Shared Housing is failing in LA — what to do about it

Matthias Sieber

University of Southern California

Gould School of Law

April 30, 2021

1 Introduction

Factors that contribute to homelessness are well-documented: Lack of affordable housing, unemployment, and poverty are frequently cited as reasons for homelessness [LAF]. In the United States of America, systemic racism, whiteness, and heteronormitivity are greatly responsible for disproportionate representation of members of racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and formerly incarcarated individuals in the homeless population [LSR15]. Poverty (as a result of the state's failure to ensure a proper education for the greater society as partially explained by Lipset's modernization theory) is indirectly linked to the disproportionate representation of veterans in the homeless population and people developing mental disabilities. The decades-long ongoing decline in public assistance further exacerbates the already harmful situation.

Over one-hundred of (mostly not-for-profit) organizations exist in Los Angeles alone to combat the issues of homelessness. While foreclosures, domestic violence-induced homelessness, disparities in ethnicity and gender across the homeless population, and the overall growing number of people exiting secured housing for the first time in their lives cannot be easily blamed on these organizations, non-profits in particular appear to be neither effective nor efficient in realizing their mission statements.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (from here on referred to as LAHSA) states on their website: "To drive the collaborative strategic vision to create solutions for the crisis of homelessness grounded in compassion, equity, and inclusion. [LAHa]"

LAHSA is attempting to have several organizations, nonprofits and for-profit vendors work together to improve outcomes for the population they are serving. LAHSA is also managing the Homeless Management Information System (short: HMIS) by Clarity for Los Angeles. Here, the word *managing* is equivalent to gatekeeping, as LAHSA routinely fails to provide any suitable access to its vendors (e.g. professional, highly experienced software development teams) who actively try to solve homelessness. At this point, there is little collaboration, equity, and inclusion when it comes to working with other organizations and

the homeless. Instead, housing service providers are encouraged by government-passed down policy and LAHSA (in Los Angeles County, Pasadena, and Glendale) specifically to move homeless people into shared housing without suitable consideration for these participants[1] of their associated programs. This is not surprising, as the field of social work as a whole still has not properly addressed its inherited whiteness [Gre21].

Not just in Los Angeles County, but globally, not-for-profit organizations especially have proven to be inadequately equipped to take on social problems like homelessness [Yun09]. It does not have to be that way.

This paper highlights not so much the properly understood reasons of why people end up on the street, but why people who were given the opportunity to have a solid roof over their head (via shared housing) end up homeless once again — by and large permanently. Housing service providers often neglect the individual circumstances of participants and focus on finding the first available unit to the participant — often breaking apart the established social networks by putting the participant into remote areas or improper housing. Participants are generally unable to freely choose their co-tenants in shared housing and reliant on the housing service provider and their manual, inefficient, and error-prone participant-matching processes — if these exist at all; often, participants are just arbitrarily grouped together without concern for compatibility between participants. As the participants are commonly not equipped with effective conflict resolution methods for co-habitation with a stranger, severe mismatches can cause at best a mental health decline, while more severe cases can be life-threatening.

Additionally, this paper attempts to influence housing service providers and policy makers to think of participants holistically and take their needs, interests, and desires seriously. LAHSA's mission statement is an appropriate starting point — it just has to be implemented and most importantly include and support participants throughout the entirety of the process. Doing so will be a step forward to solving homelessness.

---

[1]To-be-housed homeless people are generally referred to as *participants* in housing programs, despite being treated as objects without a will by their case workers — often also mislabelled as *advocates*.

2   Issues

2.1   Matching participants to housing units

For Los Angeles County, LAHSA segments the region into so-called Service Planning Areas (short: SPA). Every of the eight SPAs has its own regional lead organization assigned by LAHSA. Each SPA is comprised of multiple zip codes. The area designations from SPA 1 through 8 with their respective lead organization are as follows [LAHb]:

1. Antelope Valley (Valley Oasis)

2. San Fernando Valley (LA Family Housing Corporation)

3. San Gabriel Valley (Union Station Homeless Services)

4. Metro Los Angeles (The People Concern)

5. West Los Angeles (St. Joseph Center)

6. South Los Angeles (SSG HOPICS)

7. East Los Angeles (PATH)

8. South Bay / Harbor (Harbor Interfaith Services, Inc.)

Commonly, a housing service provider has also housing unit locators that find and hold housing units within their SPA so their advocates / case workers can try and place participants into these units, even though another unit in a neighboring SPA would be more suitable for the current needs (e.g. proximity to social network, frequent medical visits, access to support groups) of the participant.

