

Chico State Basic Needs Rapid Re-housing Assessment

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Executive Summary

Evaluation Purpose

The purpose of this initial evaluation of the Rapid Re-housing (RRH) program was to understand the impact of housing resources on stability, overall wellness and academic engagement from the perspectives and lived experiences of students who participated in the inaugural year of the program.

Methods

A point-in-time evaluation study was conducted in the spring of 2021. Of the 26 students who were enrolled in the program, a total of 13 students chose to be interviewed (50% response rate). Each student participated in an hour-long interview regarding their experience with the RRH program. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the research team coded de-identified transcripts and analyzed for similarities and differences across the data.

Findings

Five themes were identified in the interview data. Each theme represents a consistent pattern among the students who were interviewed.

Theme #1: RRH students reported complex lives, yet self-identified as resourceful

The students who participated in the evaluation expressed complex backgrounds and needs when entering the program. Simultaneously, many of them self-identified as being resourceful and savvy, and ultimately took pride in their ability to navigate the resources and systems they needed to meet their needs.

Theme #2: RRH support led to temporary stable housing, yet barriers to long term stability remained

RRH participants overwhelmingly reported that participation in the program led to stable housing while a Chico State student. Although the RRH program played the role of a safety net for them as Chico State students, they were realistic that upon graduation they will face financial barriers without the support.

Theme #3: RRH support positively impacted students' overall wellness¹, allowing for more focus on academics

Every participant suggested they had (1) improved mental and emotional health, (2) increased access to healthier food through the food pantry and CHAT food box delivery system, which had a positive impact on their overall physical health, and (3) the majority of students reported that their financial wellness had improved. Ultimately, these supports allowed students to increase their focus on academics.

Theme #4: Covid-19 job loss significantly impacted RRH students and families

Job loss due to the pandemic exacerbated housing instability for almost every RRH participant. The majority of students who participated in the evaluation reported either losing their jobs due

¹ The research team defined overall wellness as mental and emotional, physical, and financial wellness

to Covid or having their work hours cut significantly. This highlighted the important role that employment, particularly campus employment, plays in the financial well-being of students.

Theme #5: The first year of RRH was like winning the “*Golden Ticket*”: Students expressed gratitude and urgency for continued support

The RRH program participants expressed gratitude and students credited the program with having an impact on their survival. Participants expressed hope that the program will be able to continue and be expanded to include more students.

Conclusion

The initial pilot evaluation of the Rapid Re-housing program illustrated that participants feel the program benefits students’ housing stability, overall wellness, and ability to focus on school. Program growth will allow for deeper evaluation, but the current RRH program has a strong foundation of success and support from which to grow.

Background & Purpose

Across the nation, college students are experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness at alarming rates. The rising costs of tuition, higher costs of living, lower levels of financial aid, and more recently, the global pandemic have only exacerbated the issue (Brnton, 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al, 2021). Yet higher education institutions often prioritize students' academic achievement, without the infrastructure to support the stability of basic needs that ensures a foundation from which all students can thrive. In partnership with other California State Universities, CSU Chico has made intentional investments in this area to understand and support students' overall health and wellbeing, which in turn supports their academic success. The purpose of the Rapid Re-housing (RRH) evaluation was to explore the impact of housing resources on stability, overall wellness, and academic engagement from the perspectives and lived experiences of students who participated in the inaugural year of the program.

Almost half of the students enrolled in higher education across the nation report some form of housing insecurity with approximately 10% of college students citing experiences and/or significant risks of homelessness (Brnton, 2020). Recently, Temple University's The Hope Center released a research report which surveyed more than 38,000 two-year and four-year students across the nation regarding their basic needs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nearly 60% of the students surveyed were experiencing basic needs insecurity; the rates of housing insecurity at four-year institutions ranged between 35%-48% and the rates of homelessness at four-year institutions ranged from 9%-16% (Goldrick-Rab et al, 2021). The issue of basic needs insecurity, including housing insecurity, was more pronounced among students of color. Upwards of almost seven out of ten Indigenous and African American/Black students surveyed reported basic needs insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al, 2021). The disparity in

basic needs on college campuses mirrors the current state of racial/ethnic and other social identity disparities across the United States and highlights the equity issue for higher education.

