



SAN DIEGO
Regional Task Force
on the Homeless

Shared Housing in San Diego

*A HOUSING OPTION NORM THAT INCREASES ACCESS,
AFFORDABILITY, AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS*



Prepared for the Regional Task Force on the Homeless

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We're 7 million units short of enough affordable housing, and we won't fill that anytime soon. So people will have to share,"¹

Nan Roman, President and CEO, National Alliance to End Homelessness

¹ Dec 2020 - Under one roof: U.S. cities look to co-living to ease housing crisis: <https://news.trust.org/item/20201215111858-2n2we/>

From the Regional Task Force on the Homeless

Shared housing is an extremely common housing option for San Diegans, given our high cost rental market. Many of us either currently or at some point in our lives have lived with roommates either as way to afford the rent, be with friends or family to have built in supports, and in many circumstances both. Shared housing needs to be part of our practice in the homeless response system and a go to housing option as we support individuals, Veterans, youth, and families to exit homelessness. Although a logical housing option, shared housing can present challenges such as messaging it to those experiencing homelessness as a viable housing setting, engaging with landlords to have multiple people in a unit, and ensuring strategies are in place to address conflicts among roommates that may arise. No doubt these are challenges but they are not insurmountable obstacles.

It should be noted that shared housing as a homeless strategy is not new. We know that a common housing exit destination when we look our regional Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data is for people to move in with friends or family. People have been moving out of homelessness into shared settings forever, however it is now time for the homeless system to enhance our shared housing capacity, promote the approach, and refine the practice from start to finish.

It is the hope that this paper provides a foundation for what shared housing is along with key components. It builds on a prior toolkit developed last year with support from Funders Together to End Homelessness San Diego (FTEHSD) and a recent Shared Housing Forum in October 2020 that brought together national shared housing experts and San Diego stakeholders to learn, discuss, and innovate system-wide strategies. This paper anchors the Shared Housing Forum and learnings. It was prepared by Jamie Taylor, PhD for the Regional Task Force on the Homeless and funded by the State of California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) in collaboration with the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH). We hope it can help continue to build a solid foundation for our understanding of shared housing and aid in our uptake and refinement of a shared housing system-wide practice.

Shared Housing Overview

Shared housing, defined here as two or more unrelated people who live in a permanent rental home and share housing costs, offers a cost-effective option to prevent and end homelessness for people from all income levels, including extremely low-income people. Across the country, COVID-19 created both an unprecedented crisis of economic insecurity, and an unprecedented opportunity to end homelessness. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided a significant infusion of funding that can expand shared housing options in all parts of the country. Maximizing the use of this new housing assistance, i.e. the funding from the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Emergency Solution Grants (ESG) and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), allows for a systemic mobilization of this crisis-based funding to optimize shared housing opportunities. The result -- a rapid expansion of rental housing options in high-cost housing markets is an opportunity that can accelerate system-wide exiting of people out of homelessness.

Additionally, existing rental assistance resources for Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) and Rapid Re-Housing (RRH) can be used for shared housing placements. This includes the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, the Veterans Administration Supportive Housing (VASH) program, all CoC funded PSH and RRH including projects funded through the Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP) grant, and other RRH programs such as the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) programs.

The purpose of this white paper is to present the shared housing potential and need in San Diego, discussing effective shared housing practices and lessons learned from communities across the country, and provide a foundation for a system-wide shared housing practice.

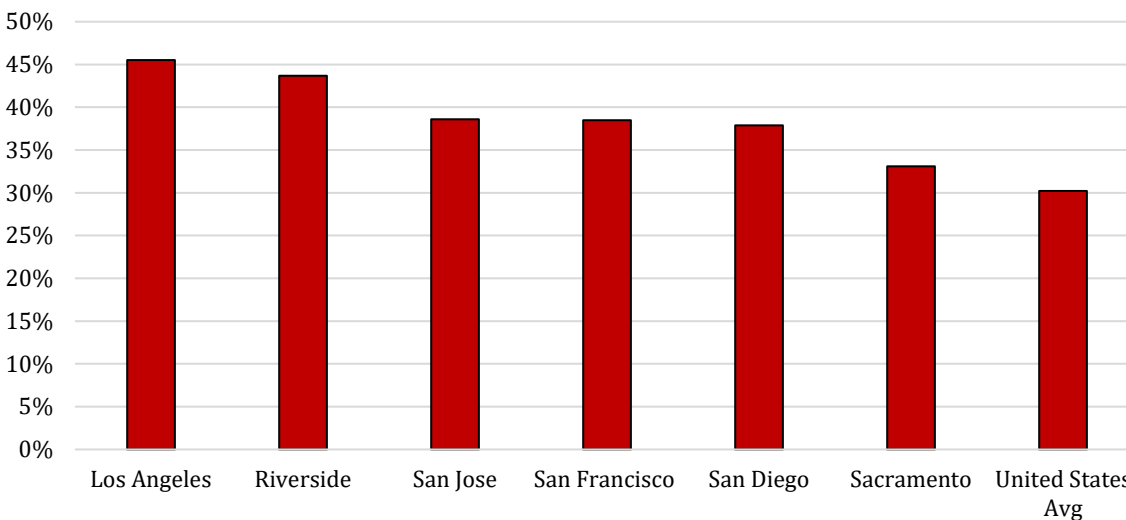
The Need for System-wide Shared Housing Options

