



A REVIEW OF THE New York State Housing Mobility Pilot

Lessons from Buffalo,
Long Island, and
New York City

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Research Action Council*

**Mobility
Works** 

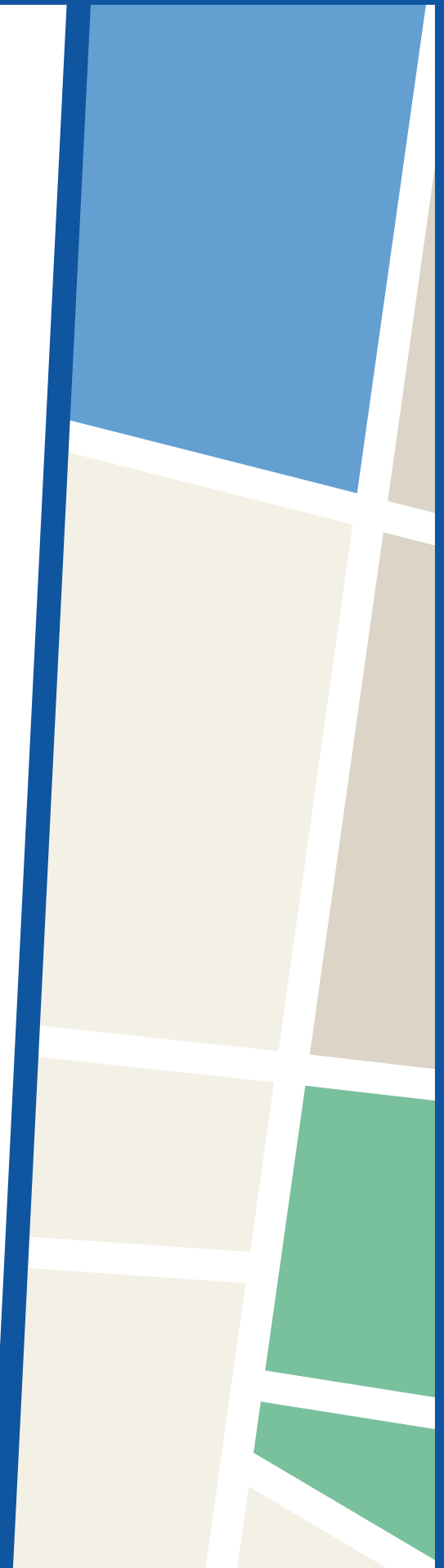




Photo: CDCLI team members, with a Neighborhood Choice Long Island program participant. Photo credit: CDCLI

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank and acknowledge the counselors, coaches and managers at the mobility programs including Adrienne Kosis, Te’Kima Anthony-Bey, Jeanmarie Buffett, Nichelle Brown, Maria Serrato, Dominick Muscadi, Alice Moore, Steve Dalton, and Chanera Pierce for their contributions to this report and their commitment to making the mobility pilot a success.



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A Note from Baaba K. Halm



At Enterprise Community Partners, we believe that where families live, and the ability to choose the neighborhood where they'll put down roots, matters. Decades of practice and research demonstrate that housing mobility programs – which address the barriers households with Housing Choice Vouchers face in moving to low-poverty neighborhoods with high-performing schools and other strong community resources – can change the trajectory of low-income families' lives, leading to improved physical and mental health, better school achievement, and for children, higher lifetime earnings. After two years of a pandemic that has disproportionately affected lower-income households, especially families of color, it is more

important than ever that we help provide all New Yorkers with access to homes and neighborhoods of their choice, with greater opportunities for success and stability.

These two convictions – that it matters where a family lives and that dedicated housing mobility programs can give families greater choice in where they live – were the impetus for the New York State Housing Mobility Pilot Program. In partnership with the New York State Office of the Attorney General, Enterprise committed funds to launch this pilot in 2020 in Buffalo, Long Island, and New York City, which aimed to provide families with federal Housing Choice Vouchers with greater neighborhood choice. The program connected households interested in moving to more well-resourced neighborhoods with critical support and services such as credit and budget counseling programs, hands on housing search assistance, and financial support. These resources help to break down long-standing barriers – rooted in systemic racism – that have led to concentration of voucher holders in high-poverty neighborhoods. Our support of mobility programs exemplifies Enterprise's "both/and" approach to community development, which encompasses stimulating investment in communities to increase opportunities, while also helping residents move to neighborhoods with greater resources, if they choose.

As you will see in this report, this pilot program affirmed previous research findings that show clear, positive changes for families who move to lower-poverty, more well-resourced neighborhoods. Participating households reported immediate benefits such as access to school districts with better educational outcomes, improvements in physical and mental health, lower stress levels, and a higher sense of security and safety. Put simply, it is impossible to overstate the positive impact this program has had for participating families, and as detailed in this report, how expanded neighborhood choice can improve the trajectory of families' lives.

Not only did the Housing Mobility Pilot Program produce tangible, significant improvements for the participating families, but it also generated broader lessons on the structure and implementation of this work that should inform similar programs in the future. Most importantly, this pilot is a key example of how federal, state, and local policymakers can successfully work together to address issues affecting families across the country.

Our partnership with the Poverty and Race Research Action Council (PRRAC) and the deep commitment and creativity of our program partners, Community Development Corporation of Long Island (CDCLI) and Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) have been central to the initiative's success. Federal, state and local partners have provided immense support and engagement, demonstrating a commitment and interest in addressing housing inequalities that we should all commend.

Of course, there is more work to do, and looking ahead, we are hopeful that this pilot and its findings can guide broader investments in fair housing and economic mobility. On the federal level, we encourage continued funding for housing mobility counseling, which helps us determine what services are most important for families moving to new neighborhoods. To continue and expand on these mobility programs, we need to increase the housing supply in all communities. We are grateful to New York State Homes and Community Renewal, whose investment of funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development will expand this initial pilot program, now to be called the Making Moves Program.

Unfortunately, we must also recognize that tenants using voucher programs for rental assistance often encounter discrimination from realtors, landlords, and property managers based on their race and source of income. We must commit to allocating greater resources and funding for the prevention of illegal source of income (SOI) discrimination. Enterprise is leading advocacy on the city and State levels to better fund SOI enforcement agencies, and to increase budgetary asks to enforce fair housing law broadly as source of income discrimination is deeply connected to other blatant forms of discrimination, such as discrimination based on race, familial status or disability.

Enterprise also works to prevent illegal discrimination through our Eliminating Barriers to Housing New York program with the New York State Office of the Attorney General, which is providing over \$5 million to six full-service fair housing organizations that respond to illegal discrimination and work to get voucher holders into housing quickly. These organizations also educate the public on source of income discrimination laws, tenant rights, and property owner responsibilities, which remain unknown to many tenants and landlords.

While there is more work ahead, we are proud to celebrate the New York State Housing Mobility Pilot program and to reflect on the critical insights it has generated here that can improve the lives of New York families. We are excited by this pilot's immediate findings, as well as its potential to bring long-term positive change.

Where we live matters, and Enterprise Community Partners is proud to work with our partners on developing mobility programs—like this one—that give families access to greater housing and neighborhood choices, and in turn, enable them to transform their lives for the better.

Sincerely,



Baaba K. Halm
Vice President & New York Market Leader
Enterprise Community Partners

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<http://www.cdcli.org/hcv-landlord>




SCAN ME




Register for an upcoming landlord forum where you will learn about the HCV program and how to become a landlord.

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION OF LONG ISLAND CELEBRATES FAIR HOUSING MONTH



CDCLI50
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SUFFOLK COUNTY'S FAIR HOUSING LAWS

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW - FAIR HOUSING LAWS

THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHOICE LONG ISLAND PROGRAM COLLABORATES WITH THE SUFFOLK COUNTY HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION TO DISCUSS SUFFOLK COUNTY FAIR HOUSING LAWS.

JOIN US APRIL 13TH, 2022 AT 12:00 PM

Congress enacted the Fair Housing Act in April of 1968. It guarantees that everyone has access to equal housing opportunities and prohibits discrimination. Join NCLI and SC Human Rights Commission to learn more about the Fair Housing Act, state and local fair housing laws, and how to file a complaint.

APRIL 13, 2022 12:00 PM

REGISTER NOW

The Community Development Corporation of Long Island (CDCLI) marketing materials.

Photo Credit: CDCLI

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GET TO KNOW YOUR NCLI NEIGHBORS.

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VIRTUALLY FOR A NIGHT OF FUN, FOOD, AND NEW FRIENDS.

Register by Friday, June 25th and receive a \$50 gift card to order dinner for the family.

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NEIGHBORHOOD CHOICE LONG ISLAND

Do you have a Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) and at least one child under 18 in your household? Learn how we can help you find a new home in a great community.





Introduction

A new regional housing mobility pilot program in New York State addresses residential segregation caused by unequal access to neighborhoods based on race and income. The pilot, located at three sites in New York –Buffalo, Long Island and New York City–provides greater neighborhood choice for families in the federal Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program. Program planning and design began in 2019, the pilot was operational by the summer of 2020, and the first families moved in October of that year. Enterprise Community Partners and Mobility Works provided policy guidance and technical assistance throughout the program’s planning and implementation phases including an assessment of the pilot’s effectiveness at two of the sites –Buffalo and Long Island.¹ This report describes the program learning as the pilot evolved, documents program challenges and achievements and highlights key findings in participant outcomes over the first year of moves.

