Interim Evaluation: Berkeley Encampment Resolution/RV Buyback Program

Jan 2025 – Dec 2025

PUBLISHED MARCH 2026

Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative

UCSF

University of California San Francisco

Interim Evaluation of the Berkeley Encampment Resolution/RV Buyback Program

Findings from the first year (Jan 2025–Dec 2025)

Authors: Margot Kushel, MD, Michael Duke, PhD.

Suggested Citation: Kushel, M., Duke, M. (2026). Interim Evaluation of the Berkeley Encampment Resolution/RV Buyback Program. UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative.

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Executive Summary

To resolve a longstanding homeless encampment in which most residents lived in oversized vehicles, the City of Berkeley instituted an initiative consisting of a vehicle buyback program for all oversized vehicles and offers of a stay in a low-barrier non-congregate shelter program with enhanced case management.

The buyback had two goals: to allow the city to dispose of oversized vehicles, the majority of which were not operable, and to provide residents with liquid assets in exchange for giving up their vehicle, in order to encourage them to accept non-congregate long-term shelter.

The goal of the shelter program is to provide a safe setting for residents while they identify and move into permanent housing. The shelter funding will last three years; thus, the City offered residents the ability to stay for up to three years. The City supported the initiative using funding from California's Encampment Resolution Fund. Berkeley officials chose the encampment due to both the perceived needs of the residents and the public safety risks of the encampment. To decrease the risk of people entering the encampment for the purposes of enrolling in the program, the City took a census of residents in October 2024 to determine priority.

Preliminary Findings

Overall

- **The program, while not without challenges, has met its preliminary goals.** Among owners of 32 oversized vehicles in the encampment, 29 accepted the buyback offer. Among 54 encampment residents eligible to enter the non-congregate shelter program, 41 did. The encampment has been closed. Most residents are doing well in the non-congregate shelter. Of 34 in the main shelter, eight have returned to permanent housing, most are now "document-ready," and eight expect housing soon. Most have engaged in health services, and none have died. Four residents have been evicted for rule violations. After initial skepticism, the residents have mostly expressed satisfaction with both the buyback and non-congregate shelter program.

Program Uptake

- **Most encampment residents had not lived in Berkeley when they had lost their stable housing.** Instead, they came to the encampment from other encampments nearby, including a large number whose encampment was "cleared" in a neighboring county.

- **Oversized vehicle owners overwhelmingly chose to participate in the buyback program,** which offered to buy oversized vehicles for $175 per linear foot, regardless of condition. Owners of 29 out of 32 existing oversized vehicles elected to take part. One of the three who did not participate in the buyback took

the offer to move into the non-congregate shelter and gave her oversized vehicle to a relative in another part of the state.

- **Of 54 encampment residents who were eligible for the program, 41 elected to move into a non-congregate shelter.** They brought two additional residents, including romantic partners and family members who were not in the census, for a total of 43 shelter program participants. Of these 43 residents (primary residents and their partners or family), 34 lived in the primary non-congregate shelter, and the City placed the nine others elsewhere.

Resident Experience

- **Overall, after initial distrust, residents viewed the program positively.** They felt that the buyback program was generally fair and did not appear to regret having sold their vehicles. The program has helped residents become "document-ready" for housing and connect them to health care and other social services.

- **The shelter program is low-barrier and does not require sobriety or engagement in treatment as a condition to stay in the hotel.** The program has sought to engage residents in case management, housing navigation, and healthcare services. There have been no overdoses or deaths among residents.

- **In the primary shelter, eight of the 34 residents have exited for long-term permanent housing.** An additional eight are in the process of obtaining housing, which they anticipate moving into in the near future. Four residents have been evicted from the program for violating program rules. These four residents returned to unstable settings, including homelessness, but remain eligible for case management services at the facility.

Encampment resolution

- **The City was able to close the encampment.** The majority of the residents accepted and remained in shelter. Residents who declined the offer of non-congregate shelter (including two households who declined the vehicle buyback program) moved to other unsheltered areas.

