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Purpose

As part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and in response to COVID-19, many communities will receive significant new allocations of Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) funds that can be used to quickly rehouse individuals and families experiencing homelessness and disproportionately at risk of COVID-19. Continuums of Care (CoCs) should leverage this moment to deploy surge strategies to swiftly rehouse households experiencing homelessness. This document describes how to use a housing surge to quickly move people into housing, details the key components of a housing surge, outlines the steps and best practices for operationalizing a housing surge in the context of COVID-19, and provides examples of housing surges implemented in communities in different situations. Equity tips are included in each section.

Use a “Housing Surge” Strategy to Quickly Move People Into Housing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 has presented new and urgent health and safety needs that necessitate expedited and efficient processes to swiftly rehouse people experiencing homelessness. The pandemic has generated a combination of political will, unprecedented collaboration within communities, and an influx of resources, all of which create an ideal environment for the deployment of a strategy that has proven successful in similar situations: the “housing surge.”

A “housing surge” is a concentrated, time-limited community effort through which key stakeholders collaborate to connect a targeted group of households to a pre-identified pool of housing subsidies and units as well as other resources and services in order to house a large number of people in a short time frame. Housing surges have been used to quickly rehouse people during and after natural disasters, to quickly deploy large amounts of new resources, and to target groups or people experiencing homelessness that may require special considerations, such as veterans, older adults, or youth. The housing surge expedites the housing process by streamlining procedures and creating temporary mechanisms (such as a pool of vacant units, pre-inspections, and same-day application processing) that break through common procedural delays in rehousing (e.g. unit identification, inspections, check processing, etc.).

Key Components of a Successful Housing Surge

- **Demonstrated Need**—a clear and specific target population of households to be served.
- **Political Will and Strong Coordination**—resources, coordination around planning, and implementation support from a group of local governmental leaders, nonprofits, business partners, philanthropists, and grassroots organizations to mobilize the housing surge.
- **Targeted Public and Private Program Funding**—rental assistance, services funding, and flexible funding for other needs (e.g. landlord incentives, furniture, etc.).
- **Pool of Housing Units and Strong Landlord Relationships**—a stock of units available immediately that landlords commit to filling with surge participants.
- **Strong Rehousing Programs and Services**—fully-staffed programs with the capacity to manage an influx of new clients and front-line and administrative workers trained in the housing surge protocols/expectations.
- **Strong Partnerships for Supportive Services**—integrating services to protect people experiencing homelessness can assist communities to transition from crisis response to rehousing.

Operational Steps to Create and Implement a Housing Surge in the COVID-19 Environment

Steps (with link to section)	Key Tasks
Step 1: Convene Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• CoC and ESG leaders recruit and lead a planning group of rapid rehousing (RRH) providers, coordinated entry system (CES) and housing navigation staff, outreach providers, landlords, private funders, elected officials, service providers, people with lived experience, and other key stakeholders.

Step 2: Identify Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify available housing subsidies and other resources to be used during the surge. Identify adequate services to support the needs of households in the rehousing effort.
Step 3: Define Parameters of Housing Surge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the target population and number of households to be served through the surge. Set a target length of time for the surge.
Step 4: Create a Pool of Housing Units and Landlord Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct outreach to local landlords. Designate a lead agency to centralize landlord recruitment. Create a pool of vacant units committed to serving surge participants.
Step 5: Expedite and Streamline the Rehousing Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a process map. Create a one-stop shop for housing identification and navigation. Prepare and Support the Rehousing Team to implement the surge.
Step 6: Track Outcomes and Engage in Continuous Quality Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track household outcomes and housing unit outcomes in real time. Review results frequently throughout the surge to measure progress against goals and to flag inequitable outcomes. Make timely adjustments as necessary to address any issues identified.

