH assistance.

Austin’s data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) tells a similar story—that RRH works for some, but not everyone. In Austin, 61% of people exiting RRH find housing, but 28%—hundreds of people—are returning to homelessness or an unknown destination after RRH ends. And these numbers don’t tell the full story. The scores of people in the program who never sign a lease are not included in those figures, providers aren’t required to confirm exit destinations, and someone’s return to homelessness is only captured if that person enters a homeless shelter in Austin again. If they’re sleeping on the street, in cars, or doubling up with friends or family, they won’t always be counted. These challenges are reflected in RRH outcome data in other cities as well, indicating that they may be baked into the reporting system.



“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, VOCAL-TX LEADER

THE SOLUTION

To begin to address a Rapid Rehousing program that doesn't work for everyone, there are several steps the City of Austin must take in the immediate and in the long-term. VOCAL-TX recommends the following steps:

Fix Rapid Rehousing and ensure no one is exited to homelessness

The program allows for up to 24 months of rental assistance, but rapid rehousing recipients are usually only offered up to 12 months of financial payments, with just case management continuing after that. Because rental assistance is tapered over the length of the program, some folks only get three months of full rental assistance before they are required to start paying the rent.

People experiencing chronic street homelessness often enroll in this program out of desperation because the alternative is waiting for years for a Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) unit to become available. Rather than wait for a PSH unit, folks take a RRH voucher, which doesn't offer the wrap-around services they need. Service providers are in a difficult position of offering people temporary rapid rehousing when many people need a higher level of support. In addition, high caseloads for case managers can sometimes mean tenants do not get the support they need to stay housed, such as help resolving disputes with landlords, fixing apartments, finding employment, enrolling in benefits, and finding a permanent housing option once the RRH rental assistance ends. In short, RRH is not fully meeting the needs of the folks in the program. To fix RRH, Austin needs to:

- Ensure financial assistance lasts 24 months if needed, or until permanent housing is secured
- Increase the number of permanent vouchers available
- Add more high quality case management support for individuals in the program

Invest in housing for the poor

Permanent supportive housing (PSH) is a proven strategy to end homelessness for people who need services and supports. As of February 2024, the City reports 1,718 PSH units in Austin, with an additional 1,000 units opening by 2026. These projects take up to four years to complete once approved, and many were funded with one-time ARPA funds. The City approved most of these projects years ago, and recently approved an additional 815 units as part of the affordable housing bond. Despite these investments, we will still fall woefully short of housing everyone who needs PSH.

As the rent and cost of living in Austin surge, we must find ways to keep people in their homes. Programs like rent stabilization, rental assistance and expanding the guaranteed income program prevent homelessness. But more than any program, we know that building deeply affordable/low-income housing is what's needed to reduce homelessness. In addition to fixing RRH, Austin needs to:

- Expand the emergency rental assistance and guaranteed income programs
- Raise revenue to build low-income housing and more permanent supportive housing
- Require developers to set aside enough units for people experiencing homelessness in new projects

For more information and to join our campaign to Stop the Clock, please visit our website at vocal-tx.org/campaign/stop-the-clock.



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