



# Implementing Creating Moves to Opportunity

## Executive Summary

Jonathan Bigelow

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# OVERVIEW

The Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) Demonstration evaluated new services designed to increase the number of families with young children leasing in areas with historically high upward income mobility, or “high-opportunity areas,” in the city of Seattle and King County, Washington. In two phases, King County Housing Authority (KCHA), Seattle Housing Authority (SHA), and a service provider called InterIm CDA offered three CMTO programs to families when they applied to the Housing Choice Voucher program. This report presents staff insights on CMTO.

In Phase 1, families randomly assigned to receive CMTO services were offered a comprehensive package of high-opportunity-area education, rental application coaching, housing search planning and assistance, financial assistance to cover rental application and lease-up costs, and landlord engagement to promote CMTO and expedite the public housing agencies’ (PHAs’) administrative processes. “Navigators” at InterIm CDA delivered the services, coaching families to obtain their desired housing. Phase 2 tested this comprehensive program plus two less intensive, lower-cost programs. Select findings include:

- Navigators believed that many families found CMTO attractive because it improved their chances of leasing in the voucher program and affording costs like security deposits; they also overwhelmingly welcomed the focus on high-opportunity neighborhoods.
- Following high participation in initial CMTO service interactions, some families engaged lightly with the navigators during their housing search either because they were searching independently in high-opportunity areas or because they were not actively searching or were searching outside of high-opportunity areas. Other families engaged intensively with the navigators as partners during the search process.
- The navigators initially struggled to serve a minority of families who appeared to expect them to take the lead in their housing search. Adjustments were made during Phase 1 to reinforce CMTO’s emphasis on coaching families to lead housing searches with navigator support.
- Navigators observed that families seemed to have uniform, favorable perceptions of SHA’s relatively clustered high-opportunity areas. KCHA’s high-opportunity areas were more dispersed and varied, and many KCHA participants initially searched in more familiar and less affluent high-opportunity areas. These families often faced challenges finding affordable rental housing through the voucher program and so expanded their searches to other areas.
- Navigators aimed at influencing rental application screening outcomes for families in engaging landlords. Many families had barriers to approval, but although rental application denials were common, family and staff appeals to landlords could reverse them.
- The navigators asserted that the full array of Phase 1 services contributed to the program’s effectiveness and emphasized the importance of coaching families to communicate with landlords. Streamlined Phase 2 programs led to less vigorous family engagement and fewer opportunities to support families encountering setbacks, but motivated families who were comfortable dealing directly with landlords could overcome rental application barriers.
- Navigators and PHA staff members underscored the importance of empathy, flexibility, and culturally competent approaches to delivering family-centered, landlord-responsive services.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Field research into program implementation hinges on the active contributions of many individuals who are juggling other responsibilities simultaneously. The findings presented in this report reflect the time and care invested by staff members of King County Housing Authority, Seattle Housing Authority, and InterIm CDA not only in interviews and observations but also in their efforts to support the families they served as part of the Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) Demonstration in Seattle and King County, Washington. Those families are also owed immeasurable gratitude for their voluntary participation in CMTO's efforts to learn from their experiences exploring and pursuing their housing options. Thank you.

MDRC is grateful for funding from the Surgo Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support its role in the CMTO Seattle-King County Demonstration. It also thanks the demonstration's principal investigators at Opportunity Insights at Harvard University for their partnership with MDRC on the CMTO demonstration: Peter Bergman (Columbia University), Raj Chetty (Harvard University), Stefanie DeLuca (Johns Hopkins University), Nathaniel Hendren (Harvard University), Lawrence F. Katz (Harvard University), and Christopher Palmer (Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

MDRC's overall contributions to the demonstration were supported by numerous committed individuals across CMTO partner institutions: King County Housing Authority, Seattle Housing Authority, InterIm CDA, Opportunity Insights, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, and MEF Associates. MDRC is grateful to those individuals for their ideas, dedication, and collaboration.