Implementation Challenges

- **The City experienced delays in disposing of the vehicles that they bought back.** Causes of delays included difficulty finding local towing companies willing to remove the vehicles and restrictions imposed by local and state laws on removing vehicles. The delays caused concern among the owners who participated in the RV buyback program, but the City was eventually able to remove the vehicles.

- **Non-congregate shelter residents were concerned about limitations on visitors to the site,** despite generally approving of the program.

- **Returns to housing have been slow, due to long wait lists for housing subsidies or permanent supportive housing slots.** At the time of this interim report, eight of the 34 residents of the primary shelter have regained permanent housing. An additional eight are in the process of obtaining permanent housing. Berkeley has moved eight additional people into the shelter, who came from other encampments.

Preliminary Recommendations

- **To address homelessness among people living in oversized vehicles, pair low-barrier non-congregate shelter with oversized vehicle buyback offers and allow participation in one without the other.** Without vehicle buyback offers, residents may fear losing their primary asset by coming indoors. This is a particular concern for those offered shelter, rather than permanent housing. By acknowledging the importance of the oversized vehicles to residents' sense of safety and empowering them with the flexibility that comes from having a small amount of savings, the buyback program built trust, gave residents agency, and enabled residents to accept offers of long-term (but not permanent) non-congregate shelter.

- **Maintain program flexibility.** Key strategies that increased program uptake included not requiring residents to accept the buyback offer to move into the non-congregate shelter, providing a low-barrier shelter with best practices around overdose prevention and resident well-being, and allowing residents to live with partners, pets, or other family members.

- **Increase efforts to better understand cross-jurisdictional movement to create equitable policymaking. The Homeless Data Integration System (HDIS) creates an opportunity for policymakers to understand the frequency and patterns of movement across jurisdictional lines among people experiencing homelessness.** While they had lived in the targeted encampment for some time, many residents had initially moved there from another encampment a few miles away that had been "cleared" without viable offers of shelter. The original encampment, while only a few exits up a major highway, was in a different county. The people who came from the neighboring county chose the Berkeley encampment for its proximity to employment and to their social support. They came without respect to county lines, which are not visible or important to people experiencing homelessness. People did not come from afar to seek services; however, cities that abut county borders (particularly those with more punitive policies) may observe a higher proportion of people coming from other counties. There is a need for policies that disincentivize jurisdictions to "push" community members away and that support jurisdictions that have a larger share of people from other jurisdictions. The increased use of the Homeless Data Integration System (HDIS), a database that combines jurisdictions' Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS), may allow for

better understanding of cross-jurisdictional movement to allow for more equitable policymaking.

- **Use transparent prioritization policies.** Counter to myths, people experiencing homelessness want to accept credible offers of non-congregate shelter. To mitigate against people coming from surrounding areas for the program, the City took a census of the encampment several months prior to the program's initiation, giving these residents priority. This is a pragmatic way to handle prioritization, and the need for it speaks to the high interest in these programs.

- **Jurisdictions looking to resolve encampments should not assume that all encampment residents prefer or require to be sheltered or housed near one another.** It is plausible that different encampment communities have different preferences. Part of the planning process should include private conversations with residents to assess whether they have a strong preference to stay together, live apart, or have no preference.

- **Ensure adequate staffing and on-site services to maintain healthy environments and promote successful linkages to community services.** Increasing on-site housing navigation and health services (including low-barrier mental health and substance use treatment) may increase uptake.

- **Prioritize permanent housing exits to sustain program capacity.** Program success depends on the program's ability to transition residents to permanent housing. Doing so will allow the program to serve a larger number of people. There is a need to examine prioritization processes for permanent supportive housing and housing subsidies and to investigate other ways to promote permanent housing exits to allow for continued program success.