Although there had been a housing mobility program in the Greater Buffalo Metropolitan Area between 1999-2004,¹ Buffalo’s voucher programs remain highly concentrated. A 2019 report described a disturbing pattern of Housing Choice Voucher concentration across the country –but highlighted Buffalo as a particularly extreme case, with the highest levels of voucher concentration among the fifty largest metro areas in the U.S.² On Long Island, with fewer extremely low poverty neighborhoods, decades of entrenched residential segregation and a multiplicity of separate school districts nonetheless have resulted in starkly segregated, racially and economically divided schools. In New York City, an earlier mobility program demonstrated the challenges that many households face in locating housing in a range of city neighborhoods without additional supports or connections to real estate brokers, landlords and property managers.



A Pilot Participant and her son. Photo credit: CDCLI

Housing policies and programs that advance equity have shown that where a person lives matters. We now have decades of practice and research demonstrating that housing mobility programs work to change the trajectory of low-income families’ lives through improvements to physical and mental health, school achievement, and for children, long term educational benefits and higher lifetime earnings. Housing mobility programs also work in concert with other investments in economic, civil, and social institutions and organizations to combat structural racism and dismantle embedded housing segregation.

- 1 [The Legacy of Buffalo’s Landmark Housing Desegregation Case, *Comer v. Kemp* \(prprac.org\)](#). As noted in the report, Buffalo is now the fourth poorest city in the U.S. and the sixth most racially segregated.
- 2 Mazzara, Alicia and Brian Knudsen. 2019. *Where Families with Children Use Housing Vouchers: a comparative look at the 50 largest metropolitan areas*. Report for the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities.

Program Design

The pilot addresses housing specific barriers for low-income voucher-assisted households that want to move from high poverty communities to lower-poverty neighborhoods with good schools and environments that have been shown to result in positive outcomes for children. These “opportunity” areas were defined using comparable indices for each of the three programs (see below). The goal was to move 70-80 households at each site during the first two years of the program.

The programs follow a model of comprehensive housing mobility services which have demonstrated success in increasing housing choice for families with vouchers. There are three primary program components:

- one-on-one mobility counseling that is tailored to individual household needs and goals;
- financial supports to help address household, structural and market barriers in higher-cost housing communities;
- and landlord outreach and development.



House rental by a participant in the Buffalo Housing Mobility Program. Photo: HOME

Finding stability in a community after moving is also important to the success of programs and the pilot includes post-move household support in the form of staff check-ins, referrals to local service agencies, and assistance with property or landlord concerns.

Seven affordable housing organizations, including five Public Housing Agencies (PHAs), one comprehensive community development corporation (CDCLI) and one fair housing organization (HOME) participate in the programs in Buffalo and Long Island by providing vouchers and/or operating the programs.³ In New York City the voucher and mobility programs are administered by the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). Within the broad mandate of the pilot’s goals and funding, and with support and models from national housing mobility practitioners, each of the sites developed and implemented their own local program.

3 In Erie and Niagara counties in Buffalo the program is managed by Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME) with voucher households from three public housing agencies: Belmont, Rental Assistance Corporation (RAC), and the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA). On Long Island in Suffolk and Nassau counties the mobility program is managed by The Community Development Corporation of Long Island (CDCLI). CDCLI also administers vouchers for New York State in Suffolk County and works with the Nassau County Office of Housing, which was the NY State voucher administrator for Nassau County during the initial pilot period. The Long Island mobility program is currently limited to serving families with Housing Choice Vouchers issued by the NY State Division of Housing and Community Renewal (HCR).

Program Outcomes

This assessment considered program design, administration, and operations at each site to understand if and how the pilot was successful at meeting its goals (1) to increase voucher holders' access to a range of low-poverty, high-resource neighborhoods and (2) to test a model of participant supports and landlord incentives. The key findings and recommendations of the assessment can inform efforts to expand housing choice, reduce barriers to mobility, and support the housing agencies committed to advancing equity in the region.



Photo: CDCLI Housing Mobility Manager with an NCLI participant. Photo credit: CDCLI

The pilot was successful in broadening the neighborhood choices for some voucher families with children.

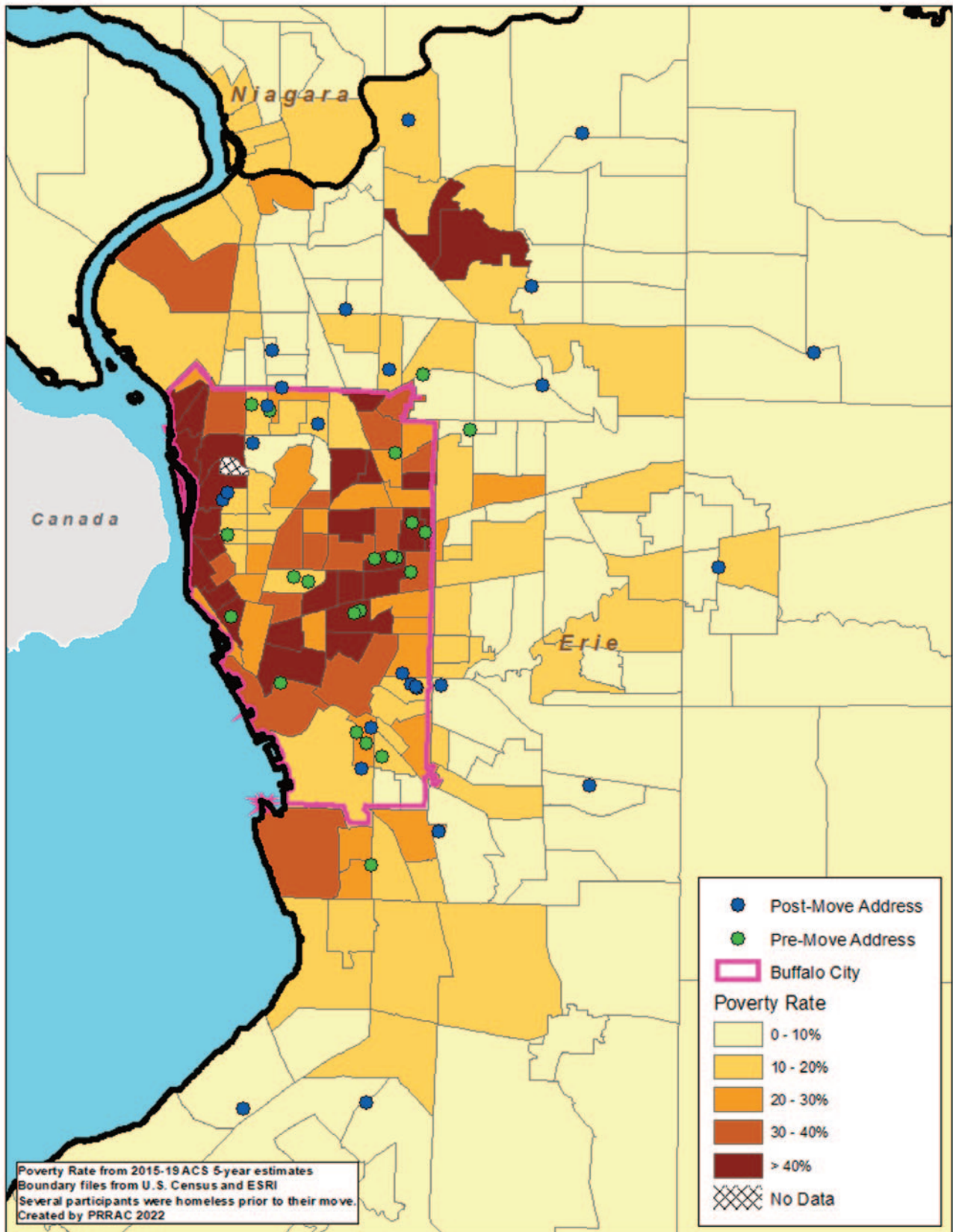
Including both Long Island and Buffalo program participants, forty-seven (47) households including seventy-eight (78) children successfully moved with the assistance of the program. The Buffalo site had more than twice as many moves overall with 33 mover households compared to 14 mover households on Long Island but with almost the same number of children in mover households (40 children moved with the program in Buffalo and 38 moved on Long Island). In NYC seven (7) households moved with the program.