With the state-wide housing affordability crisis, housing insecurity among college students is particularly relevant across the California State University system, including our CSU Chico campus. Similar to the rates reported across the nation, in 2019, Wilking, Roll and Kornbluh found that more than 43% of CSU Chico students had experienced at least one form of housing insecurity in the previous year. In the same time period, almost 15% of CSU Chico students reported experiencing homelessness (Wilking et al, 2019). In a 2019 cross-sectional study of approximately 150 students from the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), the Center for Healthy Communities (CHC) found that the majority of EOP students are living in off campus housing with roommates, making these students more susceptible to the tight renters' market in Chico, CA (Bianco & Donatello, nd). Through their work with EOP students, the CHC raises the critical issue of providing support for our low income and first-generation students.

The rapid-re-housing approach is a contemporary solution to housing insecurity that aims to provide immediate housing support for individuals and families experiencing homelessness through customized resources including access to permanent housing, financial assistance, and supportive case management strategies (HUD Exchange, 2014; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016). College-focused rapid re-housing (RRH) programs embrace these aspects and specifically focus on partnering with community-based organizations to provide housing resources to college students who are experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness (JBAY, 2019). In 2019, California's Assembly Bill 74 (AB74), allocated funding specific to addressing students' homelessness across the state's higher education institutions.

In 2020, Chico State was one of seven CSU campuses to receive funds to develop a new college-focused RRH program (Murphy, 2020). The Chico State University RRH program began assisting students in the 2020-2021 academic year and partnered with Chico Housing Action Team (CHAT) and the True North Housing Alliance to provide on-location housing resources and support. Additionally, grant funds have been utilized to provide rental assistance for students in need to the end of homelessness prevention. Across the 2020-2021 inaugural year of the program, the RRH program comprised two homes in partnership with CHAT, housing placements and rental assistance through True North, emergency grant funds, and short-term emergency housing.

The following report outlines the preliminary evaluation findings of the inaugural year of the CSU, Chico RRH program. A brief methods section is followed by the initial findings of the evaluation.

Methods

The evaluation of the Rapid Re-housing program was a point-in-time pilot study to explore the initial process and outcomes of the new program. In the spring of 2021, at the time of the study, 26 students had participated in at least one of the Chico State RRH programs. Every student who received some form of support from the RRH program was offered the opportunity to participate in a semi-structured interview. Following IRB approval, three types of RRH students were interviewed: (1) Housed in CHAT, (2) Housed with True North, and (3) Received emergency housing funds and/or were housed in short-term emergency housing. A total of 13 students chose to participate in the evaluation interviews for a 50% response rate (see Table 1). Of the students interviewed, three were housed in CHAT homes, one was previously housed in

CHAT, five were housed through True North, one had previously been housed with True North, and three received emergency funds and/or were housed in emergency housing.

All participants were asked to self-report demographic information. Although the number of participants was relatively small, the racial/ethnic breakdown roughly matches that of the larger university (CSUC, n.d.). Almost twice the number of females as males responded. Additionally, the majority of participants reported either junior or senior status in school, although that did not necessarily correspond to the number of years students had been in school. For example, two students were in their fourth year of school and considered juniors, while another student was technically in his sixth year of school and at senior status. Additionally, one student had graduated after the fall 2020 semester and one student identified as a senior, but was not enrolled in classes at the time of the evaluation. The average age of the participants was 27 years old, with participants' ages ranging from 19 to 53 years old.

Table 1. Reported Demographics (n=13)

Race/Ethnicity	
Latinx/Hispanic	4
African American/Black	2
Biracial or Multiracial	3
White	4
Gender	
Female	9
Male	4
Year in School	
Sophomore	1
Junior	4
Senior	7
Graduated	1

The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each student was asked for verbal consent to both participate in the interviews and consent for the interviews to be recorded for data analysis purposes. Each student received a total of \$50 in gift cards in appreciation for sharing their time and experience with the evaluation team.