> "Offering to buy my vehicle to get me off the street is a fantastic idea, because that's actually what was holding me to the street at that point. I mean, it was my shelter. It was my house, basically. So, to leave that, I'm worried.
>
> And then to have to sell that or having somebody buy that at the same time, it was just like two birds with one stone. And it made everything sort of believable that I could actually do it."
>
> - Berkeley Encampment Resident

Introduction

Homelessness, particularly unsheltered homelessness, is a significant issue throughout California. The state is home to approximately 12% of the nation's population, but 24% of its homeless population, and about half of its unsheltered population. Sixty-six percent of people experiencing homelessness in California do so in unsheltered locations—living their private lives in public and facing numerous health and safety threats.

Unsheltered homelessness includes both people living outdoors and people living in a vehicle. One increasingly common experience is living in a vehicle. In the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness (CASPEH), 21% of adult Californians experiencing homelessness reported spending most nights in the prior six months in a vehicle, and about twice as many spent one or more nights there. Up to half of the people living in their vehicles do so in "oversized" vehicles, such as Recreational Vehicles (RVs), school buses, or similar. People experiencing homelessness reported staying in vehicles (rather than outside or in shelters) because they provided protection from the elements and a greater sense of safety. However, many of these vehicles are inoperable and vulnerable to ticketing, impoundment, and vandalism.

In many communities, unsheltered homelessness is most visible in encampments, including some that contain clusters of oversized vehicles. While these spaces can provide residents with a sense of community and safety, they can create public health threats—including poor sanitation—and generate community complaints.

Data from early 2025 suggest that focused efforts throughout California led to a 9% reduction in unsheltered homelessness. However, homelessness—and particularly unsheltered homelessness—remains a critical challenge in California.

On September 10, 2024, the City Council of Berkeley, CA adopted Resolution No. 71,513-N.S., which prioritized resolving a longstanding encampment in the Northwest part of the city due to health and safety risks. This encampment included a number of oversized vehicles in which residents lived. To support residents and reduce the harms that can occur during encampment resolutions, Berkeley's Homeless Response Team planned two initiatives to support residents: a vehicle buyback program and a non-congregate shelter program in a local motel with wraparound services. The City chose Dorothy Day House, a local homeless services organization, to operate the shelter program. The City of Berkeley received funding through round three of California's Encampment Resolution Funding (ERF-3). The program began in January 2025.

The City of Berkeley contracted with UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative (BHHI) to evaluate the intervention. In this report, UCSF BHHI investigators

present an interim evaluation following the first year of the program. It describes the city's preparatory activities to establish the program, encampment members' initial responses to the initiatives, the subsequent opportunities and challenges faced by residents in adjusting to their new living situation, and the efforts of staff to help them achieve their housing and other life goals. The UCSF Institutional Review Board approved the project. We present methodological details in an appendix.

Overview of Program and Process

The program consisted of two distinct components: 1) a vehicle buyback program, and 2) non-congregate shelter and wraparound services for former encampment residents. The City conducted a census of the encampment in October 2024, a few months before the start of the program. The 36 encampment residents who were present in the census received priority for participating in these programs. Residents who were not in the initial census but moved in prior to the program announcement received second preference. Residents could participate in either the buyback program, the shelter program, or both.

Vehicle Buyback

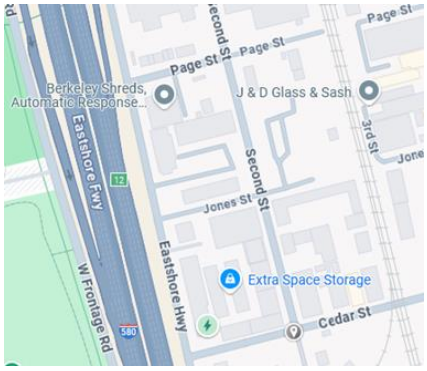
The buyback program offered residents $175 per linear foot (front to rear bumper) to purchase their oversized vehicles. Each resident could sell one eligible vehicle and receive a flat rate, regardless of the vehicle's operability or condition. To recognize that participants might change their minds after signing over their vehicle, the City paid participants 15 percent upfront, and the remaining 85 percent once the City towed the vehicle from the encampment. If residents changed their minds and chose not to sell their vehicle to the City after receiving their deposit but before the City disposed of the vehicle, they could keep the deposit.

