



# Building Evidence for Shared Housing as a Policy Response to Homelessness and Social Isolation

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**In 2024, over 770,000 people across the United States experienced homelessness in a single night — more than ever recorded.<sup>1</sup>** The number of renter households spending more than half their income on rent also reached a record high.<sup>2</sup> The nation additionally faces a loneliness and isolation epidemic, and addressing social connection will be necessary to strengthen individual and collective health and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Shared housing is a pragmatic approach to combating social isolation and homelessness.<sup>4</sup> In a shared housing arrangement, two or more unrelated people live together and share common space in temporary or permanent housing. This is a normal practice in private housing markets but not across the housing assistance world. As such, two-, three-, and four-bedroom units that could be available as shared living spaces for people exiting homelessness are not being accessed.<sup>5</sup>

To date, strong evidence on the effectiveness of shared housing to reduce or prevent homelessness is limited. Some studies have provided suggestive context and show a need for more evidence building. For example, a nonexperimental study conducted in 2010 found that, among formerly homeless individuals with mental health diagnoses, shared housing was associated with reduced housing costs as well as fewer psychotic symptoms — possibly as a result of interpersonal connections with housemates.<sup>6</sup> An evidence review of approaches to end homelessness called for further

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research on how models like shared housing can improve housing stability, connection, and well-being.<sup>7</sup> A recent U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development report on a spectrum of shared housing models and initiatives described shared housing as a viable option for affordable housing within the existing housing stock.<sup>8</sup>

The dual national crises of homelessness and loneliness afflict millions of community members, particularly people experiencing destabilizing life events who lack social connections and access to safety net services.<sup>9</sup> They motivate an urgent call to action to explore, assess, and build evidence for practical strategies to promote greater housing stability and social connectedness. Shared housing is a promising strategy that demands immediate attention.

MDRC, in partnership with the Shared Housing Institute (SHI), is conducting an outcomes and implementation study to better understand the potential and promise of shared housing to address homelessness, housing affordability, and social connectedness and well-being in high-cost areas across the country. This brief discusses how MDRC and SHI collaborated with national shared housing leaders in 2024 to codevelop a learning agenda for the shared housing evaluation.<sup>10</sup> It then lays out the framework for the research questions the study will address.

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## Shared Learning on Shared Housing

From May through October of 2024, MDRC hosted *Shared Learning on Shared Housing*—a series of conversations among MDRC, SHI, and eight homelessness services organizations across the country—to build a learning agenda on shared housing. (See Box 1 for the list of participating organizations.) The conversations brought together practitioner leaders who are using shared housing as part of their strategy to end homelessness in expensive housing markets. The discussions on implementation successes and challenges covered topics such as how to navigate local continuum of care processes, how to develop and maintain partnerships with landlords and address their concerns, how to support client needs and preferences, and how to equip staff with the necessary knowledge and skills to facilitate shared housing strategies—all critical processes that the practitioner leaders identified as important to strengthening their implementation of shared housing strategies.

These conversations also surfaced themes to help articulate a broad theory of change and a framework for assessing and evaluating diverse shared housing approaches, as follows:

- **Practitioner leaders consistently noted that “shared housing is an approach” more so than it is a program**, referring to the culture of organizations that have embraced and embedded shared housing into all their housing and homelessness assistance strategies. These organizations deploy shared housing across a variety of housing types, funding sources, and target populations as a normative option for clients to move out of homelessness and into permanent affordable housing.

### Box 1. Shared Learning on Shared Housing Collaborators

The following shared housing leaders collaborated with MDRC and SHI in the *Shared Learning on Shared Housing* conversations to develop a learning agenda for the shared housing evaluation. The experiences and perspectives they shared were vital to launching this evaluation.