Step 1. Convene Key Partners

Establish a transparent organizing framework for the housing surge strategy by creating a planning group with relevant stakeholders that have the power to align resources to achieve a community goal. Key partners for a housing surge include:

- [Homeless system funders and coordinators](#)—CoC and ESG leadership
- [Other resource holders](#)—Public Housing Agencies (PHAs), private funders that can provide furniture or security deposit funding, landlords, and landlord associations
- [RRH agencies](#)—will serve as the primary staff for a COVID-19 housing surge funded heavily by ESG-CV funds for RRH
- [Other housing and supportive service providers](#)—representatives from other government agencies, health and behavioral health providers, permanent supportive housing (PSH) providers, and any other organizations that have services to which surge participants could be connected
- [People with lived experience](#)—it is important to have people currently experiencing homelessness and people who are receiving homeless assistance involved at the inception and throughout the planning and implementation process

Leverage the urgency of the COVID-19 environment and collaboration already underway in your community to build political will for a housing surge. Use this momentum to achieve community goals around ending homelessness and reducing the spread of COVID-19. Set clear goals for the group (aligned with the tasks outlined in Steps 2–6) and assign roles for participants, including setting time frames and assigning follow-up work. Use video conferencing technology to bring the group together regularly (from daily or more frequently during a very short surge to weekly for a longer surge period) throughout the planning stage, during the implementation of the surge (to monitor outcomes and make course corrections as necessary), and immediately afterward (to review outcomes and lessons learned).

In the COVID-19 environment, ESG and CoC leads are often meeting with many of the key players necessary for a surge on a regular basis, including government housing and services agencies, housing providers, and local elected leaders. Although it may be convenient to use these regular working groups or standing meeting times to have planning discussions about a surge, ensure that other stakeholders necessary to developing an effective, inclusive process (e.g. landlords/landlord organizations and private funders) are also included during meetings focused on planning for the surge. Include service providers and others that have expertise in serving underserved populations including Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, youth, and other groups in the planning team.

One person or a small group of people will need to have ownership and responsibility for the implementation of the group process and keeping the planning group moving forward. This person or group will be responsible for orienting the planning group toward action and needs to have perceived authority to do so. They will need to arrange standing meetings and create a standing agenda for every meeting that includes but is not limited to: accountability to tasks from prior meetings and calls, time to discuss challenges in process or emerging issues, and a clear set of tasks with responsible actors and timelines. Make the set of tasks accessible to review and update using whatever platform you have available—shared cloud documents and folders, project management software, or a similar information organization tool that can be revisited outside meetings.

Tips from the field: Political will and buy-in from high-level community leaders help ensure the right decision-makers are at the table and that they are willing to commit the time, resources, and flexibility needed to operationalize a housing surge.

Step 2. Identify Resources

Target a significant portion of your CARES Act ESG-CV allocation to fund RRH for the target population identified for the surge. In addition, explore other federal, state, and local resources that can be leveraged and targeted for the surge, such as those listed below.

- **Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV)** are a key source of long-term rental assistance that can be used during a surge to house people experiencing homelessness, or after a surge to provide a sustainable source of support for tenants unable to maintain housing without ongoing support. Per [PIH Notice 2020-05](#), PHAs have increased flexibility to streamline and expedite processes around the HCV Program, including Administrative Plan changes (which can be used to adopt or expand preferences for people experiencing homelessness or [Moving On](#) from permanent supportive housing or RRH programs), briefings, and inspections, among others.
- **Vacancies in CoC-funded programs** can fill gaps if there are not enough ESG-CV resources available to rapidly rehouse all the households targeted for the surge. PSH programs and their intensive supports are an ideal intervention for the highest-need households. If PSH is not available at the time of the surge, use RRH resources to quickly house all target households and then work to identify which households may need to transfer into PSH to maintain long-term stability. For people who are seeking transitional housing settings (for example, people in recovery from a substance use disorder), look to transitional housing programs that can meet those needs.
- **Private funding** from foundations, banks, local businesses, and other sources are key to funding costs ineligible under HUD programs such as furniture, move-in supplies, and landlord incentives like unit hold fees.
- **Service partners** like primary and behavioral healthcare; employment and vocational rehabilitation; financial, credit and legal services; SSI/SSDI Outreach Access and Recovery (SOAR) or income support; domestic violence and sex and labor trafficking services; and benefits screening and enrollment all play a key role in stabilizing households according to their specific service needs.