Non-Congregate Shelter Program

The shelter program provided residents non-congregate, low-barrier shelter with on-site case management to help them achieve their goals, including permanent housing. The City master leased a local two-story motel as the primary shelter. Dorothy Day House, a local nonprofit that serves people experiencing homelessness, provided the services, which included case management and a meal program. Residents are eligible to stay for up to three years, at which point the funding for the program is scheduled to run out. Although the shelter was low-barrier, residents were required to follow program rules to remain there. These rules prohibited violence, activities that drew law enforcement to the shelter with a search warrant, and outside visitors in their rooms.

Findings

Description of the Encampment Prior to the Initiative



The encampment was situated along Second Street from Cedar to Page Streets. Some encampment residents resided on Jones, Page, and Cedar Streets, which run perpendicular to Second Street. It was bordered to the west by the Eastshore Freeway (which serves as the de facto access road for Interstates 80 and 580) and to the east by a set of train tracks. Although we do not know how long the site has served as an encampment, visual evidence from Google Maps' street view suggests that people have resided in tent and vehicle encampments at this location on and off since at least 2008.

Before becoming homeless, most participants lived in Richmond, El Sobrante, or San Pablo in Contra Costa County. Two lived in Berkeley. Most residents came to the encampment from other encampments in Berkeley and Richmond, where most lived in oversized vehicles. Although some residents lived in tents, most resided in RVs or other oversized vehicles, and some owned trailers, cars, and other small vehicles in addition to their RV. Most had acquired their vehicle while already homeless, often purchasing them from other people who experienced homelessness. These vehicles were in various stages of repair; few were fully operable. One resident noted that she had purchased her vehicle with proceeds from selling her condominium after realizing she was going to become homeless; her vehicle was operable. Residents described several reasons for moving to the encampment. Some relocated to the area to be closer to their workplaces. Nearly all moved there because they had friends or acquaintances living in the encampment. Many relocated to the area after being displaced from their encampment on Rydin Road in Richmond, approximately 2.5 miles away. "I had a friend that stayed on Second Street, and he kept telling me, 'Come over, come to Berkeley', because Richmond … they don't do no helping with nothing ... So I just called him up one day, he pulled my van out here with a small car. It's been cool. I liked it. That's a lot better than Richmond."

Vehicle residents reported that they lived in a series of vehicles since they had become homeless; some had been towed, while others became uninhabitable. Most participants brought their oversized vehicles with them from other encampments. Others obtained them from residents who had left the 2nd Street encampment due to illness or incarceration, while a few who initially lacked a vehicle cohabited with residents who

had one. Some residents, particularly those living in tents, lived alone. Most others lived with family, friends, or romantic partners.

The encampment had several sections, and residents reported settling into sections where they already knew people. Although residents highlighted some positive aspects of living in the encampment—supportive relationships with their immediate neighbors, independence, freedom from the burden of paying rent—they also described numerous challenges. Sanitation posed a common concern. Participants complained about the encampment's large rat population, with some residents resorting to purchasing pellet guns to address the issue. People from outside the neighborhood used the encampment as an illegal dumping ground, leaving their refuse in a trash mound on Second Street. Residents would consolidate this trash to avoid having it cover the entire width of the street, but the debris would nonetheless blow throughout the encampment.

Participants reported being the victim of theft, both by other residents and by people from outside the encampment. Although residents reported they could rely on their close neighbors to watch their vehicles in their absence, theft remained a consistent problem. Women reported feeling unsafe in the encampment and described strategies for increasing their safety, including establishing relationships with male partners. Women participants reported that sexual assaults, indecent exposure, and other forms of gender violence posed an ongoing concern in the encampment.