With COVID-19 increasing the risk of homelessness, combined with the clarity of public understanding that housing is healthcare, it is evident that the time to explore and deploy every possible strategy to increase housing affordability and long-term stability is *now*. Ending homelessness now requires intensifying and maximizing every possible housing opportunity, finding new ways to engage the private rental market in order to effectively increase options that lead to permanent housing and rapid movement back to community. The expansion of shared housing is a critical pathway to finding a home for the thousands of individuals experiencing homelessness in San Diego.

Shared housing is a norm found in every high-cost housing market. In San Diego, Los Angeles, the Bay Area, and Sacramento, the percentage of adults living with roommates is approximately 40%. Figure 1 below depicts a well-known reality for all income level households; shared housing is a normative experience in expensive housing markets. In 2019, the population of San Diego county was over 3.3 million, with over 1.4 million people renting their home (44%)². Almost half of that renter population in San Diego currently lives in shared housing.

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2019 1-Year Estimates*

Figure 1. Percentage of Adults in General Population Living with Roommates (2017) ³



The Financial Reality

The potential rapid expansion of shared housing options for people moving out of homelessness can be found in private housing market data. In 2018, the 1.4 million renters living in San Diego county resided in 530,366 renter housing units. At the same time, over 82% of all San Diego county rental housing had two or more bedrooms,⁴ and over 93,000 of these rental units were vacant (4.3%). With a 4.3% vacancy rate, the data indicates that landlords in San Diego could well be interested in shared housing that moves people out of homelessness if they knew rent would be met and vacancies covered.

There has never been a greater need nor a greater opportunity to match rental vacancies with shared housing opportunities that can end homelessness. To keep individuals and communities safe and healthy, every single person experiencing homelessness requires a place to call home. On August 31, 2020 there were 2,480 people in emergency shelters across San Diego County, with over 8,000 people actively connected to Street Outreach. Of the 2,480 people who were in emergency shelters on August 31st, 2020, 624 persons (25%) had incomes of \$1,000 or more⁵ (see Figure 2 below). With effective system-wide shared housing processes, housing options could be quickly increased for people with income currently living in San Diego shelters. For example, to afford the current Fair Market Rent (FMR) rate of a multiple bedroom unit, four unrelated people living in shelter with varying income levels over \$1,000 could be matched together to meet the 4-bedroom FMR rate of \$3,576. With shared housing, these four individuals experiencing homelessness would be able to afford a 4-bedroom unit themselves.

FMR's, established by HUD, set the amount of rent that HUD housing assistance will pay when supporting short-term or long-term housing placements. For example, in San Diego County, the FMR for a 0-bedroom unit is \$1,404, for a 2-bedroom unit is \$2,037, and for a 4-bedroom is \$3,576⁶.

³ Zillow (2017) Share of Adults Living with Roommates Higher than Ever Before <http://zillow.mediaroom.com/2017-12-14-Share-of-Adults-Living-with-Roommates-Higher-than-Ever-Before>

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, 2019 1-Year Estimates*

⁵ Regional Task Force on the Homeless (RTFH) Community Performance Dashboard: <https://homelessdata.com/dashboard/rtfh/community-performance-dashboard/>

⁶ Fair Market Rents 2021, HUDUser.gov <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr.html>

A four-bedroom unit could be used to house four people in shared housing, matching individuals who have income, and/or connecting some tenants with housing assistance support.