Step 3. Define the Parameters of the Surge

Identify the target population, how many households you expect to be able to house, and the period of time over which the surge will take place.

Target Population and Number of Households

Set a clear, specific, and aggressive goal that takes local needs and available resources into account. To maximize efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, concentrate efforts on housing people in three key groups:

- People experiencing unsheltered homelessness
- People in congregate shelters with shared sleeping areas
- People temporarily housed in non-congregate shelter settings, such as hotels and motels, that will return to unsheltered or congregate locations if not connected to permanent housing

Set an aggressive target based on the local need, but also ensure that sufficient resources will be available to serve all of the targeted households.

Example: Community A will use a housing surge to deploy ESG-CV funding for RRH to rapidly house 80 households, representing 100% of households currently residing in the three non-congregate shelters set to close on August 15, 2020. The surge will take place from August 3 to August 5.

Planners will need to ensure that all households experiencing homelessness are screened for eligibility for ESG-CV RRH (note that income can be up to 50% of Area Median Income for the ESG-CV funds), and use the CES to identify a group of households prioritized for assistance. Please note that planners may need to review and update CES prioritization and other policies in light of the changes surrounding COVID-19. While identifying the target group, focus on reducing inequities specifically for Black and indigenous populations disproportionately impacted by homelessness and COVID-19.

Timeline for the Surge

Set an aggressive timeline for planning efforts and the shortest period of time reasonable for the surge itself, depending on the staff capacity of housing and service providers that can be made available, the number of households expected to be served, and the model being used for the surge. Some housing surges are designed to take place over one day, during which every partner makes themselves available throughout the day and clients move through multiple stages (e.g. housing program application, housing “search” from the committed pool of units, application to the landlord, etc.) in one day. This could still be possible in the COVID-19 environment (see the [Create a “One-Stop Shop” for Participants](#) section of this guide for suggestions on how to operationalize this model), but it may be more realistic to plan for a multi-day surge. Keep in mind that the timeline cannot be based on “business as usual” expectations of timing and processes—the point of a surge is to leverage political will, intense collaboration, and a significant commitment of resources to be able to rehouse a large group of people in a very compressed time frame.

Step 4. Create the Pool of Housing Units and Landlord Relationships

Willing landlords with vacant units are critical to an effective housing surge; having a pool of units that are available immediately dramatically expedites the housing process by cutting out the time usually eaten up with a housing search. Centralize landlord engagement and the search for housing units by designating a single lead agency or small task force responsible for creating the housing pool—this will reduce duplication of efforts and competition for the same units. For tips on engaging landlords, see [LL Engagement: Reset your Community's Critical Partnerships During COVID Response](#). Set expectations so that members of the planning team with landlord relationships or leads on units will provide these to the lead agency.

Outreach

Although only one agency may be responsible for working with landlords to populate the housing pool, other planning team members have an important role to play in outreach. Key outreach activities are as follows:

- During early planning meetings, develop a coordinated outreach strategy. Tap communications teams of participating agencies or consider hiring an external firm to work with the planning team to create and refine messaging and materials.
- Elected officials should put a call out to the public to recruit landlords and direct responses to the lead agency.
- Connect with a local real estate research company and request a market research report that includes a list of all HUD Multi-family “B” and “C” class properties in the community.
- Connect with state and/or local apartment and building owner associations to make their members aware of the need and the benefits of participating through virtual meetings or by drafting an email blast for leadership to send to members.

- Leverage existing relationships with landlords known to have units that meet HUD standards for inspections as well as rent reasonableness, Fair Market Rent (FMR), or other funding requirements. Ask these landlords if they have vacant units that they are willing to commit to a housing surge effort.
- Identify new landlords with units that can be committed to the surge.