Laying the Groundwork

To fulfill their obligation to resolve the Second Street encampment while ensuring that the resolution serves as a bridge to social services and permanent housing, the City of Berkeley's Homeless Response Team (BHRT) initiated outreach in the encampment. Realizing that people experiencing homelessness throughout the city might relocate to Second Street to participate in the upcoming program, the BHRT decided to prioritize long-term residents. In October 2024, they initiated a census for all current residents. Those on this list would receive priority for participating in the vehicle buyback and the non-congregate shelter programs. The initial list included 36 people. A second "Tier 2" list included those who had arrived after the October census and would be offered services if there were sufficient resources.

On January 14, 2025, the City's Homeless Response Team and Dorothy Day House held a community meeting in the encampment to discuss the vehicle buyback and housing programs. Approximately 28 residents attended. Residents asked how the BHRT determined the price and whether they would need to sell their vehicles to participate in the shelter program. The presenters noted that Berkeley decided to offer a flat rate of $175 per linear foot to promote equity among encampment residents. They emphasized that participants were not required to participate in both programs and could participate in only one. Most of the questions focused on the shelter program.

Several residents voiced their concerns about the policy prohibiting them from inviting guests, including family, to the motel. The Dorothy Day staff explained that the organization had faced problems with visitors carrying weapons or selling drugs in their other facilities. Implementing a no-guest policy was an effort to keep shelter residents safe. Residents expressed concern about rules limiting their ability to cook in their rooms, beyond using a microwave. The Dorothy Day representative noted that cooking in the rooms would pose a fire hazard. She reminded those in attendance that the program would provide three meals per day to residents and accommodate guests' dietary restrictions. Residents expressed concern about their pets. Program staff assured them that they could bring their dogs or cats.

Given the impact of the encampment resolution on their living situation, residents reported experiencing a range of emotions during the meeting. Some came to the meeting determined to participate in the program. As one resident reported, "I wanted to be first on the list to get in here (to the motel). Because I don't want to be out there…I made sure we got in here. I was on them every day. I'm like, 'I don't want to be there anymore, you got to get me out of there. You can have the car. I don't care. Just get us out of here.'"

> "I wanted to hear what they had to say. Because we'd been hearing rumors about that something like this was going to happen, but you can't count on anything really. You know what I mean? So, I was kind of a little bit excited. Apprehensive, of course, of everything, but here we are."

Most reported feeling apprehensive during the meeting, unsure about how the resolution would affect them, and whether the program would improve their housing situation.

Some characterized the process as coercive, since the City planned to close the encampment regardless of whether residents participated in the program. The presenters noted that the City Council had directed them to clear the encampment. Their goal was to provide alternatives and to avoid engaging law enforcement. They noted: "Help us to avoid doing things the hard way." The presenters added that residents could move to other unsheltered locations, if need be, but they could not stay where they were. A resident noted: "Whatever they say is going to happen is what's going to have to happen… it seemed like you didn't really have a choice in that we were going to either have to go along with it or you would suffer the consequences if you didn't…. They said either you can do this the hard way or you can do this the easy way. And so, I figured that the easy way was going along with whatever program they had set

forward. And the hard way would be removals by the police department, aggressive removals, as they said."

RV Buyback Program

The City of Berkeley modeled the buyback program on a successful initiative in Marin County and insights from a prior BHHI research study of oversized vehicle residents, The COVID-19-Oriented Resident of Oversized Vehicle Assessment (COROVA). In COROVA, residents of oversized vehicles expressed that they were concerned about losing their primary asset (their oversized vehicle) in exchange for a non-permanent offer of shelter (or short-term subsidized housing). By offering to buy back vehicles, the City acknowledged the importance of the oversized vehicles to residents' sense of security and well-being, giving residents the confidence to accept the non-congregate shelter offer.