Over 12 months of program enrollment — between September of 2020 and October of 2021 — seventeen percent (17%) of participants at the Buffalo site who received mobility counseling moved. Another fifty-eight percent (58%) are still actively enrolled and in the process of looking for an apartment. At the Long Island site, which had fewer moves overall, twenty-five percent (25%) of the participants who received some mobility counseling were successful at moving, and an additional twenty-two percent (22%) continue to be engaged in a housing search. Two of the important explanatory factors for the difference in participation rate include a broader eligibility criteria (initially) in Buffalo that allowed households without children to enroll and the initial eligibility screening at Long Island which limited enrollment to families with a high degree of financial stability.⁴

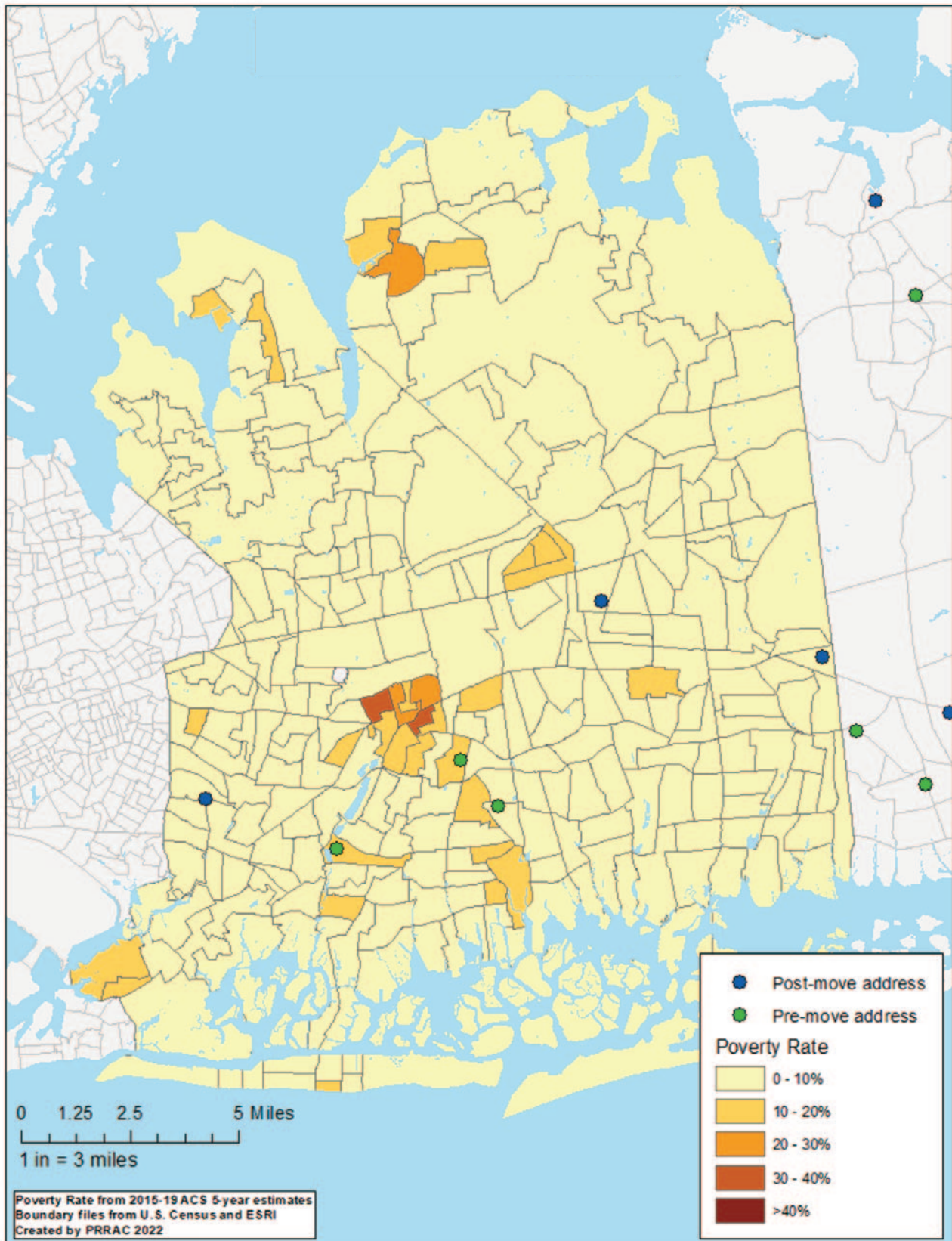
Prior to receiving assistance with housing search the NYC site's program design required households to take a series of four workshops completed over 3 to 8 months, along with an interested household's demonstration of ongoing financial stability. This pilot site began enrolling people in January of 2021 with the first household move occurring in August of that year. Between August 2021 and March of 2022, the program enrolled 100 households and seven (7) moved, but not all to a qualifying opportunity area. Sixty-seven percent of those who received mobility counseling (67%) are currently in the program—39 households are still in the process of fulfilling pre-move requirements and 29 households are actively searching for housing. The approach at this site illustrates the value of mobility counseling even for households that do not immediately make a move. Counseling can build housing knowledge and increase access to neighborhood resources through workshops and initial household assessments, and by providing referrals to local organizations and services.

⁴ This eligibility screening requirement has recently been modified.

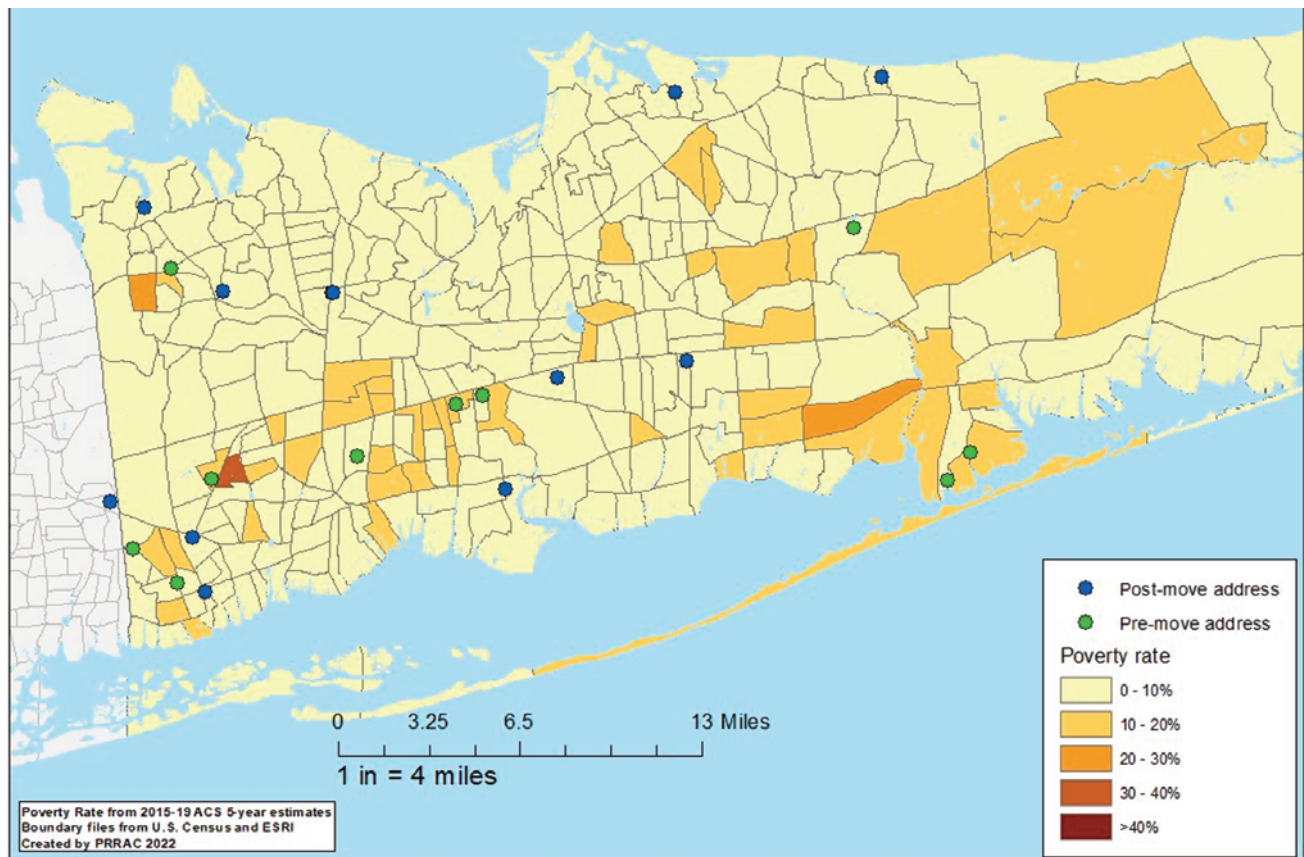
Buffalo Program Participant Pre- and Post-Move Location by Poverty Rate



Long Island Program Participant Pre- and Post-move Location by Poverty Rate
(Nassau County)



Long Island Program Participant Pre- and Post-Move Location by Poverty Rate (Suffolk County)



Participants reported that they searched for units in many different neighborhoods. The maps above illustrate where successful movers located, as well as the poverty rates in the areas they moved to and from.

- 47 participants moved to opportunity areas in 21 different communities in the first 12 months of the pilot program.
- 33 households in the Buffalo program moved to opportunity areas in 8 different towns outside of Buffalo and 6 neighborhoods within the city.
- 14 families in the Long Island program (11 in Suffolk County and 3 in Nassau County) moved to opportunity areas in 12 towns (including at least one which had no other voucher-assisted families in the school district).

Households moved to lower poverty higher opportunity neighborhoods.