Organizations under LAHSA are often silo'd and fend for themselves, not for the participants. As these organizations are in constant fundraising-mode, it is hard to imagine that true collaboration over a perceived fixed pie of resources can ever occur. Even if true collaboration among lead organizations is intended, the lack of interoperability in existing tools to

facilitate moving the homeless population into shared housing is an issue that LAHSA or its partner organizations have not yet solved.

2.1.1 Breaking apart existing, positive social networks

Housing service providers are set-up to match individual participants into shared housing units without real consideration for the participant's established social network. Proximity to the participant's friends, family, and other support is ultimately overlooked, and the participant displaced.

Lack of mobility, feelings of shame over the shared space or potential interaction with the other tenants, and landlords' prohibitions on overnight guests contribute to a decline in social networks and ultimately a sense of isolation [WOA19, BKS12].

2.1.2 Vetting of landlords

While landlords have the questionable luxury of denying participants based on criminal history or evictions, participants do not have the same ability to gather insight into landlord's behavior and attitudes. Sexual assault by landlords [CTB20] in shared housing is under-reported most likely due to the criminalization of homeless and general attitudes towards law enforcement [KS16]. The vetting process of LAHSA lead organizations is insufficient as landlords, who should not be put in a position of power over this vulnerable population, have been approved to open their housing units to participants. Participants have been assigned to these units run by landlords who have been labelled as "crazy" by employees or volunteers of LAHSA lead organizations. That these warning signs were ignored shows a lack of cohesion among teams and inexcusable quality of the process.

2.2 Matching participants to other participants

Just like most homeless shelters, housing service providers fail the participants in keeping their functioning social network together. Housing service providers are at best set-up to

effectively (but often only temporarily for more reasons to be discussed below) move partic-
ipants into a housing unit one at a time. Housing policy focuses on the physical aspects of
housing, yet routinely falls flat to acknowledge the equal importance of the lived relationships
that develop within a shared housing unit.

Furthermore, the lack of universal socially accepted guiding principles on how to behave
as a tenant in a non-kinship shared housing situation may increase the frequency of conflicts
between participants [CTB20, Nat03].

2.2.1 Disempowered participants are treated as objects

By deciding over an increasing population, housing service providers and governments alike
do not meet their own key performance indicators nor impact the population they claim to
serve positevely in any meaningful and permanent way.

Participants have preferences (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, shared interests) when it comes
to selecting their co-tenants [CTB20]. And while some housing service providers capture
some preferences and dislikes via questionnaires, for better or worse, these considerations
are usually not considered. This can be, unfortunately for very obvious reasons, extremely
dangerous for participants.

At best, participants feel objectified as they are disempowered and not included in the
process of finding suitable housing. Often, an available unit — which is often just one option
to any participant, despite the lack of affordable, suitable housing — is presented by their
case worker in the form of an ultimatum, increasing the stress on the participant, when the
prospect of a home should be a joyful possibility.

2.2.2 Differing expectations can result in conflicts

In a shared housing environment it is not unusual that a tenant's activities (e.g. music / noise
pollution, saving water / not flushing the toilet every time after use) may be to the perceived
detriment of a co-tenant's quality of life [Mau08]. Conflicts between participants regularly

arise over different expectations and (non-) action on perceived standards especially over domestic chores [CTB20].

2.2.3 Housing service providers' lacking processes

Theft, disruptive behavior due to substance abuse, blatant bigotry, verbal and/or physical harassment, are more severe cases that are spurred by a landlord's desire to just fill their cheap housing with paying bodies [WOA19], and made possible by a system of housing service providers that fail to advocate for and ensure the safety of the participants of their housing programs.