The buyback program proved popular among residents. City outreach workers approached the owners of 32 vehicles in the encampment: of those, 29 agreed to the sale. After buying the vehicles, the City arranged to tow and dispose of them. Each resident approached could sell one oversized vehicle. Delays stemming from a lack of cooperation from local tow companies and existing State and City laws dictating the disposal processes for abandoned and potentially hazardous vehicles caused there to be a delay in removing the vehicles (and thus delays in paying residents the majority of the buyback price). After this delay, the City was able to tow the vehicles and pay the residents the remainder of their fee.

Outreach workers approached the owners of **32 oversized vehicles** in the encampment

29 agreed to sell.

Program Acceptance

RV residents considered their vehicles their homes and felt emotionally attached to them. Many spoke with pride about improvement projects they had undertaken to keep their living spaces comfortable, clean, and in good physical condition. Despite these sentiments, most felt cautiously optimistic when they heard about the buyback program.

Given the power imbalance between the encampment residents and the City, coupled with lingering concerns that city officials had not always treated homeless residents fairly, some expressed apprehension about the program, concerned about whether the City "(was) going to follow through with what they were saying as far as acquiring our vehicles from us and of our homes, to be honest. Our vehicles. And just a little bit

apprehensive of (whether) they're going to follow through. I mean, it's the City, you know what I mean? And it is just us."

Residents characterized the amount the City offered as fair. Because most residents' vehicles were inoperable, they felt that the amount they received in the buyback program was more than they would receive had they sold them on the open market. One respondent noted that he was reluctant to sell his vehicle but conceded that the buyback program had worked out for the best: "I didn't have a choice in the matter. My motor home was past registration, and it was going to get towed anyway. I had no choice in the matter. And turns out it was a good thing."

Another resident who had been skeptical about the program was surprised by the amount she received: "I thought (the buyback offer) was very generous. And I keep saying that I appreciate the opportunity and I appreciate the generosity, that they could have said 25 bucks a foot. They really could have … I was shocked, that's all. Shocked and thankful and grateful. We deserve it."

Table 1. Vehicle Buyback Program Uptake

	Tier 1 Residents	Tier 2 Residents	Total
Declined	3	0	3
Accepted	16	13	29
Total	**19**	**13**	**32**

As shown in Table 1, 16 out of 19 vehicle owner-residents listed in the October census (Tier 1) agreed to participate in the buyback program. The Homeless Response Team subsequently approached an additional 13 eligible owner-residents who were not listed in the October census (Tier 2), all of whom chose to participate. In total, owners of 29 out of the 32 vehicles who were approached agreed to sell their vehicles to the City.

Three encampment residents declined to participate in the buyback program. Two moved their vehicles to a nearby location. While the third declined to sell her vehicle, she agreed to leave the encampment and participate in the shelter program. The sole owner of an operable vehicle, she felt that the amount the City offered for the vehicle should be based both on the vehicle's condition and its square footage, not just on its length from bumper-to-bumper: "Some of these people only bought their (vehicles) for a couple hundred (dollars). Some people were gifted it, but I bought mine because that was the money that I got from selling my condo. So I just didn't think it was fair." Instead of selling her RV, she took it to a relative's property to be renovated. She planned to repair the vehicle and then either give the vehicle to her daughter or use it as short-term rental unit.

Some residents who participated in the buyback program came to realize that, while they viewed their vehicles as their homes, the logistical challenge of keeping them had become a barrier to obtaining permanent housing. As one resident said, “Offering to buy my vehicle to get me off the street is a fantastic idea, because that's actually what was holding me to the street at that point. I mean, it was my shelter. It was my house, basically. So, to leave that, I'm worried. And then to have to sell that or having somebody buy that at the same time, it was just like two birds with one stone. And it made everything sort of believable that I could actually do it.”