Most of the participant households who moved during the pilot year moved to higher opportunity neighborhoods as well as to lower poverty ones. In Buffalo eligible opportunity areas were defined as low-poverty census tracts that ranked *high or very high* on the Child Opportunity Index (COI), a comprehensive measure of 29 neighborhood indicators important to healthy child development and wellbeing.⁵ In the Long Island program eligible neighborhoods are census tracts that meet two

5 The Child Opportunity Index (COI) is an index of neighborhood features that positively impact child health and development outcomes. It combines data from 29 neighborhood-level indicators into a single composite measure in three domains: education, social and economic, and health and environment. There are five categories of neighborhood opportunity ranging from very low- to very high-opportunity. See: [Child Opportunity Index \(COI\) | diversitydatakids.org](https://diversitydatakids.org)

defined criteria: high public school performance rate and low poverty rate.⁶ Eligible zip codes for the NYC program must meet one of the following three criteria: a poverty rate that is less than 10%, a felony crime rate that is less than 2.8 per 1,000, or a school district with the highest 3rd grade math test scores.

Most participants moved to census tracts with higher opportunity compared to their prior addresses.⁷ For example, among the 47 mover households, none lived in a high or very high opportunity area prior to moving; 100% of these households now live in such areas on Long Island along with 53% of the movers in the Metropolitan Buffalo region. Participants also moved to census tracts with significantly lower poverty rates on average, compared to their prior addresses. Participant households that moved are living in neighborhoods with poverty rates that are 50-60% lower on average in comparison to their prior neighborhoods and lower in comparison to most of the voucher-assisted households living in Buffalo and on Long Island.

For families in the Long Island program the average poverty rate prior to moving was 10.52% with more than half of the families living in neighborhoods with poverty rates greater than ten percent. After moving, the average neighborhood poverty rate was 4.71%, a more than 50% decrease. In Buffalo, where households began in much higher poverty neighborhoods to begin with, the reduction in poverty was striking. Households in Buffalo moved from neighborhoods that ranged from 3.3% to 61.1% with an average poverty rate of thirty percent (30%) and moved to neighborhoods between 1.7% and 28.4% with an average poverty rate of 12%—a nearly 60% decrease. Whereas 70% of Buffalo participant households moved from neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20% or higher, only 10% of households had that level of exposure after moving. The finding that only slightly more than half of the successful movers in Buffalo lived in higher opportunity areas after moving illustrates the importance of considering local context in housing mobility; all but one household that moved to non-opportunity census tracts none-the-less moved to neighborhoods with an average poverty rate 49.4% less than their prior neighborhood.

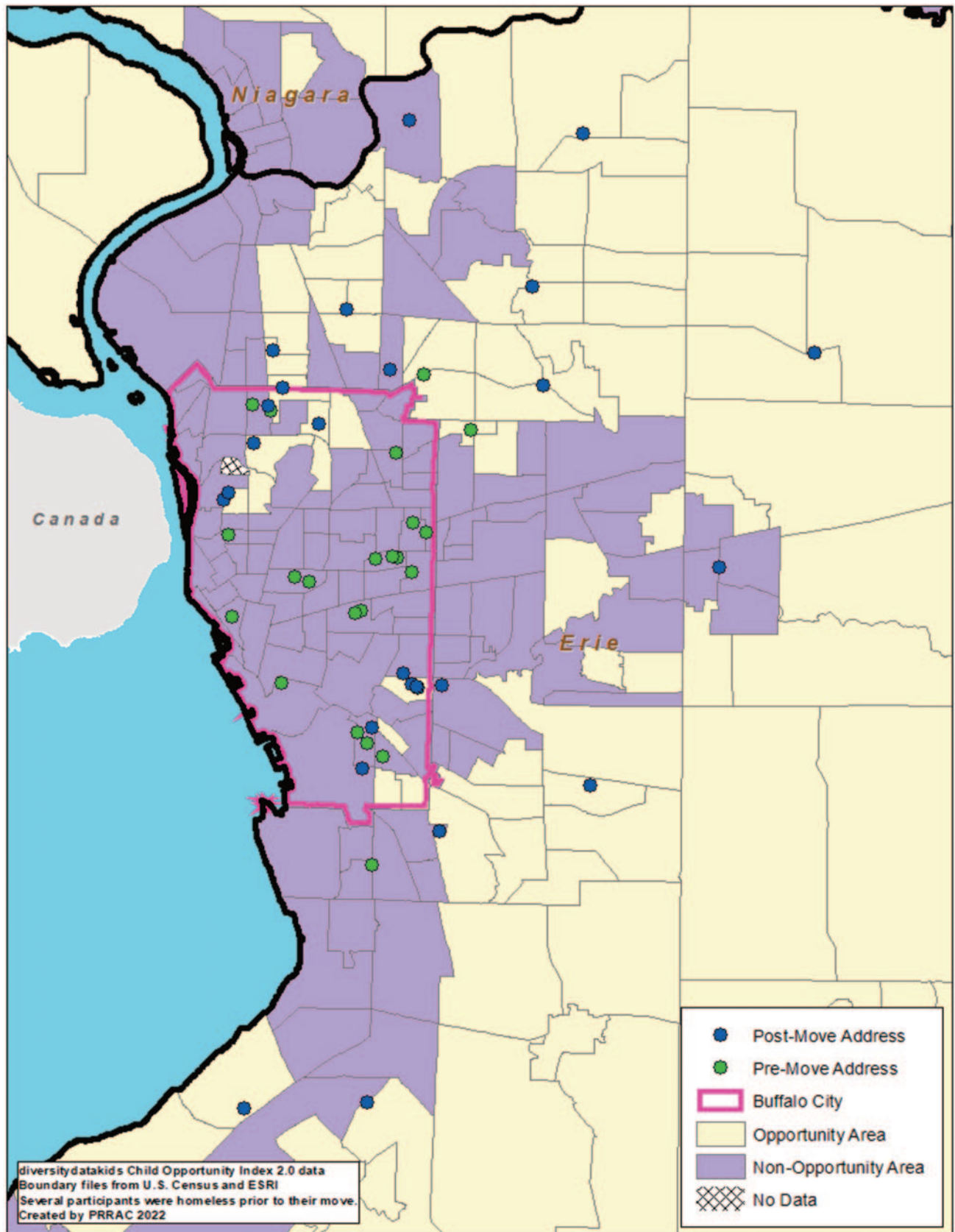
***Pre- and Post-Move Neighborhood Characteristics of Movers
in Buffalo and Long Island***

Census Tract Indicators	Long Island		Buffalo	
	Pre-Move	Post-Move	Pre-Move	Post-Move
High/Very High Opportunity (COI)	No	Yes	No	Yes
	0%	100%	47%	53%
Poverty Rate				
Average poverty rate	10.5%	4.7%	30%	12%
Poverty rate above 10%	58%	42%		
Poverty rate above 20%			70%	10%
Average change in census tract poverty rate		-50%		-60%

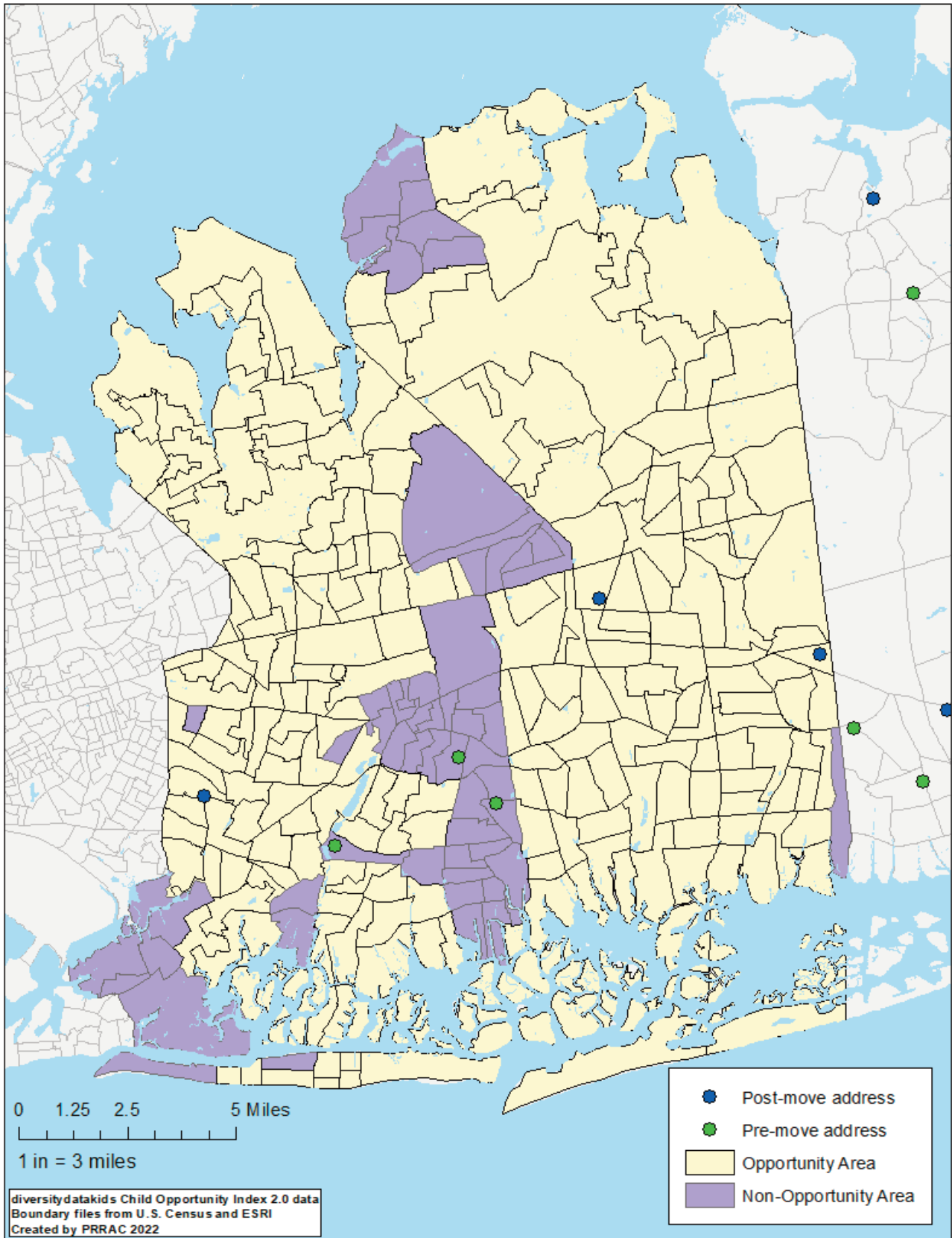
6 The definition of opportunity areas in the Long Island program were based on NYS Housing and Community Renewal’s (HCR) FEHO Opportunity Area designations with the addition of several census tracts reflecting communities with high performing schools: schools where the average school testing scores are in the upper two quartiles of proficiency scores across the state.