- Jamie Almanza and Qimmah Hameed, Bay Area Community Services, Oakland, California
- Meghann Cotter, Micah Ecumenical Ministries, Fredericksburg, Virginia
- Amber Maiberger, Arizona State University, Maricopa County, Arizona
- Melissa Peterman, Townspeople, San Diego, California
- Wendy Tippet, Palm Beach County Community Services Department, Palm Beach County, Florida
- Roy Warren, RH Community Builders, Fresno, California
- Rob Wetherington, Pathways to Housing PA, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Cathy Zall, New London Homeless Hospitality Center, New London, Connecticut

- **Some organizations began using shared housing options in their high-cost rental markets primarily to keep housing costs affordable.** Practitioner leaders observed that shared housing was associated with mental health improvement and reduced isolation through socialization. These are now viewed as important complements to affordability. For example, a representative from Micah Ecumenical Ministries, which provides housing navigation and behavioral health services to the Fredericksburg, Virginia, community, explained that Micah “jumped into shared housing as a necessity” more than 20 years ago, before funds for rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing were more widely available. She elaborated:

One person could not afford a place to live . . . but if you paired up two people or sometimes three people, they could at least have more money coming into the house than they would if they were renting a place on their own. And by default, we found that people actually became interesting support systems for one another, people that have a more organic need to take care of people, living with people who needed care. . . . It became an interesting complement.

She views shared housing as part of Micah’s “continuum of compassion for people.”

Similarly, the director of the Department of Human Services in Palm Beach County, Florida—where shared housing has been an option and a practice since 2008—remarked that “our biggest challenge is . . . fair market rents.” She reported that in 2017, the county deployed shared housing for all young people being served under a Youth Homelessness Demonstration Grant, and saw incredible success in placing chronically homeless young people into shared housing using rapid

rehousing funds. She also acknowledged that recently, with rents continuing to increase, even shared housing units are becoming more difficult to afford.

- **People with high-acuity needs can benefit greatly from the socialization and health aspects that often follow from shared housing.**<sup>11</sup> A representative from Bay Area Community Services (BACS), a behavioral health and housing organization in Oakland, California, that works to both prevent and end homelessness, noted that “when people get permanent supportive housing and they get their voucher [to live on their own], many times they end up getting lease violations and evictions because they want to bring their community in with them.” Shared housing addresses the isolation that often occurs when people are removed from their homeless community and placed into a single-occupancy situation. She also saw in shared housing the potential to extend life through social connections:

We had a woman who . . . moved in at the age of 18; she passed away in our house 23 years after moving in. [Her dad told us,] “My daughter would have been dead at 18 if she didn’t move into your shared housing site.” . . . The participants in the house, they’ve all lived together for upwards of 20 years together, for better or for worse, [and] even with conflicts . . . they really took care of each other.”

- **People with high-acuity needs can also be the most challenging tenants in a shared housing arrangement.** BACS leaders acknowledged that providing shared housing for people with severe or complex physical and mental health needs brings elevated risks and challenges. “It’s getting more complex with the homelessness epidemic,” a BACS leader explained, “because [the funds] require the highest acuity people [be placed into available shared housing that sometimes is] . . . not permanent supportive housing with deep subsidies and live-in staff.” When the housing arrangement is not appropriately resourced with adequate supportive services for everyone in the shared living space, the arrangement can introduce additional challenges for housemates. BACS meets this complication by finding more appropriate living situations for people when necessary. In addition, the organization has worked with its continuum of care to develop processes to match housemates that consider both acuity levels and lifestyle preferences so that those living in a shared space have baseline connections for their housing stabilization journeys.
- **Stigma about shared housing draws resistance from referring organizations, and sometimes from clients themselves.** A leader from Pathways to Housing PA, an organization that provides housing, healthcare, and supportive services in Philadelphia, talked about facing resistance from other community providers who prefer referring clients to single-occupancy housing. He attributed this resistance to “the societal prejudice of ‘living alone is better,’ which we know is false . . . especially when the alternatives are the waitlists for single-occupant dwellings, prolonged and unneeded dependency on strained shelter supports, and missing an opportunity to move out with built in peer support. . . . [W]aiting for an individual unit increases the potential for discharge without any supports.” Clients who have experienced trauma in overcrowded group or congregate housing settings — which often come with very structured schedules and restrictions — may also

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be resistant to another shared housing placement, even though it may afford them more independence and agency than they had in the past. One BACS leader remarked, “I have open units right now – in beautiful homes – any of us . . . would move in tomorrow – that we can’t get filled.” This problem persists despite the long waiting periods for a voucher and the inadequacy of current Supplemental Security Income to pay for higher rents in single-occupancy units.