Video and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim through the Zoom software. Transcriptions were deidentified and one member of the research team then reviewed each transcription for quality. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis strategies starting with open coding for patterns across the data, which became the basic code book for analysis. Two members of the research team coded each transcript, and a spot check was completed to ensure fidelity in coding. Ultimately, emerging themes were cited and are outlined in the findings section below.

Findings

The purpose of this initial evaluation of the RRH program was to understand the impact of housing stability resources on overall wellness and academic engagement and success from the perspectives of students who participated in the inaugural year of the program. There were five thematic areas that were explored from our interviews which included: (1) the background of students who participated, (2) the role of RRH in finding and maintaining housing stability, (3) the impact of housing stability on overall wellness, (4) the impact of Covid-19 in the inaugural year, and (5) students' reflections on what it means to be provided housing support and resources at Chico State. These five themes are further explicated below.

Theme #1: RRH students reported complex lives, yet self-identified as resourceful

The students who participated in this evaluation expressed complex backgrounds and needs when entering the program. At the same time, many of them self-identified as being

resourceful and savvy, and ultimately took pride in their ability to navigate the resources and systems they needed to meet their complex needs.

We're [Camp] fire survivors, so bouncing around since the fire in different places, but I couldn't really qualify to get our own place. I have two teenage sons that lived with me. Until I called to 211 and they immediately hooked me up with [Chico State Basic Needs], who called me that same day and it's like a month later, we were in an apartment. – Participant #6

One of the most common experiences cited across students was a history of homelessness and/or a persistent worry about becoming homeless. Four students described experience with homelessness in the past, while another five spoke about their precarious housing situation prior to entering the program. Additionally, several students spoke of past trauma including family estrangement or unaccompanied minor statuses, histories of addiction, and Camp Fire survival. Several students were also navigating self-identified disabilities and emergency situations that were immediately and urgently unsafe. Finally, four students were not only seeking housing stability for themselves, but also their families as they were parents or caregivers.

And so, at that point [just prior to RRH involvement], I became homeless and I started living in a U-haul van and I lived in a U-haul van for like nine days or 10 days, and then I was like, okay there's got to be something, so I went to the Rapid Re-Housing website. – Participant #4

I found out through Basic Needs. It was during quarantine and I was about to be kicked out of my parents' house. – Participant #11

I've been unaccompanied since I was 15, so it was really hard for me to look for a place, not just for myself, but for my sibling. And then, knowing that I was going to also have my sister with me soon and like becoming her legal guardian as well, so I was just I needed a place to stay. – Participant #13

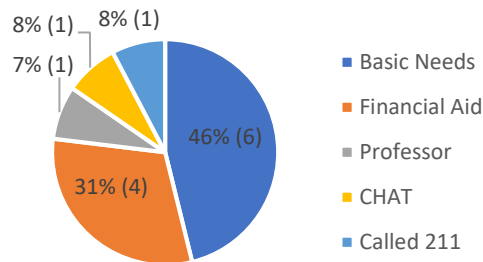
Students who participated in the RRH program expressed complex backgrounds and commonly described themselves as being resourceful. For example, participant #1 identified that she's "always had to utilize the programs at school" and participant #4 shared that he's "a very resourceful person to begin with, but... [the RRH program] made me more resourceful."

I've definitely realized throughout a couple of my major life events and all, that I'm very resilient and I always find a way to make things work out actually. Even though I'm currently...I'm also in this type of situation, I'll be fine. – Participant #7

We always have been in financially difficult situations. It's just about I guess being a bit savvy about things. Like for a while we were selling tamales even. – Participant #1

Highlighting their resourcefulness, students accessed the program in a few different ways. Many students either found the program through their established relationships at the Basic Needs food pantry (n=6) or through the Financial Aid office (n=4). However, three other students found out about the program's resources through a caring professor, the 211 hotline, or outreach specifically to CHAT (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Students' Access to Program



The students represented in this evaluation provide a strong reminder that despite complex backgrounds and needs, the circumstances that brought them to the RRH program do not define them. Access to housing resources is just part of their story as Chico State students.