7 Given the timing of this assessment relative to the first moves in the NYC mobility program only the Buffalo and Long Island sites are included in the analysis of mover households.

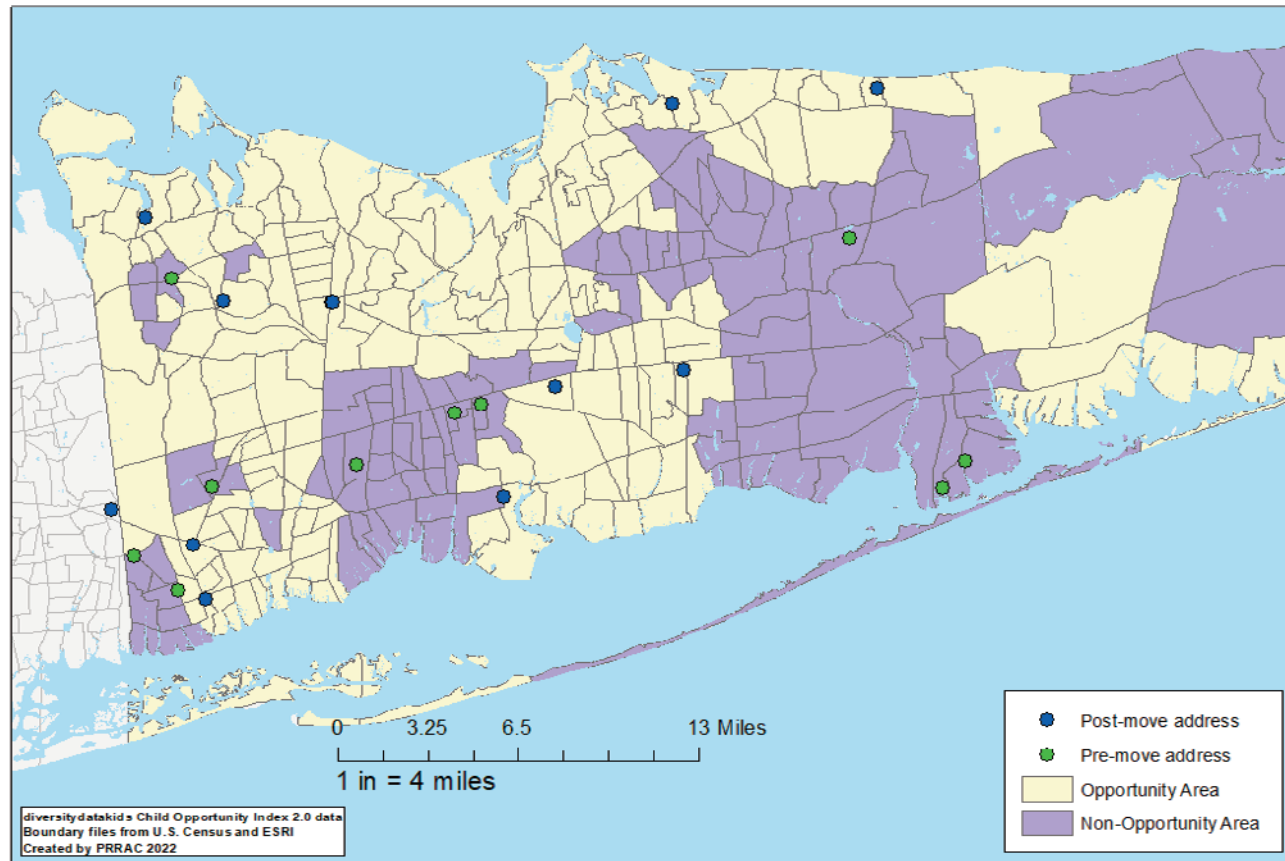
Buffalo Program Participant Pre- & Post-Move Location by Opportunity Index



Nassau County Program Participant Pre- & Post-Move Location by Opportunity Index



Long Island Program Participant Pre- & Post-Move Location by Opportunity Index Suffolk County, NY



Households moved to school districts with better educational outcomes.

Long Island has an extremely fragmented school district system, with over 120 separate districts in two counties and some highly segregated school districts by race and income. One of the primary goals of the mobility program there is to increase access to less segregated, highly ranked schools. Pilot neighborhoods had to provide access to census tracts with high public school performance and poverty rates of 10% or less. Although only two-thirds of the school age children changed or planned to change schools during the first year of their move, primarily due to the pandemic and to the timing of the move, all mover children can now access high quality schools on Long Island because of program participation. Many of the opportunity moves in the Long Island program were from racially concentrated, higher poverty school districts to lower poverty, racially diverse or predominantly white school districts.⁸

⁸ The opportunity ranking for school districts on Long Island combines 6 separate component indicators into a single metric. All component indicators have been vetted for their relevance as a determinant of school quality based on empirical studies on educational achievement and educational inequalities. The index uses public data from the New York State Department of Education from the 2017-2018 academic school year.

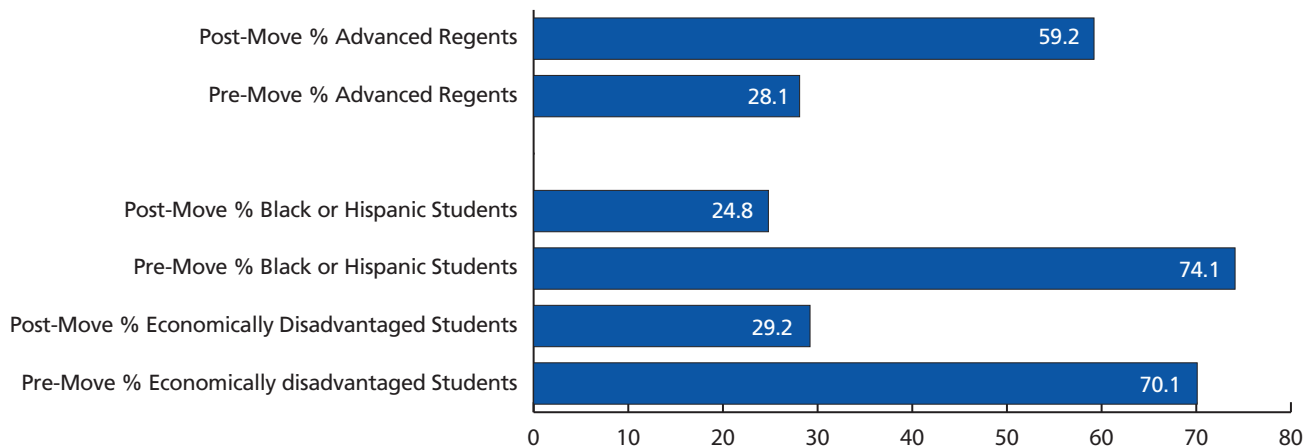
For additional literature on predictive measures and educational achievement see: [Annotated_bibliography_on_school_poverty_concentration](https://www.prrac.org/pdf/annotated_bibliography_on_school_poverty_concentration.pdf), https://www.prrac.org/pdf/annotated_bibliography_on_school_poverty_concentration.pdf. See also [Breaking Down Barriers: Housing, Neighborhoods, and Schools of Opportunity \(huduser.gov\)](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/insight-4.pdf), <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/insight-4.pdf>.