- **Organizations that are deeply engaged in shared housing view it as an essential tool in addressing the homelessness crisis, despite its challenges.** As a representative from the New London Homeless Hospitality Center, an organization that provides emergency shelter, housing navigation, and rental assistance services in New London, Connecticut, observed, “People just can’t afford an apartment on their own and shared housing is the only option for a lot of people, so it’s the norm of what we do – whether it’s rapid rehousing, or rapid exit, or . . . housing-focused problem solving. . . . Shared housing is both a necessity and also could be a positive experience for people.”

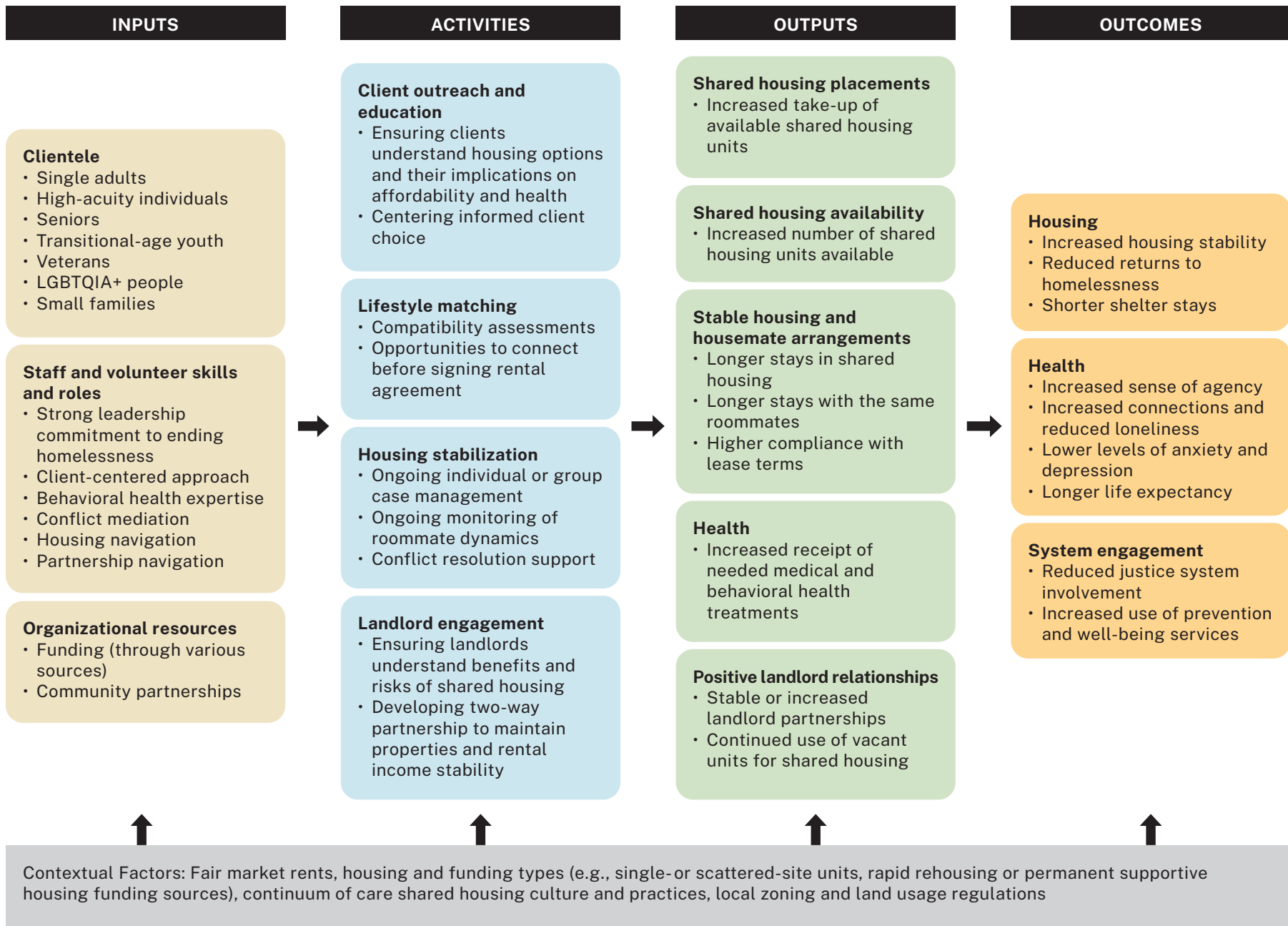
## Developing a Learning Agenda

The *Shared Learning* conversation series demonstrated that organizations use shared housing in a wide variety of local contexts and service styles. At the same time, it elevated important shared principles about how best to deploy shared housing. These principles were used to develop a working version of a theory of change, presented in Figure 1, which will serve as a basis for the shared housing evaluation. As new lessons from the field emerge, the theory of change may continue to evolve.

The theory of change reflects a consensus among organizations that a strong shared housing approach includes the following attributes:

- **Strong leadership committed** to ending homelessness in expensive housing markets.
- **A lifestyle matching process** to match housemates based on their preferences, lifestyles, and needs.
- **Conflict resolution guidance** that can help housemates communicate clearly with each other and be used to help resolve disagreements that occur in day-to-day living.
- **Housing stabilization services** that may include intensive wraparound health and social work interventions, employment assistance, and relationship-building services to help tenants stay safely and consistently housed.
- **Consistent engagement with landlords** to facilitate transparency, clarity, and accountability on rental payments and lease terms among landlords, service providers, and tenants so that landlords can continue to confidently lease properties as shared housing units.

Figure 1. Shared Housing Theory of Change: Working Version



To begin testing and validating the shared housing theory of change, the study will address the following lines of inquiry through both organizational and participant lenses.

### **Organizational culture and practices**

- What are the essential components of a strong shared housing approach? How do differently sized and resourced organizations implement these components in the way they support their clients?
- What systems and structures need to be in place to deploy a strong shared housing option in public or community-based organizations that provide housing assistance? How can the organizational and wider community culture addressing homelessness drive clients' education and choice around their housing options?