Once participants signed over their vehicles, the City paid their 15 percent deposit quickly; once the City arranged to have the vehicles towed from the encampment, they would pay the remainder. However, there were delays in removing some of the vehicles, for two reasons: 1) local tow companies refused the vehicles, citing lack of impound yard space or potentially hazardous vehicle conditions (e.g., rodents) as reasons they could not accept them; and 2) restrictions imposed by State and local laws on the circumstances in which, and the processes by which, vehicles that could not be impounded could otherwise be removed from the street. As a result, many participants experienced longer-than-anticipated delays in receiving their money, causing some to express concern. Because the City staff and Dorothy Day personnel discussed the non-congregate program together during the town hall meeting, some residents assumed that the shelter staff were City employees and directed questions and frustration about not knowing when they would receive their money to them. Although most residents understood the circumstances that caused these delays, they were worried that they would not receive the remainder of their payout, or that their vehicles would fall into disrepair.

A few participants mistakenly believed that the City would void their agreement should anything happen to their vehicle after they left the encampment. For example, an encampment resident who moved into the motel heard that other people were squatting in his vehicle to escape the cold. Concerned that the presence of people in his vehicle would nullify the agreement, he returned to the encampment and shattered all of the vehicle’s windows to make it less habitable.

Program participants used the funds from the buyback program in a variety of ways. Some chose to save all or part of their payout to develop a financial cushion once they regained housing. Others used the money to pay off debts or to provide financial support to family members. Despite the challenges of limited street parking around the non-congregate shelter, a few used the proceeds to purchase new vehicles. However, these were cars, rather than oversized vehicles, and residents did not intend to live in them.

Non-Congregate Shelter Program

Program Acceptance

Table 2. Non-Congregate Shelter Program Participation

	Tier 1		Tier 2		Other Participants[1]		Total
Declined		7		6			
Accepted		29		12		2	
• Program motel	21		11		2		34
• Other Dorothy Day facility	6		1				7
• Other indoor destinations	2						2
Total		29		12		2	**43**

Although residents participating in the encampment meeting expressed reticence about the non-congregate shelter program, ultimately 29 of the 36 Tier 1 residents and 12 of the 18 Tier 2 residents encountered chose to participate. In addition, two people not listed in either tier participated. These were romantic partners, friends, or family members who were able to move in with Tier 1 or Tier 2 encampment residents who had moved into the non-congregate shelter.

We were unable to interview all participants who declined. Of the seven Tier 1 encampment residents who declined the shelter program, three were members of a single family. While two of these three family members wished to participate in both the vehicle buyback and non-congregate shelter programs, the third did not. In the interest of keeping the family intact, they decided to turn down both programs. Of the six Tier 2 - eligible residents who did not participate, one was able to move into permanent housing, removing the need for the program. The remaining five did not provide enough information for BHRT to enroll them into the HMIS system, so their subsequent location is unknown. In total, 43 participants enrolled in the non-congregate shelter program, with 34 moving to the 26-room main program motel. The residents brought along 26 animals (primarily dogs). We found no evidence that it was crucial to the encampment residents that they all moved to the same place. Residents' expressions of solidarity and need to remain together rarely extended beyond their romantic partners, roommates, or immediate neighbors in the encampment. Instead, their decisions to

[1] Romantic partners, friends, or family members of Tier 1 or Tier 2 participants

participate in the non-congregate shelter program on whether they thought it would improve their household's circumstances.

> "They're not trying to rush me out [of the encampment] this time... They're trying to take a different approach, which is cool. I'm basically telling them when I want to be moved."

Residents began arriving at the motel in March 2025. They were able to move in at their own pace. Residents appreciated this approach, since it gave them time to organize their possessions. Participants chose their own living arrangements. While some opted to live alone, others chose to live with romantic partners or friends. Despite concerns among some meeting attendees about being unable to bring all their possessions, most participants chose to bring only a few pieces of clothing and their bicycles.