With expanded funding for RRH under the federal COVID response CARES Act, RRH assistance can be used to supplement housing costs for qualifying individuals. For up to a year, or more, people who move out of homelessness into shared housing could receive a bridge of housing assistance that provides a span of time and security while individuals return to work and/or increase income options. Having a place to call home that is neither a shelter bed nor living on the streets provides opportunities for stability, community connections, improved self-efficacy, and earnings. Without a home address it is very difficult to apply for jobs and without a home at all, stability and safety is not rooted in one’s daily life. When faced with high housing costs, and a shortage of affordable housing, shared housing can be one of many housing solutions to prevent and end homelessness in San Diego County; eventually becoming a natural and rapid solution that expands housing options for people willing to move into a shared residence.

Figure 2. RTFH Community Performance Dashboard Monthly Income by Age 8/31/2020*

| Monthly Income by Age | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------------|
| Income Group | Under 5 | 5-12 | 13-17 | 18-24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-61 | 62+ | Unknown A.. |
| No Income | 3 | 3 | 4 | 220 | 516 | 510 | 538 | 387 | 248 | 5 |
| \$1 - \$150 | | | 1 | 2 | 5 | 6 | 10 | 8 | 2 | |
| \$151 - \$250 | | | | 2 | 8 | 15 | 10 | 4 | 2 | |
| \$251 - \$500 | | | | 18 | 52 | 62 | 66 | 51 | 20 | |
| \$501 - \$1,000 | 2 | 1 | | 32 | 97 | 93 | 124 | 131 | 145 | |
| \$1,001 - \$1,500 | | 1 | | 6 | 49 | 56 | 87 | 69 | 111 | |
| \$1,501 - \$2,000 | | | | 2 | 29 | 23 | 20 | 15 | 14 | |
| \$2,000+ | | | | 2 | 29 | 29 | 22 | 14 | 27 | |

*Table shows all persons “Active” in San Diego Emergency Shelters on 8/31/2020

Benefits of Shared Housing

A national shared housing review of existing shared housing programs, funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and Funders Together to End Homelessness San Diego (FTEHSD), found shared housing to be a valuable and sustaining housing option for all populations experiencing homelessness. Effective shared housing programs that implement personal choice as the core tenet of success were found to be cost-effective in moving people out of homelessness, and often beneficial in reducing social isolation and loneliness. Expanding shared housing as a valid housing solution involves first, the cultural acceptance that shared housing is a norm in most urban and high-cost communities and second, that it is an important and timely tool when housing options are severely limited for people exiting homelessness.

Community benefits of shared housing include:

- Expansion of a normative experience in high cost-housing markets, whereby roommates are the norm, and shared housing expands that norm for people moving out of homelessness
- Maximization of rental opportunities in tight rental markets
- Reduction of housing costs for households with very low incomes.
- No requirement for new construction, though shared housing is cost-effective when included in new construction models

- Decreased isolation and the creation of natural support systems.
- Increased long-term permanent placements
- Increased short-term housing options that can bridge to long-term housing
- Local community connection
- Decreased homelessness

Shared housing provides a way to strategically expand housing options and enhance the entire homeless response system. Shared housing has been found to be most effective when deeply grounded in client-centered services and partnered with strong landlord engagement services.

Shared Housing Features and Models

Shared housing models have multiple variations. Most successful shared housing is found with apartments or homes that have no more than four bedrooms per shared dwelling, provide each tenant with a choice of roommates and an individual lease, and other features such as having multiple refrigerators and doors that can lock have proven beneficial. As mentioned earlier, HUD programs support shared housing, including: the HCV program, ESG, CDBG, CoC rental assistance, SSVF, VASH, HOME Tenant Based Rental Assistance (TBRA), and Housing Opportunities for People with Aids (HOPWA) programs. Additionally, many of the funding sources through the state of California, such as the Homeless Emergency Aid Program (HEAP), Homeless Housing Assistance and Prevention Program (HHAP), and No Place Like Home also can be utilized for shared housing placements.

For many of these funding sources to be used for shared housing, there are a few critical aspects that need to be incorporated. Like all effective housing assistance, client choice is at the center of the shared housing approach, allowing individual choice in opting-in to a shared housing situation. Client choice is a cornerstone of the Housing First model, and the necessary foundation for effective shared housing outcomes, as well as a requirement for all housing programs funded with federal and state funds. Similarly, the quality of the housing needs to be dignified and pass necessary quality inspections. These funding sources also require that tenants have the ability to enter into their own lease and be able to exit a shared housing agreement at any time.