2.3 Mental health

2.3.1 Mental health decline

Substandard characteristics of a housing arrangement (e.g. subpar physical condition of the building, relative high cost, instability, located in neighborhoods with adverse health attributes) negatively affect the health of tenants [BCSS13, GPB+11, SH19]. The eager matching of participants to shared housing units and often resulting incompatibilities and arising conflicts between tenants has often severe negative health consequences (e.g. invasion of pricacy, proneness to sexual assault, self-harming [WOA19]) for a population that is more likely to suffer from pre-existing mental health issues.

Not meeting this vulnerable population's interest is to the detriment of the participants, ending in worsened mental health and routinely dissolvement of housing arrangements. Experiences in shared housing are sometimes so bad, that the participant decides to rather relocate to the streets and abstain from following shared housing opportunities [CTB20].

3   What to do

Discourse analysis on audio-recorded interviews of 37 participants, students or full-time employees between 20 and 35 years old in New Zealand where shared housing has been described as a rite of passage surfaced two preferred conflict resolution strategies: Open, relaxed dialogue as a first option with avoidance as a viable alternative [CTB20].

It may be useful to pair participants by their conflict resolution style (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accomodating [She18]) and/or provide training on the Harvard Method on principled negotiation to steer participants to a more collaborative thought process and thus allow participants to solve their conflicts amicably. A self-awareness of one's own biases is important [BG16], and it is equally important to be "aware of what disgruntles others" [CTB20, p. 8] to reduce and manage conflict — this applies to partcipants among each other as it does to advocates and all personnel involved in finding, providing, and co-creating a suitable home for the homeless.

Avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy can be effective as it allows "groups to function better in the face of dysfunctional, hard-to-resolve interpersonal differences" [She18, p. 211]. Conflicts may vanish with time, or participants move out of the shared housing unit — with no guarantee that the next place will be any more suitable [CTB20].

3.1   Improving mental health in shared housing

A Swedish study illustrates how proper management of participants' mental health could look like. The content analysis on interviews with 29 participants with serious mental illness indicates that supportive housing facilities may need to actively facilitate relationships between tenants and staff of supportive housing for improved outcomes [BTEE14]. These participants reported having a place to rest, having someone to attach to, and being a valued member of a community as positive aspects of their living situation. Supportive housing staff was needed to continously evaluat participants' needs. The staff can aid in stimulating

participants' mental and social aspects of their lives by facilitating engaging activities. Somw participants reported a sense of gloom when they themselves were still "full of energy", yet activities have ended for the day.

A study conducted in Norway came to similar conclusions and deemed meaningful daily activities outside the residence as essential to avoid re-hospitalization [RBS+16]. While daily activities are provided, the "main purpose of these facilities is to maximize the personal autonomy of residents and encourage them to do as much as possible for themselves…with the support of the staff as needed" [RBS+16, p. 2]. The provided private fully equipped appartment with the opportunity to use a shared living room has been reported as a big positive factor in the satisfaction of participants. In contrast, *Hope of the Valley* and other housing providers in Los Angeles now offer housing that have been described as sheds by the population they hope to house.

Compared to U.S. counterparts, clearly, the sometimes unfulfiled needs of participants in Scandinavia are higher in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Improving mental health outcomes for participants can be driven positively by properly trained staff that continously evaluates and acts on the needs of the participants.

3.2 Helping participants to make their home

Community plays a role in participants with and without severe mental health challenges.

It can be beneficial for tenants to try to get to know each other including respective communication styles, triggers et cetera through open dialogue. Sharing one's insights and carefully packaged expectations in a relaxed atmosphere can move superficial talk to deeper conversations. By learning about one another, participants may still disagree on issues, but the relationship-building is essential in excluding potentially very harmful outbursts as a sense of genuine care for another will foster over time [TB16, FUP11]. Advocates who are trained in transformative mediation should encourage dialogue and allow participants to get to know each other while modelling active listening, rephrasing, reframing, and other

facilitation skills.