Long Island Mover Families Change in Selected School District Characteristics

	Pre-Move Average	Post-Move Average	Percent Change
Segregation/Integration (% Black or Hispanic students)	74.1%	24.8%	- 66.2%
Disadvantage (% economically disadvantaged students)	70.1%	29.2%	- 58.5%
Regents Score	28.1%	59.2%	+ 110.7%

In the school districts Long Island program participants moved to the percent of disadvantaged students decreased by 58%. The number of Black and Hispanic students in school districts decreased from 74% to 25% on average—a decrease of 66%—as compared to the districts in prior neighborhoods. The percentage of students scoring in the top two quintiles on the Regents exam increased by more than 110% across the mover districts.⁹

Change in School District Characteristics for Long Island Mover Families



In Buffalo, the percentage of disadvantaged students in the school districts where participants moved decreased by 26% on average, and the percent of Black and Hispanic students decreased by 36% as compared to their prior neighborhood school districts. The *range* of district disadvantage more starkly illustrates the change for mover households: prior to their participation in the mobility program, 90% of households lived in school districts where 80% or more of the students are disadvantaged whereas 46% now live in neighborhoods with school districts where less than 50% of the students are disadvantaged.

⁹ The Segregation/Integration measure is significant because it reflects differences in the distribution of educational resources depending on the degree to which a school is more integrated or predominantly white. See: Unequal Resources for Long Island Students Based on Race - ERASE Racism (eraseracismny.org)

Buffalo Mover Families Change in Selected School District Characteristics

	Pre-Move Average (N = 22)	Post-Move Average (N = 28)	Percent Change
Segregation/Integration (% Black or Hispanic students)	59.6%	37.6%	- 36.6%
Disadvantage (% economically disadvantaged students)	76.7%	56.6%	- 26%
Districts with > 80% disadvantaged students	90% (20 of 22 households)		
Districts with < 50% disadvantaged students		46% (13 of 28 households)	

The total number of households in the pre-and post-move columns is different as some participants were not included in the pre-move calculations due to their homeless status at the time of their move.

The pilot demonstrated that many voucher holders will invest time and effort to participate in a program that increases their access to a wider range of neighborhoods.

Even in the middle of the pandemic and with the many potential challenges voucher holders often experience when accessing higher opportunity areas more than 700 households that received outreach letters with information about the programs had enough interest to contact the housing agencies and over 500 households received mobility counseling through the pilot during the first year.¹⁰

Love living in a family-oriented community. I see families walking and playing in the neighborhood.

– Participant in the Long Island Program

This finding—like the recent housing mobility study in Seattle—shows that there are many families living in higher poverty neighborhoods that want to move from their origin neighborhood when provided with a real range of neighborhoods to choose from.¹¹ Although the vast majority

of public housing resources are directed to low income neighborhoods, and the families living there, the popularity of these mobility programs reinforces the point that policymakers should also devote resources to residential mobility. The families who enrolled in the NY state mobility programs need the additional support of mobility counseling, and are willing to invest in the program’s requirements to move to neighborhoods that they believe will be better for their family.

The pilot increased the number of participating landlords in opportunity areas.

One of the key challenges for housing mobility programs is expanding into areas that have historically been less accessible to voucher assisted households. Across the sites program staff

10 Households expressing interest in the program: In NYC (211); Buffalo (223); Long Island (283).

11 Fifty-four percent (54%) of families receiving additional mobility counseling services as part of the Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) project chose to move to opportunity. The services led to a shift in where families chose to live rather than whether they were able to use their voucher. Creating Moves to Opportunity | Seattle Housing Authority. www.creatingmoves.org

reached out to more than 1,500 property owners through bulk mailings, emails, workshops, individual meetings, and direct calls. Fourteen percent (14%) of these landlords at the Long Island program were in opportunity areas and new to the HCV program. Ultimately programs at both sites were equally successful at increasing the number of properties available to the five voucher administering agencies in the pilot's designated neighborhoods; there are more than forty (40) different property owners participating in the pilot. Additionally, more than a third of the property owners/ landlords were new to the HCV program or at least were not currently renting to other families with HCV program vouchers.

The pilot's Housing Quality Improvement Fund (HQI), when utilized, helped to leverage additional investments in properties for program participants.

The pilot established a Housing Quality Improvement Fund (HQI Fund), seeded with \$60,000 per site, to recruit new landlords in the pilot's designated high opportunity areas. The HQI Fund recognizes that the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program's Housing Quality Standards (HQS) are a barrier for some potential landlords who cannot meet inspection standards, thereby limiting the supply of available rental units. For the HQI Fund each site established its own list of the types of allowable improvements to the property, the maximum amount permitted per property owner, and the conditions for eligibility (how many units could receive funding, etc.). In exchange for HQI funding landlords commit to maintain the property in good condition and to keep the unit affordable and available to voucher holders for several years depending on the amount that is allocated.¹²

Our experience partnering with HOME has been terrific. The reimbursement has allowed us to make additional upgrades to our apartments resulting in a higher level of quality living space which ultimately leads to happier tenants.

– Buffalo area property owner talking about the HQI Fund.

For owners who took advantage of the program these funds appeared to have worked as an incentive to participate in the program while significantly enhancing the condition of the properties. The HQI Funds were applied to one-third of the apartments that were leased during the first year. Some of the improvements and repairs included washer/dryer hook ups, window replacements, kitchen items, plumbing improvements, and electrical work. In total HQI Funds doubled their investment—\$75,000 leveraged more than \$150,000 in total property owner contributions/ spending and improved the quality of housing through improvements from floor to roof. The funding was allocated to 16 apartments in 10 distinct neighborhoods suggesting the program can work in a variety of locations. If a tenancy is successful, the property is likely to continue to be part of the inventory available to the program in the future.

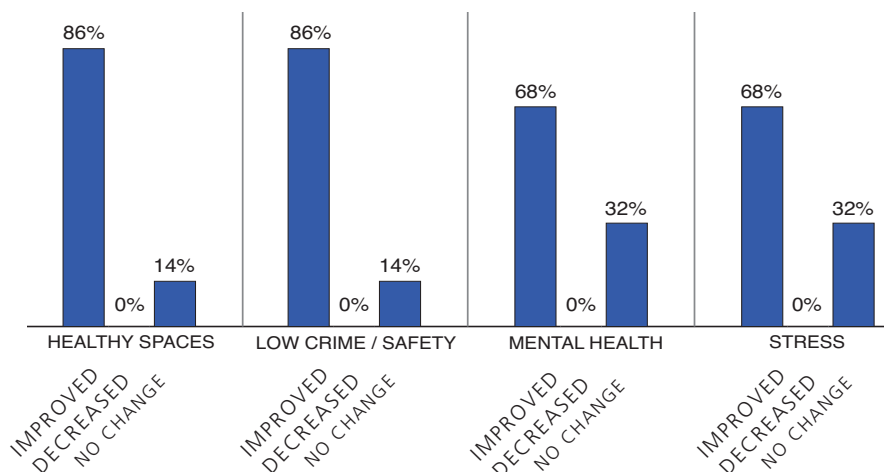
Households who moved to opportunity neighborhoods reported many meaningful and positive changes for their families.

The initial findings on mover households indicate that participants in the pilot report much lower levels of stress, better physical and mental health, better sleep, and say that they are living in much healthier environments. As importantly, households did not report significant disruptions to

12 The amount of time that property owners agreed to continue to maintain affordability was 2-4 years with this cohort.

resources, their social connections or work life because of their move, and reported that the adults and children in their households have adjusted well to their new neighborhoods and schools. There was nearly uniform agreement that new neighborhoods and homes were an improvement from the prior apartments and communities. Within less than a year, neighborhood changes seem to have made a meaningful difference in many quality-of-life factors for participants and their families.

Long Island Mover Reports on Health and Wellbeing



Many mover families described a sense of security and a change in perspective.

My kid's mental health and self-esteem has improved. I feel more at peace in the quiet area than my previous place.

I am less overwhelmed, anxious, depressed. Happy, more open-minded, and positive.

My sons are happier & appreciate the larger space.

It's a lot of opportunity now. I'm thinking further ahead like career and owning a business, and getting my kids into sports.

Neighborhood perceptions and adjustment

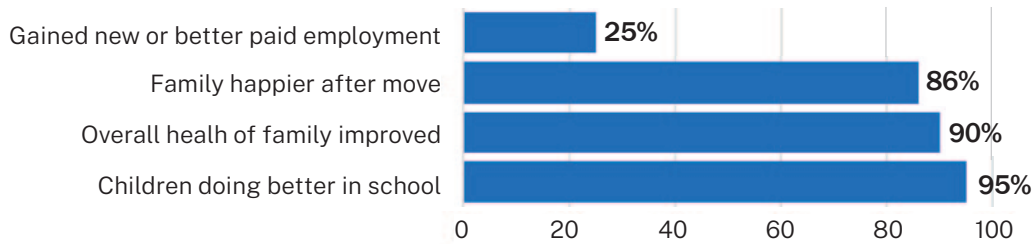
A positive finding is that 60 percent of the responses received from mover families on Long Island (with several families reporting at subsequent points in time), indicated that their new neighborhood—including neighbors and community members—were friendlier than their last neighborhood and an additional 32 percent said that it was about the same. Only two participants said that they found the new neighborhood less welcoming. Along with some unexpected challenges mover families also described unexpected benefits. Many families report improvements in mental health, neighbors who are friendly, being able to be outside (safely), in a calm and quiet environment. Eighty-six percent of participants on Long Island reported that their new neighborhood was an improvement over the past one, and 100% reported that their home was an improvement.