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The Author





# Executive Summary

The Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) Seattle–King County Demonstration represents the work of a practitioner-researcher partnership involving King County Housing Authority (KCHA), Seattle Housing Authority (SHA), and a coalition of research organizations led by Opportunity Insights at Harvard University. The goal of the partnership was to design, field, and rigorously evaluate the effects of housing mobility services provided to families with children under age 15 who were served by the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program.<sup>1</sup> The services were designed to enhance access to the range of geographic choices that were available to these families by mitigating the barriers to their leasing in private rental markets. Through these efforts, CMTO sought to increase the number of families leasing in “high-opportunity areas” within the city of Seattle and King County, Washington, areas with historically high rates of upward income mobility.<sup>2</sup>

Across two study phases, two public housing authorities (PHAs) in Seattle and King County and their service partner, InterIm CDA, offered three service bundles to families who were on HCV program waitlists. The services were evaluated through randomized controlled trials. Families who elected to enroll in the CMTO study were assigned randomly to receive either regular voucher program services only (that is, a control group) or regular voucher program services plus CMTO services (one or more program groups) designed to support families who pursued moves to high-opportunity areas. In Phase 1 of the demonstration—and in a five-month pilot of services that preceded its launch—the PHAs offered families a comprehensive bundle of services that they theorized would support families in pursuing “opportunity moves.” In Phase 2, this “kitchen sink” CMTO approach would continue to be offered alongside two programs that streamlined and varied the original model. This test of multiple programs in parallel furthered a learning agenda that sought to yield a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of specific components of the CMTO model and the ways they were delivered.

Phase 1 study enrollment was conducted between April 2018 and February 2019, and Phase 2 enrollment was conducted between June 2019 and March 2020. In 2019, early findings were

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1. The study’s investigators are directors or academic affiliates of Opportunity Insights at Harvard University. Research partners included MDRC, Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (JPAL), and MEF Associates. The HCV program is the federal government’s major program for providing rental assistance to very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled in the private market. Housing choice vouchers are administered locally by public housing agencies, which receive federal funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to administer the voucher program.
  2. For a description of the CMTO intervention and findings from the study, see Peter Bergman, Raj Chetty, Stefanie DeLuca, Nathaniel Hendren, Lawrence F. Katz, and Christopher Palmer, “Creating Moves to Opportunity: Experimental Evidence on Barriers to Neighborhood Choice,” NBER Working Paper No. 26164 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020). A nontechnical summary of the paper’s findings and descriptions of the areas and their selection criteria are provided at [https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cmto\\_summary.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cmto_summary.pdf).

released from the impact, participation, cost, and qualitative analyses of Phase 1 of the CMTO Seattle–King County Demonstration. Notably, investigators found that family involvement in the CMTO program increased the share of families who moved to high-opportunity areas, from 15 percent among peers in the experimental control group to 53 percent in the CMTO group.<sup>3</sup> This report draws on interviews with program staff members to describe important perspectives from both phases of the demonstration and to identify the factors that shaped service delivery and the ways families and landlords responded to CMTO.<sup>4</sup>

## THE CMTO MODEL

In designing the CMTO approach and services for Phase 1, the PHAs and research partners referred to existing evidence as well as the experiences and insights of PHA staff members, existing voucher holders, and landlords to identify the likely barriers to families accessing low-poverty neighborhoods and the mechanisms that might counter those barriers. The partners also consulted with operators of housing mobility programs to learn more about effective approaches from existing programs. From these efforts, a core set of CMTO services emerged:<sup>5</sup>

- **High-opportunity-area education** to increase families’ knowledge about these areas and inform their perceptions of neighborhood desirability. Staff members offered informational materials, such as neighborhood guides; led neighborhood tours; and held discussions with families about their neighborhood preferences.
- **Rental application coaching** to identify families’ barriers (for example, past evictions or low credit scores) to leasing in rental markets and to provide guidance to families on mitigating those barriers or communicating with landlords about them. Staff members offered to pull credit reports with families, educated families about completing rental applications, and cocreated tools families could use to communicate with prospective landlords about their circumstances.
- **Housing search planning and assistance** to help families plan and execute searches for rental housing in high-opportunity areas. This support included helping families identify and differentiate between their housing “needs” and “wants,” providing training on how to search and filter listings of available rental units online, and sharing referrals of available units that staff members thought might match each family’s preferences.

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3. Bergman et al. (2020a).

4. The MDRC implementation findings are primarily derived from staff interviews, observations of service delivery, analyses of program documents, and technical assistance experience. These findings do not summarize the direct viewpoints of participating families or address Phase 2 implementation after the COVID-19 pandemic altered service delivery beginning in March 2020.

5. For additional details about the program model and approaches to service delivery, see [https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cmto\\_programoverview.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/cmto_programoverview.pdf).