Unmet expectations, as previously discussed, are a common source of conflict between participants. Yet conflict is not inherently bad. Conflict, if addressed properly, can lay the groundwork for improved outcomes for all parties involved [FUP11, Deu14]. If participants agree and act on a shared vision of how their home should function, they can achieve harmony [CTB20].

Additional community-building may need to take place in order for participants and neighbors to feel comfortable with each other. Some housing service providers have skilled mediators that even solve conflicts between gangs and participants that got their unit taken over by the local gang. Other housing service providers are advocates only in name.

3.3   A model for housing social networks

It should not require peer-reviewed articles to understand that homeless people are people with social networks, too. Yet, this vulnerable population is often treated as objects that have to be put away. This section looks at ways to keep functioning social networks of potential participants of shared housing programs in tact while improving outcomes for the sub-community, their individuals, and the greater community at large.

3.3.1   Housing unit data

Housing service providers have their own housing unit locators or they rely on unreliable services like LeaseUp[2] that has no concept of shared housing on a data or API level, but fakes sophistication and costs tax payers a significant amount of money in maintenance.

A standardized, but centralized API or the use of a 3rd generation blockchain technology like Cardano[3] would improve data accuracy, reliability, accountability and transparency.

In the meantime, a survey for landlords would ask basic information about a housing units's location, amenities on a housing unit level, amenities on a bedroom level, footage,

---

[2]https://leaseupla.org
[3]https://cardano.org

rent, and bathrooms. Further information requested includes what vouchers are accepted and whether participants with sex offender status, evictions, or convictions are allowed in the unit. Physical barriers to the unit and the parking situation should be disclosed and images and/or videos added.

That data will be used to match housing units to participants and display the information on a dedicated web application where participants can request a viewing.

3.3.2 Participant data

For participants to be matched to appropriate housing units and other participants, reliable data on a participant has to be collected. Homeless services provider in Los Angeles generally use the ids provided by the Homeless Management Information System, which is developed by Clarity and managed for the Greater Los Angeles region by LAHSA. As eluded to in the introduction, LAHSA is doing a terrible job of providing access to the system. Service providers ask participants for their HMIS id in addition to the data that would come with it (if given access to the system) to keep track of participants internally. Not all participants have a HMIS id. This further inhibits collaboration among service providers and makes reliable identification of participants extremely difficult and impractical.

The data can be collected via a well-structured questionnaire that can be self-administered (for those participants that have access to the internet via a smartphone or computer) or filled out with the help of an advocate at a housing service provider. At a minimum, the questionnaire should be made available in English and Spanish.

In addition to full name, contact information, demographic information such as gender, ethnicity, race, age / date of birth is important to collect for matching among participants. Similarly, it is mandatory to surface a participant's biases across these and more themes. The survey would have about one hundred questions (some of them are conditional on one the existence of specific answer patterns) that surfaces not only prejudices, but also more positive preferences that can aid in creating a sense of community. Most importantly, the

11

participant's needs need to be accurately captured. If the answer to the survey question "How many stairs can you comfortably get up and get down" is "wheelchair / no steps" then that will certainly narrow down recommendations to housing units that are ADA accessible. Location preferences will be deemed more important, if the participant's response indicate that important persons or facilities in the participant's life are nearby (e.g. medical doctors, counselors, family members, support groups).

When a participant provides a personal email that they have exclusive access to, they are set up to self-advocate for themselves and approve or deny viewing, and ultimately moving into specific shared housing units. An important question to keep social networks together is "Do you have a specific person or persons you would consider living with?" — sophisticated web technology allows to preemptively draw connections to said person (whether they already took the intake form themselves or not), but none of LA's housing service providers have that level of expertise yet. An important question that housing service providers that somewhat attempt to keep together should ask is: "Do you feel safe living with that person?"[4]

Some other questions that gain insight into a participant's readiness for shared housing and matching to other participants are:

- "How many housemates would you consider living with?"

- "Do you need a unit with a designated parking spot?"

- "Do you smoke tobacco or marijuana"

- "How clean would you expect your housemate to keep shared areas of your home?"