Recruitment

When recruiting landlords, provide clear and transparent messaging on expectations and roles.

Expectations of the Landlord	Expectations of the Housing Surge Organizers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commit to providing one or more units available for immediate occupancy to households targeted in the housing surge • Provide pictures or a virtual tour of the available unit(s) to prospective tenants • Ensure that all units committed meet rent reasonableness standards • Allow inspections, if required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect landlords with a tenant during the surge period, reducing their need to market and show the unit and process multiple applications • Connect landlords to tenant households that will receive rental assistance and services designed to help them maintain housing stability and ensure they can keep up with their rent payments. This will include support to the landlord around any issues for as long as the provider is connected to the client

When engaging and recruiting landlords, work to maximize not only the total number of units available for the pool, but also:

- The availability of options for households of different sizes
- Accessible options (e.g. first floor or in a building with an elevator) for people with disabilities
- Units in a range of neighborhoods with access to critical resources including transportation, health care, education, and other key services

Work to affirmatively further fair housing and use the surge as an opportunity to combat historic patterns of segregation by seeking units outside of racially and ethnically concentrated areas of poverty and in neighborhoods with access to quality education, jobs, and other resources.

Tips from the field: To attract more landlords, work with private funders to create incentives:

- Set up a risk mitigation fund that can be drawn on in cases of excessive damage to the unit, lost rent, or legal fees that exceed the amount of the security deposit. For examples, see United States Interagency Council on Homelessness's [Engaging Landlords: Risk Mitigation Funds Community Profiles](#).
- Set aside funds for one-time landlord bonus/incentive payments for participating in the surge. This strategy has been successful in many communities. For examples, see [The New York City Department of Homeless Services' Veteran Housing Rental Incentives](#) and [San Diego's Landlord Incentive Program](#).
- Use flexible funds to pay a holding deposit to landlords who agree to keep a vacant unit off the market until the surge.

Another tactic for incentivizing landlords is for RRH providers to guarantee that they will cut a check for landlords on the same day as the lease signing, demonstrating their ability to offer landlords efficient and timely rental assistance administration.

Creating the Pool

The agency designated as the lead for landlord engagement will collect information on all committed landlords and units including:

- Landlord contact information
- Unit address

- Unit size (number of bedrooms and bathrooms)
- Rent (pre-check for rent reasonableness and FMR)
- Key features and neighborhood information
- Accessibility
- Date available
- Photos or videos

Use SmartSheet, a Data Management System, or a web-based spreadsheet to populate and track the units and make status updates in real time. Develop protocols for use of the document by collaborators including who is authorized to view, who is authorized to update specific sections, and who is responsible for quality assurance.

Step 5. Expedite and Streamline the Rehousing Process

Key steps in the development of the surge include creating a process map, setting up the client-facing “One-Stop Shop,” and assembling and supporting a strong, effective, and compassionate rehousing team.

Create a Process Map

Develop a map for a surge process that bypasses or changes typical procedures in order to expedite the housing process and enable participants to move from engagement to placement in hours or days, instead of weeks or months. Develop the map during a live meeting with all key stakeholders participating in a web conference, ideally with the ability for everyone to see the draft process as it is being mapped out on-screen. Use the map to visualize all the steps that will be required in order to move a household through the surge process including, at a minimum:

- Outreach to eligible, targeted households
- Connection to a housing navigator (CES or RRH staff) and completion of program intake documents
- Housing navigation to assist client with selecting one of the units from the pool, allowing for client choice to the greatest extent possible (understanding that this is often very limited when project basing or master leasing)
- Apartment application paperwork and background checks, if applicable
- Housing inspection and lease-up process (lease signing, coordinating rental assistance payment requests with financial assistance administration)
- Warm hand-off to rehousing case management
- Support with the move-in process (providing connection to move-in resources for furniture, arranging for transportation)
- Start of ongoing case management to provide housing-focused supportive services and connections to other resources as requested (e.g. health care, mental health, public benefits, nutrition assistance, etc.)