Below are the most common shared housing models:

- 1. Landlords and/or Homeowners rent out multi-bedroom apartments or homes:** Individuals may choose to apply for housing together with a friend/s or may have choice with a roommate match offered by a service agency. This is the most widespread approach, whereby landlords rent out multi-bedroom apartments or single-family homes, to two or more unrelated individuals or households. In all HUD-funded shared housing programs, each tenant holds their own lease with the landlord or with an agency that holds the master-lease.
- 2. Home-sharing Model:** Homeowners who live in their home may lease one or more rooms in exchange for rent or services. Homeless service providers most often consider this model for specific sub-populations such as seniors or youth. HUD assistance funding can also be used for home-sharing models when the owner and tenant are unrelated, and the owner does not also receive HUD assistance.

3. **Interim / Bridge / Recovery Housing:** Interim housing programs provide a bridge between homelessness and permanent housing and can offer shared living options which are time limited. Recovery Housing, as shared housing, is generally a residence-based program whereby individuals may choose substance use recovery services and accept time-limited, shared living accommodations while working through a recovery program. Other models such as Sober Living Homes or similar programs may allow people to stay on a permanent basis however their tenancy is often contingent on sobriety or other program participation requirements. Participants may have a landlord lease instead of a tenant lease, with tenancy rights delineated in written agreements.
4. **New Construction:** Driven by the goal to keep per unit construction costs down and increase the number of households housed per unit, building shared housing units into the design of new construction for affordable housing is an evolving practice. Successful new construction modes that include shared housing have focused on innovating housing typologies such as modular structures, and service partners who support client choice and effective shared housing practices.

Emerging Effective Shared Housing Practices

While shared housing “best practices” have not yet been established, programs across the country are finding success in shared housing to effectively house a variety of subpopulations of people who were previously experiencing homelessness, including single adults, older adults, Veterans, transitional-age youth, individuals in substance use recovery, and people exiting chronic homelessness. To optimize shared housing across the San Diego county, several contextual factors require consideration when developing or expanding this housing model. The critical contextual factors and emerging essential components for successful shared housing are discussed below.

Findings suggest there are three essential components in all effective shared housing programs. These include: 1) client messaging, and roommate match practices that keep client choice at the center; 2) landlord outreach and supports that ensure help with tenant conflict, and 3) client-centered housing stability services. In most shared housing programs serving people exiting homelessness, non-profit organizations in the homeless services field lead the work of implementing these essential components.

1. **Framing the Shared Housing Message and Roommate Matching:** By committing to client/tenant choice as a foundational practice, staff members help to ensure programmatic success in shared housing, with clients themselves understanding and choosing shared housing benefits. Shared housing does not replace other housing approaches but rather expands housing options; with staff providing effective framing of shared housing that supports client knowledge about shared housing options in their own region. To decrease conflict, roommate-matching tools have been utilized in effective shared housing programs, even as matching processes vary across the field. Some shared housing programs include the use of matching surveys, while others discuss directly with clients their initial lists of “deal-breakers” for living with other housemates.

Effective shared housing programs often arrange for both an initial interest match and opportunities for potential roommates to determine if they want to move in together. Meet and Greet events have been arranged to occur monthly in some housing markets, where potential roommates have discussions about “deal breakers” as the next level of the roommate match process. Roommate matching can also occur based on housing prioritization lists. With the continued threat and spread of COVID-19, many housing markets are matching roommates quickly, supporting the right to choose shared housing as a solution to staying in a crowded shelter. Shared housing is often “sold” to clients as a bridge to longer-term housing goals and not a forever situation. In some markets, agencies are piloting the use of financial incentives to persuade individuals to agree to a shared housing situation rather than living alone.