- **Flexible financial assistance** to cover up to \$3,500 in costs associated with rental applications and screening, plus lease-up costs like security deposits.<sup>6</sup>
- **Landlord engagement** to identify units in high-opportunity areas and promote landlords' participation in CMTO. These interactions entailed brokering on behalf of families to influence (or change) the outcomes of rental applications, promoting the advantages of participation in the HCV and CMTO programs, and expediting housing authority lease-up processes. A mitigation fund was set up to pay for any future tenant damages beyond what would be covered by security deposits.

Four full-time InterIm CDA staff members performed these essential activities. Two family navigators, the primary points of contact for families, provided education about high-opportunity areas, coaching on completing rental applications, and assistance planning and conducting housing searches. Two housing navigators conducted outreach to landlords to promote CMTO and “influence rental application decisions” on behalf of CMTO families. They also administered expedited lease-up processes through the housing authorities once families were approved to lease.

CMTO deployed an individualized approach to coaching families toward achieving their desired housing outcomes. Navigators held in-person meetings with families at locations that were convenient to them, and the frequency of assistance given between and following those meetings was tailored to each family's need. The PHAs and navigators drew distinctions between their approach and other program models in which staff complete many activities, such as housing searches, without much involvement expected from families. Service delivery spanned the four-to-eight-week period before a family's voucher was issued and continued for up to 120 days (or longer if vouchers were extended). If families leased up in high-opportunity areas, the family navigator would hold one consultation within the first two weeks of families moving in to offer guidance on topics such as accessing local resources. This concluded CMTO service delivery, and families were informed about the PHAs' typical voucher supports that would still be available.

Phase 2 of the demonstration was set up to test three alternative service delivery strategies: the comprehensive approach featured in Phase 1, which continued under the name CMTO Coaching and Resources, and the following two less intensive, lower-cost variations:

- **CMTO Financial Assistance.** Families who were assigned to this group were offered financial assistance identical to what families received in Phase 1, as well as light education about high-opportunity areas. Families did not receive any rental application coaching, housing search assistance, or expedited lease-up supports from CMTO.
- **CMTO Toolkit.** Families in this group received “lighter-touch, streamlined” services from CMTO staff: one in-person meeting with a family navigator who was dedicated to this program, a packet of rental application coaching materials, and access to online housing search tools that they could use independently. The amount of security-deposit assistance was pared back

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6. A “lease-up” generally refers to a successful lease outcome for an HCV program participant wherein the participant receives program rental assistance.

relative to the Phase 1 model, and customized unit referrals were provided only to families with vouchers for units with three bedrooms or more.<sup>7</sup>

## LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTING CMTO IN PHASE 1

- **The PHAs and InterIm built a productive partnership for CMTO, enhanced by their efforts to codevelop the operational strategies for delivering program services and entailing significant investments in staff training related to the model and to HCV program procedures.**

The partnership required more time and effort than the PHAs initially forecast, partly to accommodate the hiring and training of three of the four navigators during the service delivery pilot. The pilot period was extended in order to ensure the navigators could be trained on HCV program procedures and gain familiarity with the high-opportunity areas in the PHAs' jurisdictions. Moreover, taking on the role of the CMTO service provider required InterIm CDA to reorient its regular service delivery approach from one that emphasized more holistic social service provision to one that emphasized coaching families within the specific CMTO service framework.

- **Most families seemed to find CMTO attractive because it would improve their chances of using (as opposed to losing) their voucher, and they welcomed the focus on “opportunity moves” as a bonus.<sup>8</sup>**

The navigators related that many families were surprised to learn that their vouchers could be used in more affluent, higher-cost areas, and they noted that families' preferences in housing searches overwhelmingly included access to good schools and safe neighborhoods. According to the navigators, most families were not focused on whether to participate in CMTO; rather, they were more concerned with whether they would be able to secure stable, affordable housing that met their preferences through the voucher program.<sup>9</sup> Further, many HCV program families were experiencing homelessness, unstably housed, or experiencing financial strain and seemed pleased that CMTO could help them afford lease-up costs, especially security deposits, that might otherwise be difficult for them to cover.<sup>10</sup>

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7. For a full summary of the program interventions that were offered and tested in Phase 2, see <https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CMTO-Phase-II-Intervention-Details.pdf>.

8. Although the risk of failing to lease up in the voucher program motivated families to participate in CMTO, overall lease-up rates in the voucher programs at SHA and KCHA were similar. See Bergman et al. (2020a).

9. In addition to perceptions and preferences related to location and neighborhood characteristics, families typically had specific preferences related to unit and building features (for example, dedicated parking or an in-unit washer and dryer) that could inform where they searched for rental housing.