Theme #2: RRH support led to temporary stable housing, yet barriers to long-term stability remained

RRH students overwhelmingly reported that participation in the program led to stable housing while a Chico State student. In several circumstances, housing resources also led to safer housing.

I would say it definitely helped me have that peace of mind that I was safe where I was sleeping and knowing that you know, that person who was trying to break into my apartment would not find me. And so that peace of mind helped me to get that sleep that I needed to get that stable mind, or you know, to make the right decisions, make the right calls and use the resources that you need it. It definitely helped me as a way to remove myself from a bad situation and also to use that time to think and process what I need to do next.” – Participant #7

Participant #8 was living in a motel prior to utilizing the emergency housing at Chico State. Of the emergency housing she said, *“It was just peaceful because I just had like my own little space to do all my work and stuff like that.”* She then utilized the RRH food gift cards temporarily and housing resources for a rental deposit help to find stable housing in a nearby town.

In the moment, students felt stably housed, yet at the same time, every student talked about the financial barriers to stable housing in the future, particularly students who aim to stay local. This included almost every participant citing worry about their ability to obtain stable housing in the future and its dependence on employment after graduation that would allow them to access incomes where they would be able to afford housing. One student, participant #10, noted that she actually found the program because she was anticipating needing affordable housing upon graduation and therefore pre-emptively reached out to CHAT to ensure she had a place to live upon graduation.

They helped us with all of it. They paid back up rent, and then they helped me and my sister-in-law get more financial aid so we could pay more future rent at least to cover us until like the rest of school” – Participant #1

I know that [a Basic Needs staff member] told me I can always call if I have any problems and she's expressed that they will support me so that I have a safety net in case anything happens. Um my main thing is long term housing that we can afford. So far, I mean we can afford this. It worries me if they raise the rent a lot, but I don't think that they can raise the rent more than a certain percentage. I'm not really sure. – Participant #6

Ultimately, the majority of students cited that they lacked a safety net, some due to the same complex issues that brought them to the program in the first place. Although the RRH program played the role of a safety net for them as Chico State students, they were realistic that upon graduation they will face the real barriers to stable, long term housing, without the support of college-focused Rapid Rehousing programs.

Theme #3: RRH support positively impacted students' overall wellness, allowing for more focus on academics

In an effort to understand the impact of the RRH program, the research team defined wellness as encompassing mental and emotional health, physical health, and financial wellness. In general, every student suggested that as a result of stable housing resources they had improved mental and emotional health in the form of less stress, depression, and worry. Several students also reported increased feelings of security and “peace of mind.”

I feel like overall it's kind of it's taking a big weight off my shoulders stress-wise. Like I feel like I'm able to function more without all the additional issues piling up on the side, and I do feel like overall it just kind of like helped brighten the mood. -Participant #2

I have a lot less depression, I really had a major depression, when we moved into that place, and I mean I was working my way out of it on my own. But this has just accelerated the healing for us, especially. Because of the [Camp] fire and because of our housing being so unstable since the fire. The boys didn't live with me before the fire, so in this last two years I'm trying to provide a good home for them and feeling like I was failing. So in all ways, this has impacted my mental health, and I think that the mental health then will help the physical health because I really feel like we've just healed so much here. – Participant #6

Let's start with emotional and mental, for that I feel a lot more safe being in this household and knowing that like I have people who support me and they're there to help to guide me and encouraged me to go to counseling and getting the help that I need. And then physical wellness, now that I feel more at ease about like my living situation, there's a bike path right behind our house, so I like going for walks and just being able to do that. And then with eating better, because we're food secure now, eating better, having a lot of access to produce and fruits and such like that, so I'm really happy about that. And financial wellness, being able to get help budgeting is helping me a lot, because I used to be very financially insecurity [sic]. So, just being able to have someone go over a budget with me and help guide me, that's helping me a lot. So overall I'd say being in CHAT has helped my wellness a great amount. – Participant #11

Additionally, almost every student identified that improved mental and emotional health and their access to healthier food through the food pantry, Basic Needs food gift cards, and CHAT food box delivery system, had a positive impact on their overall physical health. Finally, the majority of students reported that their financial wellness had improved with some students reporting the ability to pay off debt and begin to save.