- "What kind of relationship would you prefer to have with a housemate?"

Data around pet preferences (have / want / need / dislike), evictions / convictions / registered sex offender, spoken languages (at a level to chat with a friend), religion and
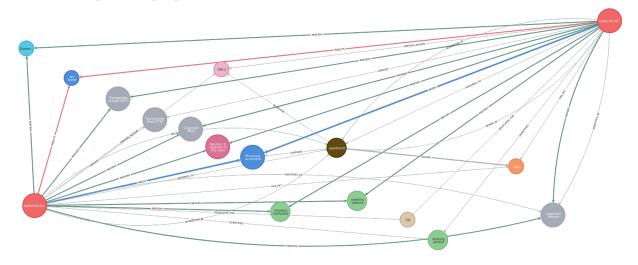
---

[4]This information has been provided by Azbai Arreguin — BA Psychology & Master of Social Work — in private conversation to identify potential domestic violence situations.

importance, political interest and party affiliation, hobbies and activities, bedtime, noise sensitivity / noise activities, guests during day / overnight, and substance use are other topics of importance for proper matching that preemptively reduces conflict.

Based on the answer, a graph model of the participant in relation to their preferences, dislikes, other participants, housing units etc. can be drawn.

Since this can be automated and no person needs to tell the participant about the existence they think they are a good match for (after painstakingly comparing data), the process of getting participants into proper housing (preferably with or near their supportive social network) is streamlined. Advocates should spend their time on mental health, conflict resolution, social work, but not data entry that can be automated. With this system, it frees advocates also up from pressuring participants into the first open house they find on the basis that the work of finding a decent room for a participant is so much work. Participants will be able to make an informed decision whether they would like to view and move into a recommended unit or not. This self-advocacy is also an important step to regaining a sense of self and autonomity for participants. Ideally participants will have their smartphones and are able to use these. They can be notified via email or SMS on recommendations and the detailed status of their process in moving into a home they can call their own.

Participant survey data and housing unit data are created as a directed graph. Nodes and relationships have properties that hold further data.

This particular subgraph shows the matching of two participants (the nodes on the bottom left and top right) that had no prior relationships to a housing unit (brown node called apartment.) This housing unit is located in SPA 2, where both participants indicated they prefer living in. Participants indicated that they reject living in a *dry home* (which this apartment is not), and both participants have exact preferences for alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use. Both participants have some need for physical accessibility, which the housing unit fully supports.

As far as the participant to participant matching goes, this one is easy as well. The participants identified as cisgender female and reported only a slight aversion to living with transgender male participants. Both participants have one dog each (which is okay in the housing unit) and share a hobby (gardening), while being fairly neutral on the political spectrum with little interest in bringing up political topics themselves (as indicated on the property on the relationship to the node).

While not a factor for the recommendation, both participants share the same advocate, which could be helpful in mediating conflicts between the participants, if a need should arise.

The recommendation would happen automatically. This graph presentation is only a simplified illustration on why such a recommendation would occur.

4   Conclusion

LAHSA's inability to foster collaboration among housing service providers and overall operational challenges and inefficiencies in the involved organizations are to the detriment of the homeless population. More resources should go to proper assisted-as-needed housing, mental health services and other counseling. Yet, LAHSA and their partners have not shown interest in tackling systems of homelessness, nor even improve their systems when housing the homeless. Instead, the experience of homeless people in the system is so bad that they often-opt out; as one of the few decisions that they could make.

To amplify the voices of the participants, technology can help in relieving pressure from social workers that are too often misused as data entry personnel. Unfortunately, the support from LAHSA and piloting service providers is so bad, one can not shake off the feeling that these organizations have suffered so long from indecisiveness and lack of vision that one can not expect help from these paper-heavy organizations. Instead of trying to align oneself with these slow and inefficient institutions, one could try to go the YC route to raise funds, awareness, and increase one's ethos and influence over political institutions.

A new alternative could also be to get funding and awareness through community-driven initiatives like Project Catalyst[5], which aims at doing good in the world. Its proposals, which can receive funding via community voting, are built-on the Cardano blockchain. A recent Cardano project has been the launch of a project through the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia, onboarding five million people[6].