### **Participant experiences**

- What proportion of people placed into shared housing are in stable housing a year later? What resident experiences support or hinder housing stability?
- What proportion of people placed into shared housing experience increased social connectedness and reduced loneliness and isolation a year later? How does the quality of housemate relationships influence residents' overall well-being?

### **Structural influences**

- How do housing stability and social connectedness outcomes differ by service population and variations in shared housing service models? How might certain participant characteristics, contextual factors, and supportive services moderate these outcomes?
- What are some common profiles and trajectories of shared housing residents through the continuum of care and other social service systems over 12 months?

## **What's Next?**

MDRC has launched study activities with five of the eight organizations that participated in *Shared Learning on Shared Housing*. The study's findings, planned for release in 2026, will feature participating organizations, including where they operate and the various homelessness assistance services they provide; assess the promise of shared housing for improving housing stability and social connectedness; and discuss the implications for practice and further research.

The shared housing evaluation fills a critical evidence gap and provides timely and valuable guidance to the field about the promise of shared housing as a pathway to housing stability and well-being.

Its contributions could be useful for federal, state, and local governments and community-based organizations to address the growing homelessness and loneliness epidemics in cities across the country. Findings may guide the expansion of affordable housing options to address homelessness, the considerations of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in funding flexibility allowances, the improvement of strategies for landlord incentives and engagement, and the emergence of new conversations around local zoning rules and regulations.

## Notes and References

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10. A learning agenda is a set of activities through which stakeholders set research priorities and identify questions to serve as a guiding framework for an evaluation. See the U.S. General Services Administration's Office of Evaluation Services, "Learning Agenda Overview" (website: [https://oes.gsa.gov/assets/toolkits/Learning\\_Agenda\\_Overview.pdf](https://oes.gsa.gov/assets/toolkits/Learning_Agenda_Overview.pdf), n.d.).
11. In the context of considerations for homelessness assistance, people with "high-acuity" needs have a combination of high behavioral health needs, substance use disorder, or experiences of chronic homelessness. See King County Regional Homelessness Authority, "Definitions" (website: <https://kcrha.org/resources/definitions>, 2022).

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