Living within CHAT, we have food deliveries every other Saturday. And that's enough for everyone in the house, plus more and it just makes me...I don't have food insecurity anymore like worrying about my next meal or anything because there's always food in the house. – Participant #11

Ultimately, students did not directly attribute access to stable housing to improved academic achievement, retention or graduation goals. Most students cited that their graduation timeline has not changed and they are determined to meet their academic goals. However, the feelings of housing and food security as a result of the program, has provided students the ability to focus on academics.

[As a result of RRH & Cal Fresh] I was able to calm down more and actually focus on the things I need to get done. – Participant #2

[Access to stable housing] Definitely makes things easier. Like it definitely makes it so you have to think a little bit less about that. Living here, I've definitely noticed like not having to focus as much on external things and being able to focus more on school, just because I don't have to worry about, "oh, when's this bill due?" -Participant #4

I feel like before I was always worried because I worried a lot about basic stuff. I felt like I couldn't provide a home and food, like a stable and safe environment for my siblings, which was my number one priority. So I feel like now like I'm able to sleep through the night and just like go to work and focus on school and stuff. Because I have a place now, I have a room. They have a room. They're happy and I feel like it just makes everything so much easier, just having a stable place to live at, so yeah it really makes a difference. – Participant #13

As a result of RRH participation, students experienced a positive impact of the program on not only their overall wellness, but those who they lived with and cared for as well.

Ultimately, as a result of the RRH resources, participants were offered the opportunity to regain focus on their academic goals at Chico State.

Theme #4: Covid Job Loss Significantly Impacted RRH Students and Families

Clearly one of the most defining characteristics of the 2020-2021 academic year was the Covid-19 global pandemic. Although not intentionally aligned with the inaugural year of the RRH program, every participant experienced impacts of the pandemic. Reflections on the impact of Covid varied. Some students reported the impact of illness for themselves and close family members. Other students cited the global challenges, yet balanced these with personal growth opportunities as the result of Covid restrictions. However, job loss due to the pandemic exacerbated housing instability for almost every RRH participant. Ten of the 13 students who participated in the evaluation reported either losing their jobs due to Covid or having their work hours cut significantly.

I feel like getting laid off was a really hard hit, because before then, we were pretty stable... My job paid well. I had good hours, and so, when I got laid off everything kind of like got a little unsettled in our house. – Participant #2

I was previously working on campus before Covid. And that's another thing, it kind of...I lost my job after Covid hit on campus, which resulted in me having to get a job off campus. And so that kind of like threw everything into anarchy pretty much in terms of schooling and trying to balance the work and school schedule. – Participant #3

When Covid hit, I was living in the dorms. I have bad credit and I had had an emergency in which I had to move out of where I was living, and so I had to move into the dorms frantically. But when Covid hit, I got laid off from my student job and I couldn't pay dorm prices, so I needed to move out. – Participant #10

For RRH students, the loss of employment income as a result of the pandemic significantly impacted housing stability and wellness. As the pandemic wanes and Chico State becomes more attuned to dealing with the pandemic's impact, last year's inaugural group of

RRH participants highlight the important role that employment, particularly campus employment, plays in the financial well-being of students.