10. KCHA offered security-deposit assistance widely in its regular HCV program; SHA offered it more selectively and to fewer households overall. Neither agency covered rental application-related costs.

- **Families' participation in initial service meetings was consistently high; engagement with navigators during the subsequent housing search phase varied widely from family to family.**

Factors that influenced families' engagement with CMTO during the housing search period included outside stressors (for example, health issues, housing instability), varying experiences in housing searches (including setbacks such as rental application denials), different levels of familiarity with high-opportunity areas, and the availability of family resources or external housing supports. According to staff members, these same factors also affected families' interest in moving to high-opportunity areas versus other areas. Common participation patterns emerged: Some families engaged less with navigators because they were more proactive in searching independently in high-opportunity areas, while others engaged less (or not at all) because they were not searching for housing or were searching outside of high-opportunity areas. Staff members said a subset of seemingly disengaged families eventually reengaged, often within one month of their initial voucher search period ending. Other families engaged intensively with the navigators as partners during searches, communicating frequently (sometimes daily) about their search efforts.

- **A nontrivial minority of families expected the navigators to play a more direct role in searching on behalf of families than was intended by the model. This expectation posed challenges to staff workloads and partly motivated a realignment of staff roles and practices to reinforce the program's focus on coaching families to search independently, with scalable staff supports.**

The navigators observed that some families—perhaps up to one-third of participants in the first several months after the program launch—believed that CMTO would conduct significant housing search activities on their behalf, including accompanying families on multiple unit tours, taking the lead in searching for units, and communicating with landlords. Fulfilling these high expectations increased the workloads of the housing navigators and clashed with the goal of supporting *family-led* housing searches. This was one factor that influenced a reconfiguration of responsibilities for the family navigators and housing navigators, with the former continuing to assist families throughout the housing search period and the latter focusing on generating unit referrals and landlord engagement in support of family rental applications. The navigators also enacted changes to the way services were described and delivered to reflect the fact that although CMTO supports could be intensive and were scalable to a family's needs, there were limits to how much staff members would do in lieu of family engagement in their housing searches.

- **Family attendance on staff-guided, group tours of high-opportunity areas was low, and the program finally stopped providing the tours and deemphasized other in-person staff-family interactions during housing searches.**

Many families expressed an interest in attending monthly, staff-guided tours of high-opportunity areas that were organized for groups of families, but the no-show rate was high. Although the families who did attend these tours responded well to their content, it became difficult to reconcile the time that was invested in executing the tours against the overall workloads of the

navigators once the program reached scale. Staff members attempted to include some more informal, individualized neighborhood tours when they joined families on unit tours, but the program ultimately ended both the group tours and staff accompaniment on unit tours during Phase 1. Instead, families were offered itineraries for self-guided tours.

- **Families' preferences for high-opportunity areas varied and often proved to be flexible in response to the experience of searching for and applying for housing. Some families initially prioritized searching and leasing up in high-opportunity areas that were close to their current residences or were otherwise more familiar, but many of these families had a difficult time finding affordable units in those areas.**

To the surprise of the family navigators, few families expressed concerns about the racial or economic makeup of high-opportunity neighborhoods, although the navigators noted that many families expressed affirmative preferences for neighborhoods that staff members suggested were more racially diverse. SHA families seemed to have more uniform perceptions of SHA's high-opportunity areas, and many families appeared to have impressions of certain of these areas as favorably diverse. In contrast, KCHA families faced a vastly larger and more varied set of high-opportunity-area options. KCHA families often initially prioritized searching in the less affluent south King County areas of Kent, Auburn, and Newcastle, and staff members believed this was because many families already lived in or near those areas. However, many families experienced challenges in finding rental units in these high-opportunity areas that would be affordable under the voucher program. The navigators frequently counseled families in this position to expand their searches to neighborhoods on the east side of the county, such as Bellevue, but they said this could be a point at which some families began exploring rental options outside of high-opportunity areas.

- **The housing navigators focused on engaging landlords who had available, listed units, rather than on building relationships with a pool of interested landlords in the hope that future vacancies would become options for CMTO participants. Denials of families' rental applications were common, yet they could lead to engagement with landlords that reversed those outcomes.**

Although the housing navigators frequently interacted with landlords who did not have any current vacancies, they found that the CMTO proposition resonated more with landlords who had units available to lease because they were motivated to fill the vacancies, even if that meant relaxing their application screening criteria. Landlord engagement efforts were often customized to address the concerns landlords expressed about leasing to a CMTO family or to respond to denials of rental applications. Despite the advance engagement of landlords by CMTO, denials of families' rental applications were common. However, a denial often provided a chance for CMTO families and the housing navigators to communicate about the circumstances that led to denials and successfully advocate for reconsideration.