Ongoing preliminary research aims to clarify the feasibility of bringing housing unit data and/or participant data onto the blockchain.

---

[5]https://cardano.ideascale.com/
[6]see https://africa.cardano.org/

References

[BCSS13] Matt Barnes, Carl Cullinane, Sara Scott, and S Silvester. People living in bad housing: Numbers and health impacts. 2013.

[BG16]   Mahzarin R Banaji and Anthony G Greenwald. *Blindspot: Hidden biases of good people*. Bantam, 2016.

[BKS12]   Caroline Barratt, Christopher Kitcher, and Jill Stewart. Beyond safety to wellbeing: How local authorities can mitigate the mental health risks of living in houses in multiple occupation. *Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 12(1):39–51, 2012.

[BTEE14] Anita Bengtsson-Tops, Ulf Ericsson, and Kent Ehliasson. Living in supportive housing for people with serious mental illness: A paradoxical everyday life. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 23(5):409–418, 2014.

[CTB20]   Vicky Clark, Keith Tuffin, and Natilene Bowker. Managing conflict in shared housing for young adults. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology (Online)*, 49(1):4–13, 2020.

[Deu14]   Morton Deutsch. Cooperation, competition, and conflict. 2014.

[FUP11]   Roger Fisher, William L Ury, and Bruce Patton. *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin, 2011.

[GPB+11] Marcia Gibson, Mark Petticrew, Clare Bambra, Amanda J Sowden, Kath E Wright, and Margaret Whitehead. Housing and health inequalities: a synthesis of systematic reviews of interventions aimed at different pathways linking housing and health. *Health & place*, 17(1):175–184, 2011.

[Gre21]   Joshua R Gregory. Social work as a product and project of whiteness, 1607–1900. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1):17–36, 2021.

[KS16]   Yasmeen I Krameddine and Peter H Silverstone. Police use of handcuffs in the homeless population leads to long-term negative attitudes within this group. *International journal of law and psychiatry*, 44:81–90, 2016.

[LAF]   Causes & Solutions | LA Family Housing. https://lafh.org/causes-solutions. Accessed: 2021-03-19.

[LAHa]   About LAHSA. https://www.lahsa.org/about. Accessed: 2021-03-19.

[LAHb]   Regional Info. https://www.lahsa.org/ces/regional-info. Accessed: 2021-03-19.

[LSR15]   Kaya Lurie, Breanne Schuster, and Sara Rankin. Discrimination at the margins: The intersectionality of homelessness & other marginalized groups. *Available at SSRN 2602532*, 2015.

[Mau08]   Karsten Mause. The tragedy of the commune: Learning from worst-case scenarios. *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 37(1):308–327, 2008.

[Nat03]   Kristin Natalier. I'm not his wife' doing gender and doing housework in the absence of women. *Journal of Sociology*, 39(3):253–269, 2003.

[RBS+16]   Eirik Roos, Ottar Bjerkeset, Erik Søndenaa, Dag Øyvind Antonsen, and Aslak Steinsbekk. A qualitative study of how people with severe mental illness experience living in sheltered housing with a private fully equipped apartment. *BMC psychiatry*, 16(1):1–9, 2016.

[SH19]   Carolyn B Swope and Diana Hernández. Housing as a determinant of health equity: A conceptual model. *Social Science & Medicine*, 243:112571, 2019.

[She18]   G Richard Shell. *Bargaining for advantage: Negotiation strategies for reasonable people*. Penguin, 2018.

[TB16]   Ginka Toegel and Jean-Louis Barsoux. How to preempt team conflict. *Harvard business review*, 94(6):78–83, 2016.

[WOA19] Eleanor Wilkinson and Iliana Ortega-Alcázar. Stranger danger? the intersectional impacts of shared housing on young people's health & wellbeing. *Health & place*, 60:102191, 2019.

[Yun09] Muhammad Yunus. *Creating a world without poverty: Social business and the future of capitalism.* Public Affairs, 2009.