- 2. Landlord Engagement and Supports:** Ideally, the homeless service provider or homeless system looking to implement a shared housing approach has a dedicated staff person or team that cultivates relationships with landlords and property owners. Successful shared housing programs have found it helpful to train housing staff to be flexible in their support role with landlords. Building a sustained shared housing culture with landlords takes time, patience, transparency, and sustained flexibility to meet landlord needs. Housing liaisons should provide assurances to landlords that they, or their partner service providers, will help prospective tenants with critical aspects of housing stability and that support will be available if the need for conflict mediation arises between roommates. Additionally, some landlord engagement strategies offer “vacancy-loss” compensation to a landlord if a client has to move out and there’s a gap in rent while a new tenant is found.
- 3. Housing Stability Services:** An additional critical practice for effective shared housing programs serving vulnerable homeless populations is person-centered housing stabilization. Some individuals exiting homelessness need an initial level of intentional supports prior to move-in, such as coordination of housing appointments, completing applications and documentation, and move-in assistance. Housing staff can also help their clients learn about tenancy rights and responsibilities. Providers can ensure staff members are trained to effectively support individuals with disabilities and special needs in shared housing. In 2016, the California Legislature passed Senate Bill 1380 requiring all housing programs to adopt the Housing First model. For all homeless funded services, the state of California requires these key “core components”:
 - Housing applicants are not rejected based on poor credit, rental history, or criminal convictions unrelated to tenancy, or a lack of "housing readiness."
 - Supportive services emphasize engagement and problem-solving goal planning. Participation in services or program compliance is not a condition of housing.
 - Tenants have a lease and all the rights and responsibilities of tenancy and the use of alcohol or drugs, without other lease violations, is not a reason for eviction.

- Case managers actively employ evidence-based practices for engagement, including motivational interviewing, and client-centered counseling.

Similar to non-shared housing settings, once housed, most tenants benefit from some level of on-going housing stability services. Linkages to community-based services are important, such as entitlement access, connections to culturally specific supports, employment, health and behavioral health services, faith-based and legal services. Housing stability specialists can help tenants learn about where to grocery shop, how to use local public transportation, and ways to make meaningful connections in their communities. The level of intensity of these services will vary based on the needs of each tenant. For many tenants, lighter-touch services with occasional housing service check-ins with roommates and landlords will be sufficient. For others, a full supportive housing approach will be needed. When providing case management to individuals in shared housing who need an intensive level of supports, services should mirror those of Housing First best practices. Staff-to-client ratios should be relatively low when placements are in shared housing that is permanent supportive housing. Shared housing and RRH support is aligned with the service needs of each individual client, as in all RRH programs.

Effective shared housing programs most often have staff who have completed some type of conflict resolution training or have dedicated staff who specialize in conflict mediation services. Supporting client skills to address roommate conflict is unique to shared housing placements and specific staff training and guidance is useful but not always necessary if staff are deeply trained in trauma-informed care, and/or motivational interviewing and problem-solving. If it becomes apparent that a roommate match is not going to remain effective, it is up to the provider to move one or both roommates to a new place if the initial match does not work out. Trainings for shared housing staff could include client messaging for shared housing, shared housing and RRH, trauma-informed care, housing first, conflict mediation, cultural competency, budgeting, and motivational interviewing, all which support client-centered approaches to housing stabilization.

Next Steps for Shared Housing System Approach in San Diego

Shared housing encompasses multiple models and approaches. Shared housing offers a rapid expansion of options for most individuals experiencing, and at risk of, homelessness, utilizing existing housing supply and eliminating the long waiting period associated with other affordable housing solutions. Shared housing is a critical component of all plans for rapidly and successfully moving people out of homelessness into strengthened relationships, community connections and a permanent place to call home.

Though extremely limited, research evidence for shared housing has shown that for the general population, shared housing is associated with reduced loneliness, isolation, depression, increased happiness, and safety.⁷ Shared housing has also been found to be associated with reduced

⁷ *Harvard Health Letter* The health benefits of shared living. Published: May 2018.

psychotic symptomology⁸, but before best practice claims can be made, there is a long road ahead of future evaluation of shared housing programs serving people moving out of homelessness. Essential practices linked with effective shared housing programs have established a visible pathway for expanding this option for people who choose to live with a housemate.

To establish a system-wide approach for expanding shared housing, San Diego leaders, providers, and frontline staff must deploy effective outreach messaging to both clients and landlords about shared housing; build an extensive landlord network for shared housing across the County, establish standard roommate matching guidelines and processes, and promote high-quality housing stability practices that include a conflict mediation component.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted deep, structural housing inequities that have existed for decades in San Diego. This call for system-wide shared housing as one of our key housing solutions motivated by our current crisis, and opportunity; focusing all efforts on housing every single one of us, now required for individual and community health, well-being, and economic strength.

⁸ He, Y., O'Flaherty, B., & Rosenheck, R. A. (2010). Is shared housing a way to reduce homelessness? The effect of household arrangements on formerly homeless people. *Journal of Housing Economics*, 19(1), 1-12.