Health

Research on housing mobility programs consistently highlights neighborhood effects on adult and child health and mental health that are theorized to be a result of positive changes in the environment, especially improvements in neighborhood safety, access to healthy environments,

physical space, and apartment quality.¹³ More than 90% of Buffalo movers reported an improvement in health and wellbeing for themselves and their children, while 86% of the households indicated that they were happier after moving and almost all (95%) of the households with children (23 households, and 40 children in total) reported that their children were doing better in school. The findings at the Long Island site were equally encouraging. Mover families report much lower levels of stress, better sleep, and much healthier environments.

Percent of Buffalo Mover Households



Schools

One of the primary goals of the Long Island Neighborhood Choice program is to increase access to highly ranked schools that have been difficult to access for many students of color and limited to no voucher-assisted families. This priority was emphasized in program outreach materials and shared with participants through information provided during mobility counseling. Families were encouraged but not required to enroll their children in their new neighborhood schools. For the group of children that did change schools 90% of mothers said that they considered their child’s new school an improvement over their prior school and 75% of the mothers reported on how they felt their children were adjusting to new schools: six of nine said “very good” or “good” and three said “fair.” This response is more mixed than the responses about overall neighborhood adjustment but still reflects a positive experience.

90% of mothers said that they considered their child’s new school an improvement over their prior school.

13 See: Sociology’s revenge: Moving to Opportunity (MTO) revisited (brookings.edu); Seven Years Later: Effects of a Neighborhood Mobility Program on Poor Black and Latino Adults’ Well-being - PMC (nih.gov); The Effects of a Housing Mobility Experiment on Participants’ Residential Environments (nlihc.org) and; How Housing Mobility Affects Education Outcomes for Low-Income Children HUD USER



Te'Kima of CDCLI with a participating property owner. Photo credit: CDCLI

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Lessons learned from the pilot are informed by administrative, neighborhood, and household data provided by the sites as well as through notes, materials, and shared conversations during ongoing meetings with staff from the program sites, the public housing agencies, the funder, the technical assistance provider, and with practitioners from other mobility programs. Both sites received access to the same set of resources, tools, and technical assistance in developing and managing their programs, but the pilot was also intentional about providing local flexibility and supporting a state-wide community of practice across the sites to learn from each unique experience. The lessons shared reflect a collaborative and iterative reporting process on specific program metrics

established by Enterprise Community Partners and draw from more informal discussions about challenges and strategies among the housing mobility providers over the first two years.

The willingness of program leadership and staff to change direction and course correct over the first year helped to make the programs more effective.

Staff and management demonstrated flexibility during the program's implementation phase. Program staff responded to challenges with enrollment and landlord development by changing their operational strategy, sometimes more than once, seeking out new information, requesting feedback, and searching for models of best practice. One example is the Long Island site's effort to identify strategies to address the housing discrimination reported by their participants and mobility program staff. They researched and reached out to several organizations including the Long Island Board of Realtors and Long Island Housing Services.¹⁴ While course corrections could have been more formally detailed and reported at the time that they happened, the challenges resulted in some creative solutions and better programming.

Mobility counseling is not uniform across all participants and requires staff to adapt depending on individual need, timing, experience, and on the cohort of families that are enrolled at any point in time.

Mobility counseling begins with a one-to-one meeting and assessment of the household's needs and goals, and continues for up to two years after a family has moved into an opportunity neighborhood. In addition to the assessment/eligibility process, counseling includes supporting participants with housing search and the leasing process and in interactions with property owners, including rent

¹⁴ CDCLI has also had initial conversations with UnlockNYC, a new non-profit that created an on-line application for households to report discrimination anonymously and in real time.

negotiation, and advocacy. Mobility counselors provide not only instrumental but also emotional support during the housing search process and help households feel comfortable in new neighborhoods. As one participant on Long Island shares:

My advisor {counselor} has been a true blessing. She is patient, easy to talk to and always reaches out to me to check on myself and my family. It is very rare that you find someone in the social services field of helping that truly cares about the well-being of those who require services. She has made this transition less stressful for me in more ways than one.

—Long Island Program participant

Balancing mobility counseling activities with agency capacity was a challenge during the implementation phase of the pilot before the level of program interest became clear and as staff learned who the program could best serve and with which specific services. At the Buffalo site the pilot enrolled more families than planned and the volume initially strained the agency’s capacity to manage it. The numbers of households responding to outreach was consistent with what has been observed at mobility programs in other states but a very high number of households—85%—that completed the initial eligibility application also completed the assessment process and the same number enrolled in the program. At the Long Island site 63% of the families that expressed interest were determined initially eligible and went on to schedule a second meeting to conduct an intake assessment and enroll. These numbers can provide a benchmark for how many families can be expected to enroll in subsequent years given an outreach target. The programs can also use information about the characteristics of the families that did enroll during the first year to refine their targeting and manage the caseload.



Photo: Te’Kima of CDCLI with an NCLI participant. Photo credit: CDCLI

Both programs lost a significant number of families after enrollment but before they moved to an opportunity area. The program in Buffalo, with more moves overall, also lost contact (at least temporarily) with many families after they moved. It is possible that program capacity was limited by staff turnover at both sites—in the first year counseling capacity for enrollment and housing search was delayed by 3-6 months while new staff was hired. Still, counseling has benefits that are independent of a move. Mobility counseling provides information about, and access to, a range of different, often historically less accessible neighborhoods for voucher holders and teaches housing search strategies including how to recognize and report discrimination.¹⁵ At times counseling surfaces non-housing specific household challenges and staff can offer workshops or referrals to appropriate service providers. Counseling caseloads should be maximized to achieve these outcomes. The challenge is to find a balance between assisting each family to achieve their goals based on a realistic assessment of what is available, but without losing them along the way, and while maintaining optimal staff capacity.

15 See, e.g., Maria Krysan and Kyle Crowder, “Promoting Integrative Residential Choices: What Would It Take?” (https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/A_Shared_Future_Chapter_8_Promoting_Integrative_Residential_Choices.pdf)

Communication and coordination are critical elements of a successful management strategy.

Program success and expansion requires coordination with staff of the voucher administering agency, clearly defined roles for the mobility program staff, and the buy-in of leadership across the partners involved in the effort. Establishing consistent, formal channels for communication and coordination at the site and between the mobility programs and staff of the voucher administering agency/s is a critical mobility program management strategy. The Buffalo site was challenged during the implementation phase due to HOME's position as a non-voucher administering agency and the need to coordinate voucher-assisted households coming from three different public housing agencies with separate organizational cultures, priorities, and operating procedures. In contrast, the mobility program on Long Island is managed by CDCLI, itself a voucher administering agency. The Nassau County Office of Housing is the only other public housing agency that works with CDCLI on

There is a lot of support across the board including any issues with implementation. There is support all the way from program staff to the new commissioner.

– NYC Mobility Staff Program
Manager

the mobility program and it was more challenging to enroll families with vouchers from Nassau County than families with vouchers from their own agency. Training, and cross-training staff, ensures that mobility staff have a solid understanding of the HCV program and creates a predictable, productive process. To build capacity and enhance program operations the pilot should include staff training and empowerment specifically on the HCV leasing process and conduct training with the non-mobility focused HCV housing staff. When the programs successfully coordinate the voucher administration process, it facilitates

the leasing process, improves landlord interactions, and increases moves while also engaging broader support for the program's activities and accomplishments.

Landlord outreach and development requires more than one approach and mobility counselors must represent the interests of property owners and participants.

In addition to mobility counseling, a critical part of the success of mobility programs is finding new properties and owners in locations that have not generally been as accessible to voucher holders while maintaining existing landlord relationships. Property owners need to see the mobility program as a resource for their asset and mobility program staff as allies who make the requirements of the HCV program worth engaging with and easy to navigate. When there are low vacancy rates in the approved program neighborhoods and rents that are higher than the allowable payment standards it can help to offer the right incentives and respond as quickly as other potential renters. Investing in longer term relationships when there are not immediate vacancies is also important.

Landlord outreach activities are continual, and must have a reach wide enough to saturate the market, encompassing all potential avenues and actors from individuals and management companies to realtors and landlord associations. Even within one year, both sites found that they were able to get at least one referral for a second unit from a satisfied mobility landlord that joined the program. Staff in Buffalo also explained how the Housing Quality Improvement (HQI) Fund helped build good will with some property owners by allowing them to use the funds to repair units

damaged by prior (non-voucher holding) tenants. This type of investment works to forge longer term relationships while improving the housing quality of units in the HCV program.

Discrimination is common and challenging for program participants to address on their own.