For each step, identify the target timeline, the partner responsible for implementation, and the key documentation needed from participants and the sub-steps for administrative processes. Standardize administrative documents such as Rental Assistance Agreements and other forms for all participating RRH providers to ensure that landlords have the same experience regardless of which providers with whom they are working. Discuss how to increase access to the surge by vulnerable populations and to identify ways to use the surge to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in the community.

For an example of a process map, see the “Housing Navigation Services” section of the [Back@Home Handbook](#) developed for a [2018 housing surge in North Carolina](#).

Create a “One-Stop Shop” for Participants

Many housing surges involve a physical housing fair-style setup where participants can connect with all of the people and resources they need on one day (or a series of days) at a single site. In the COVID-19 environment, communities will need to adapt the model to find a way to safely provide a similar level of intensive engagement and support to participating households. If your community has non-congregate shelters in a hotel or motel with meeting space available, you may consider setting up an on-site access center that follows social distancing protocols and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) procedural considerations and provides personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and attendees. In a hybrid in-person and virtual model, providers and resource holders (e.g. landlords and administrative staff from RRH and other programs) can be brought into the on-site access center virtually through live-streaming video feeds to computer or tablet stations in the center.

Another option is to create a virtual fair where participants use a computer or phone to connect by video with a navigator that can bring different providers into the conference as they move through the process. For example, a navigator could work with the tenant to electronically complete and virtually sign forms for an RRH program. The navigator could then conference in a participating landlord who could share their screen and offer a live virtual tour of an apartment or provide photos/videos and answer questions. If electronic document completion does not work for participants or participating agencies, providers will need to have staff ready to deliver paper forms to participants, collect the completed forms, and scan or enter the information remotely in real time to expedite the process.

When using a model that includes any kind of virtual technology (e.g. phone or video calls, live-streamed housing tours, etc.), ensure that participants have the equipment they need to participate and that the technology is accessible for people with visual or auditory disabilities, lack of familiarity with technology, or other challenges. Make translation services/interpreters available.

Prepare and Support the Rehousing Team

Housing surges require higher expectations and greater capacity from all participating staff. Rapid rehousing providers will receive an influx of new clients from the surge, so prepare to fully staff agencies and train all staff by the launch date for the surge. Prepare front-line and administrative staff for the surge itself by training them on the process, their role during the surge, and expectations about follow-up. If the surge is utilizing a hybrid or fully online model, ensure that all participating staff have the equipment and capability to participate in the designated format (e.g. video or phone conferencing).

Quick communication across team members is necessary to achieve the rapid process goals of the surge. Provide teams with necessary technology such as laptops, Wi-Fi hotspots, mobile scanners/printers, smartphones, and other important tools. Experienced teams often use communication tools like GroupMe or other group text apps to quickly connect and move decisions; selecting such tools and training staff on them ahead of time can ensure smooth communication during the surge.

The intensive preparation work in a short time frame leading up to a surge, the high level of activity during the surge, and the extra effort related to serving a large influx of new clients in the wake of the surge will put staff at high risk for burnout and turnover, which can disrupt the success of a housing surge strategy. Intentionally create a team culture of support and collaboration by recognizing the challenges and extra work accompanying a surge, uniting staff around the goal of rehousing vulnerable members of the community, adequately preparing and compensating staff for the extra work, and appreciating and celebrating their hard work and successes.

Step 6. Track Outcomes and Continuous Quality Improvement

Household Outcomes

Track participant outcomes in real time at all stages of the surge process and review regularly to monitor progress against the goal, identify any areas of delay or issue, and make adjustments to ensure the surge is successful in rapidly connecting participants to resources, housing units, and services. Ensure that data can be broken down by factors including age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, household size, RRH provider agency, and housing navigator or case manager in order to facilitate detailed analysis of outcomes and the ability to quickly identify inequities in outcomes by group.