## EARLY INSIGHTS FROM IMPLEMENTING CMTO IN PHASE 2

- **After roughly one year of working with families in the CMTO Financial Assistance program, the coordinator who served these families observed that those with income from employment fared comparatively better in the rental application process. They noted that families who had more rental barriers could also be approved to lease up in the absence of more robust CMTO supports if they were comfortable communicating with and attempting to persuade landlords.**

Working with families and landlords to process financial assistance payments was straightforward, with few challenges reported other than the occasional incomplete submission of documentation. The PHAs and InterIm began sending email reminders about the program during the course of implementation, which resulted in an increase in family engagement but also some calls from families who were struggling in their housing searches. The coordinator suggested that providing referrals of available units in high-opportunity areas might have been a low-cost way to increase supports for these families.

- **The reduced intensity of service interactions for the CMTO Toolkit group resulted in less vigorous family engagement overall relative to Phase 1, although family participation in the initial meetings remained high. Opportunities to assess how families' housing searches were progressing and to coach families through any challenges were limited relative to both navigator expectations and the more comprehensive CMTO program.**

The family navigator serving families in the CMTO Toolkit program succeeded in condensing the activities of two initial service meetings from Phase 1 into one session in Phase 2, but this resulted in a more one-sided conversation between the navigator and families. Families seemed less deeply engaged in both those meetings and in follow-up check-ins, and they were less likely to share the challenges they encountered in their housing searches than were families who were offered more intensive services. Two types of families seemed more likely to be engaged with the family navigator in relation to the progress of their searches: those who were very motivated to move to high-opportunity areas and those who experienced at least one rental application denial and asked the family navigator for help.

## TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING FORWARD

In reflecting on their experiences supporting families and engaging landlords across both study phases, PHA and InterIm staff members emphasized the importance of placing families' needs at the center of CMTO's service delivery efforts while coaching them toward agency in leading their housing searches in high-opportunity areas. Family navigators reported serving families who had a variety of lived experiences, a wide range of approaches to searching for housing and engaging with CMTO, and sometimes high expectations of their service providers. Housing navigators similarly stressed the individualized approach that was required to engage landlords on behalf of CMTO and its participating families, with landlords expressing various

concerns about leasing to voucher holders and different degrees of comfort with relaxing their application-screening criteria or working through their concerns about partnering with PHAs. Staff members underscored that providing effective services to families and landlords required staff to be flexible in their ways of working (and in their work schedules), deeply knowledgeable about the HCV program, and both patient and culturally competent.

As Phase 2 enrollment ended—with many families still searching for housing—PHA and InterIm staff members remarked that their success in implementing lower-cost and lighter-touch service approaches had supported some families in each of the two new programs in moving to high-opportunity areas. Staff members suggested that many families in these programs who had more rental barriers experienced more challenging housing searches than their counterparts who had access to more robust supports. However, staff members also noted that families who had more barriers could nevertheless succeed in obtaining landlord approvals to lease up in high-opportunity areas.

At a time when new efforts are being launched in jurisdictions across the country to establish and evaluate housing mobility programs serving voucher recipients, implementation lessons from the CMTO Seattle–King County Demonstration may be especially instructive. With CMTO Seattle–King County research activities continuing, forthcoming analyses describing the costs and outcomes of the CMTO program, as well as the experiences of the families and landlords who participate, will offer further insights to inform both housing mobility research and practice.



# ABOUT MDRC

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Founded in 1974, MDRC builds and applies evidence about changes in policy and practice that can improve the well-being of people who are economically disadvantaged. In service of this goal, we work alongside our programmatic partners and the people they serve to identify and design more effective and equitable approaches. We work with them to strengthen the impact of those approaches. And we work with them to evaluate policies or practices using the highest research standards. Our staff members have an unusual combination of research and organizational experience, with expertise in the latest qualitative and quantitative research methods, data science, behavioral science, culturally responsive practices, and collaborative design and program improvement processes. To disseminate what we learn, we actively engage with policymakers, practitioners, public and private funders, and others to apply the best evidence available to the decisions they are making.

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