The federal Fair Housing Act prohibits discrimination in rental housing by realtors, landlords, and management companies on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, gender identity, family status, or disability. New York State, and both Long Island and Buffalo's counties, also have Source of Income (SOI) protections, which prohibit discrimination against households that receive rental subsidies such as vouchers. The mobility program in Buffalo is administered by a civil rights organization and is the Greater Buffalo region's fair housing enforcement agency providing education, advocacy, and enforcement of fair housing laws. On Long Island, CDCLI refers families to Long Island Housing Services, the local fair housing enforcement agency. Each site requires participating households to take a fair housing workshop, or includes topical curriculum in a workshop that teaches how to recognize and report housing discrimination. Yet staff and families in this pilot (and in many other housing mobility programs) indicate that fair housing laws are often violated by landlords and management companies.

Staff from the NYC mobility program cite source of income as the primary reason for discrimination in their program. Challenges with landlords who will only accept high credit scores at all three pilot sites is also suggestive of ongoing income-based bias. Even when voucher holders report that discrimination is a standard practice they rarely make discrimination complaints. The burden of filing a complaint, time constraints during the housing search, and especially the sense that it won't change the outcome, limit the effectiveness of the law. In competitive housing markets, landlords and property management companies can be less flexible with their screening process and more selective of tenants without engaging in overt discrimination. The burden of recognizing and reporting discrimination cannot be placed only on the participant.

The role of the mobility counselor—representative of both participant and landlord—means that they often have timely first-hand knowledge of any housing search or post-move challenges. They also have the means to address them through program supports and relationships. Mobility staff on Long Island shared that larger management companies are more likely to have discriminatory credit checks whereas smaller owners tend to be more flexible, appreciate the mobility counseling participants receive and are more willing to listen to a unique family specific situation. Having quality detailed information about what is happening on the ground, and what has been useful, and then sharing that knowledge is important to making any systemic policy change. However, the responsibility for systemic testing and enforcement, which is a key adjunct to a successful mobility program, should probably be located separate from the housing mobility program as discrimination is experienced by a range of low-income renters (and homebuyers) beyond mobility participants, and given the importance of expert and independent review to litigation.

Data collection required more time and automated systems to facilitate effective program management and reporting.

A strength of the pilot was the amount of information collected by the sites on program measures and participant outcomes. Along with this volume came the challenge of not having the systems and staff capacity to devote time and energy to managing the data. Frequent meetings with external technical assistance partners appeared to be helpful for building a community of practice, keeping the programs moving forward, and providing flexibility and encouragement for useful course corrections. However these program flexibilities and changes made the data more confusing to collect, report, and analyze over time. This challenge was less acute on Long Island because the mobility program was able to harness staff and resources from their HCV and community development programs and mobility staff were more experienced and comfortable with the type of reporting requirements. As a result, staff experimented with different case management systems to track activities and data points for program outcomes. At the NYC site, which like Long Island is also the voucher administering agency, mobility counselors have access to a shared HPD case management database with FSS coordinators and HCV staff that facilitates client level knowledge, paperwork processing, and accountability. Like CDCLI they were able to draw on the capacity and expertise of an agencywide data analytics team to build and update their data management and reporting system.

Data management systems are important to mobility program outcomes. Efficient communication and coordination of the local housing market information can help guide landlord development and make housing search for staff and participants more targeted and less frustrating. Accurate, timely information increases the percentage of units that are likely to be available. For example, the NYC program shifted their approach to focus on building relationships with brokers when the data showed that outreach to landlords and direct inquiry about apartment listings in opportunity areas was not nearly as effective. Knowing the locations of where families are looking but not finding housing because of discrimination, a lack of affordable units, or for some other reason, is also useful information for program development.

The flexibility in program design meant that in addition to the basic common metrics required by the funder, each site collected additional and different information using separate measures and tools. Going forward the pilot should build in more time for data entry and analysis and identify the priority focus areas and subject domains for program and participant outcomes. Comparable tools for data collection around assessments and landlord outreach will help the agencies more clearly define which supports and strategies are most effective, will support the pilot's community of practice and maximize its multi-site design. An example of questions that can be addressed by the data in the second year might include: Do longer search times matter to retention? Is the length of time that a participant is in a pre-move counseling process associated with different program outcomes? Are the demographics and housing histories of families that drop out of the program before moving different across sites or from families that do move with the program? For which participants and types of properties are credit scores a barrier? What characteristics are common to the neighborhoods or properties that have successfully used the HQI funds? Which schools are most welcoming and supportive to the mobility families, and how should the mobility program support any school challenges experienced by movers?

Conclusion

Although the pilot did not meet its numerical mobility goals, there was remarkable investment and engagement from the mobility organizations and partners to develop the programs and to learn from the work. It is important to place the evaluation and learning of the first year in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic, an unprecedented and uncertain time impacting everything from housing markets to health care. When this pilot first started enrolling families most schools were closed and children were learning remotely from home. Many people left or lost work and income, vacancy rates fell, and fewer apartments turned over as the housing market responded and Congress passed the CARES Act which included a moratorium on the evictions of tenants in rental properties that receive federal funding. Public housing agencies that administer vouchers had to review many of their policies and reinvent the management systems and operations of their programs in the wake of a shifting social safety net and health care crisis. It is impressive that the pilot sites continued to invest in the new mobility programs and accomplished the work that allowed families to move to higher opportunity areas.

At this time interest from voucher-assisted families is still sufficiently high to achieve the pilot's mobility goals. With the knowledge gained and relationships built during the first year the expectation is that the programs will have the capacity to support additional moves for new participants along with the more than 100 enrolled households that are currently receiving mobility services and engaged in housing search.



CDCLI team members, Te’Kima Anthony-Bey, Housing Mobility Manager and Gwen O’Shea, President and CEO, with a mobility program participant at a new apartment. Photo credit: CDCLI

The pilot provided guidance for ongoing operations by offering some evidence on how and when participant supports, and landlord outreach and incentives, were most effective. The pilot also expanded the reach of the HCV program and in places that have historically been less accessible and welcoming to voucher-assisted households. The sites were successful in helping families to move from higher poverty locations to a range of low poverty, highly resourced neighborhoods, and nearly every mover household from these individual communities reported that the move improved their families' health and the quality of their children's education. In Buffalo, the nation's fourth poorest city, the average rate of neighborhood poverty decreased by 60 percent for those who moved with the program. On Long Island, families moved from lower opportunity areas to higher opportunity areas, and mover families gave very positive ratings to their new community: 65% reported that it was "excellent" or "very good" and 35% said "good" or "fair." This is a key finding that

reflects highly on the program’s support for families—including the post-move services—and suggests that this group of families may choose to remain in the program and in their communities over time. The seemingly intractable challenges finding affordable housing in competitive rental markets along with the financial hurdles that many lower income households confront will be worth overcoming when a family feels welcome and invested in their new neighborhood.

Endnote

- i The implementation of the Enterprise funded pilot at the HPD NYC site began eight months after the other two pilot sites in NY and follows a different model. The program at this site builds on a housing mobility program that began in 2018. *Housing Choice*, HPD’s Mobility Counseling Program, was launched as part of HPD’s Family Self Sufficiency (FSS) Program and used Small Area Fair Market Rents (SAFMRs) in select New York neighborhoods to access apartments in higher cost rental markets. The primary goal of that pilot was to learn what resources and elements were needed to develop a mobility counseling program in the NYC area. As a result of the program, HPD introduced Exception Payment Standards (EPS) to all its voucher holders. In January of 2021 HPD began outreach for the Enterprise pilot, maintaining the primary program design of *Housing Choice*, but adjusting elements of outreach, participant eligibility criteria, and landlord development based on lessons from the original pilot. The 2021 program continues to serve households from FSS but requires families to be financially secure prior to beginning counseling activities.

When the NYC Housing Choice program employed a random lottery selection for FSS households interested in joining the program counseling staff found that many households had extensive arrears, a housing court history, and low credit scores that made moving more difficult. The pandemic exacerbated education, health and financial instability for many people. To address these challenges the new program instituted criteria which required applicant households to (1) address their outstanding arrears and establish a stable income among other criteria as a condition of applying for the enterprise pilot and (2) developed a lengthier pre-counseling phase during which households needed to complete a series of workshops (orientation, housing search, budgeting and financial fitness, and landlord tenant relations) prior to formal enrollment. While all of the sites offered similar workshops and required at least one, overall enrollment and counseling began earlier and was of a shorter duration in Buffalo and Long Island by 3 to 8 months. As a result of these program differences, and a more limited time for data collection and analysis of participant experiences, the NYC site is not directly comparable to the Long Island and Buffalo sites on many of the first year operational and outcome measures that the full assessment focused on. Where possible we incorporate initial findings and lessons from the first six months of the NYC program (August 2021-March 2022). However, this reflects a different point in time and duration from the other two sites, where the first moves happened in September of 2020, and the analysis included 12 months of operations from the date of first move.



Photo: CDCLI team members. Photo credit: CDCLI

**Mobility
Works** 

PRRAC
*Poverty & Race
Research Action Council*

 **Enterprise**

Mobility Works is a collaborative nonprofit technical assistance and training project that includes PRRAC, the Inclusive Communities Project, the Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership, and Housing Choice Partners. Mobility Works partners directly with public housing authorities seeking to develop effective housing mobility programs, and has also received core support from Funders for Housing & Opportunity, the Kresge Foundation, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.