Theme #5: The first year of RRH was the “Golden Ticket” – Students expressed gratitude and urgency for continued support

Ultimately, for students who participated in the RRH program, the first year of aid and support was like receiving a “*golden ticket*.” Every student who participated in the evaluation project expressed gratitude for the program, with some sharing their genuine surprise that Chico State would provide such resources. Others cited the relationship of housing support and equity on campus. For example, as noted below, Participant #1 suggested that the program “*helps level the playing field*.” Additionally, the students who participated shared a message to the Chico State administration of hope that the program will be able to continue and be expanded to include more students.

I'm really grateful that they have this program. I don't think a lot of students really appreciate the privilege it is to be here. I know one thing, I didn't realize the big differences in economical gaps until I came here and saw how people live here. And it surprises me because... they don't see the privilege it is to be able to come to school here and not to worry about living expenses and everything. The program has been something that I feel is needed that helps level the playing field a bit more. – Participant #1

I mean I'm flabbergasted that there were even services at all, because I really didn't know about any of this, and um I mean I feel like I was handed the golden ticket or something this is so amazing for us. – Participant #6

Thank you for the services that our school provides because even though not everybody needs them, there are a few that desperately need a place to stay for whatever reason. – Participant #7

These programs are incredible and lifesaving. And that they need to be prioritized. And they need to ... continue with as much support as they can get because they're really, really on the right track– Participant #10

The Rapid Re-Housing program is a great program! It's a great resource for students who are in need of housing, and I feel like this program really saved my life, especially because of the situation I was in before. And now I feel as though I'm able to be more independent because of this house. – Participant #11

The RRH program participants expressed gratitude, while often combined with disbelief at their good fortune, for access to the housing resources that were offered at Chico State. And many students credited the program with having a major impact on their own survival. As noted previously, these resources have come to define their experience at Chico State and ultimately supported students in achieving their goals of successfully achieving their degrees at our institution.

Discussion, Limitations & Implications

The findings from the initial evaluation of the Rapid Re-housing program illustrate that participants feel that the program benefits students' housing stability, overall wellness, and ability to focus on school. Although these findings are not necessarily surprising, what is nuanced about the students' experiences is the complexity of the backgrounds and needs that define students' journeys to the RRH program. This includes the on-going impact of the Camp Fire, as well as individual life experiences around housing precarity that Chico State students bring to their academic career. Additionally, although students reported feeling stably housed in the time that they were receiving resources and many were assured that the services would be in place during their time in the program, it is difficult to assess how impactful this support is in achieving long-term stability. Ultimately, the program played a significant role in the lives of Chico State student participants and they overwhelmingly advocated for its continuance and growth.

There are limitations to a cross-sectional evaluation study in that it was a pilot study with a small number of students at one point in time. At the time of the evaluation, only a small number of students had participated in the program, therefore it is hard to assess transferability

across trends in student experience. Students were also asked to reflect back on experiences which potentially led to a recall bias. Future evaluations of the program will provide more depth in this area; however, there is still a lot that can be learned from the initial voices and experiences of students who participated in the first year of the program.

Three main evaluation and programmatic implications arose from the pilot evaluation of the RRH program. First, although students reported some trends across their experiences, this study has highlighted critical areas for future research. These areas include broadening the number of participants involved in future studies and further examining the connection between housing and academic retention and success. An increase in evaluation participants will help to differentiate and understand the impact of the program across the different types of housing resources, as well as provide the statistical viability to examine different factors in the link between housing and student success. Additionally, further consideration may pinpoint more accurately the role that housing plays in wellness and deepen the tie to academic achievement. Second, students communicated their anticipation of precarious housing after graduating from Chico State. Although further exploration is needed, these students' experiences may highlight an area for growth in terms of programming and support for current students around navigating the housing market post-graduation. Finally, it would benefit Chico State to further examine what leads students to seeking out housing resources in the first place. Perhaps further evaluation can highlight potential areas for prevention services and programming supports.

In the midst of the global pandemic, the first year of the RRH program provided a strong, impactful foundation from which to grow the program. Participants benefited from the resources and support that they received and as the program grows, future evaluation will help to

illuminate the long-term impact of housing stability supports on the health, wellbeing and academic success of our Chico State University students.

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