Key metrics include:

- Outreach/Engagement—Time it takes to contact households prioritized from the CES process and connect with a housing navigator (CES or RRH staff)
- Enrollment—Time from initial engagement with housing navigator to enrollment in the program (paperwork completed, housing intake preferences identified)
- Unit Identification—Time it takes household to identify unit from the pool and complete apartment application
- Application to Acceptance—Time it takes from apartment application submission to landlord accepting the tenant for unit
- Administrative Processing—Time it takes for unit to pass inspection, lease to be signed, and rental assistance payment to be processed
- Lease Signing to Move-In—Time from lease signing to move-in

Closely watch for inequitable outcome trends for Black people, people of color, youth, LGBTQ people, and other vulnerable groups. Review outcomes at frequent intervals during the surge and identify inequitable outcomes in the length of time each stage takes and/or successful progression to the next step. Discuss any issues that come up with direct staff who are responsible for those tasks and make direct adjustments to the process to improve outcomes and

address any disparities. For example, if data indicate that LGBTQ youth are experiencing longer times for successful engagement or enrollment, connect with LGBTQ organizations, youth outreach and drop-in service providers, and other groups trusted by the population that can help foster successful engagement.

Housing Unit Tracking

Real-time tracking of data and resources is critical to successful management of available units. Have the lead landlord engagement agency designate a point person to closely monitor the status of vacant units committed to the surge and ensure that unit availability is accurate and updated in real time.

Community Housing Surge Examples

Disaster Recovery—North Carolina

State, federal, and local partners worked together in North Carolina in 2018 to launch the Back@Home housing surge initiative in the wake of Hurricane Florence. The surge was designed to rapidly house people in disaster shelters or other temporary housing who were displaced by the hurricane and would have become homeless without immediate assistance. The surge included two phases with different target populations and resulted in the connection of 270 families to permanent housing. For more information, see the following resources:

- [Back@Home update](#) from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
- [Back@Home Handbook](#)
- [Back@Home website](#)

Population-Specific One-Day Surges—Boston

The City of Boston and a host of partners have been successfully implementing single-day housing surges since 2015. Each surge brings a variety of housing and services partners together under one roof for one day, enabling participating people experiencing homelessness to leave the event with housing (e.g. public housing units set aside for the surge, RRH vouchers, or HCVs) and enrolled in supportive services and resources (e.g. Medicaid/Medicare, primary care, food stamps). Targeted populations have included veterans and older adults (aged 50+ years) experiencing chronic homelessness. For more information, see the following resources:

- PowerPoint: [The Housing Surge Model: Housing First for Elders Experiencing Homelessness](#), presented in April 2018 at the Housing First Partners Conference.
- Press release from the City of Boston: [City of Boston Holds First-Ever “Housing Surge” for Homeless Veterans](#).
- USICH-Hosted Blog: [Boston’s Housing Surges: Helping Older Adults Experiencing Chronic Homelessness Find a Permanent Place to Call Home](#)

100-Day Challenges

100-Day Challenges, pioneered by the Rapid Results Institute, are another model for quickly housing an ambitious number of people experiencing homelessness through an intensive, collaborative effort. In these challenges, community teams work together with expert technical assistance providers to set ambitious housing targets for a specific population, develop and deploy innovative ways to collaborate and operate in order to streamline and expedite housing processes, and regularly monitor progress against stated goals. These 100-Day Challenges have been employed by communities across the country for a variety of populations experiencing homelessness including youth, veterans, and people experiencing chronic homelessness. For more information, see the following resources:

101-Youth Homelessness—100 Day Challenges

- [Youth Homelessness in the United States](#)
- [Five Communities Launch 100-Day Challenge to End Youth Homelessness](#)

102-Veteran and Chronic Homelessness - 100 Day Challenges

- [Veteran and Chronic Homelessness](#)