Initial Program Impressions

Despite initial reservations, all expressed relief about moving out of the encampment. As a participant noted, "I'm happy I'm out (of) the streets. That's what I'm happy at. I'm not in no car. I'm not in no trailer with the big rats." Others felt that the program offered them a way out of what they considered a permanent cycle of homelessness: "On the street, you're always in fight or flight mode and there's always an emergency… And you can't have nothing because you got to live out of a backpack. You can't have any paperwork. It is just impossible. So I'd given up on ever getting out."

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment, noting that being sheltered motivated him to make positive changes in his life: "Being (homeless) for so long, it had me in a mindset of living that way. So, me getting here (to the motel), it is bringing me back to my regular state of mind to where I want to get a job and I want to do things." Another resident remarked on the positive changes that he has seen in his neighbors since they moved to the motel: "I see the changes in people's faces … What I used to think were the grumpiest people in the world, actually have smiles and stuff … Even the dogs are happy."

When asked to describe what they most appreciated about living in the motel, most described the comfort of sleeping indoors and, particularly, the ability to shower whenever they pleased: "Sleeping in a bed and a shower right here is just incredible. I mean, you don't really know how much you miss something like that until you don't have it. And then you get it again … to take a shower right when I wake up, or just to be able to go to the bathroom right here is incredible."

Relations with Program Staff

Some residents were initially distrustful of the staff and the program, based on their negative perceptions of similar programs. Over time, they came to appreciate the project personnel: “The staff is nice because I've heard horror stories about other people going into motels and they're treated like crap, their items are searched, their rooms are searched when they're not there, that (kind of) thing. In that aspect, I think we're better off here because everybody seems to be -- the staff has been nothing but nice.” Residents particularly appreciated the staff’s sensitivity regarding the challenges they faced in transitioning to life in a non-congregate setting. “All the staff seem very, really nice and ready to help, and like really help without being demeaning at the same time ... Especially when you're dealing with a bunch of sensitive people, (who have) kind of been left to their own devices out there.” Another resident concurred, adding that “(the staff’s) whole goal is to transition you and acclimate you back into society, and to have a normal functioning life now.”

During staff meetings, the program manager emphasized the importance of treating residents with respect and understanding, adding that disrespect directed toward participants would result in disciplinary action. For example, residents reported that a staff member engaged in harassing behavior, particularly toward the female residents. Residents were initially concerned that bringing these incidents to the program manager’s attention would result in an escalation of those behaviors. However, after an investigation, the manager removed the staff member from the facility. Residents identified this staffing decision as evidence that the program manager would take their potential concerns over staff behavior seriously.

Staff said that they were initially wary of the encampment residents. They were pleasantly surprised to discover that the residents generally were friendly and respectful, particularly once they settled into the program. The director noted that the residents are “such a beautiful group,’ adding that, “if you show that you care, without judgement, you get a lot more from them.”

Response to Program Regulations

When residents enrolled in the program, the case manager presented them with a document listing each of the facility’s rules. After discussing them, staff asked them to write their initials next to each rule, indicating that they agreed to adhere to it. As a low-barrier, program, the staff prided themselves on the lack of burdensome regulations found in other shelter settings. Residents generally considered these rules to be fair. However, some found the concept of adhering to rules imposed by others to be challenging and associated behavioral control with their previous experiences with

incarceration. For these, living with rules felt like a significant departure from their experiences while homeless.

Despite initial concerns that the presence of security cameras and a dedicated security guard on site would expose residents to unwanted scrutiny, most came to see these measures as an effort to ensure their safety. Some felt that the cameras constituted a form of surveillance, a perception that came in part from presenters at the community meeting characterizing the initiative as a "pilot project." As one resident put it, "You like structured a program, and we're guinea pigs. We're doing a trial run, just like a pilot program on TV, to see what the ratings are. If they get good ratings, then they (will) decide to keep it or not keep it." For some, the presence of an evaluator at the facility (MRD) offered further evidence that residents were under surveillance.

Residents' opinions remained divided on the program's no-visitor policy. While many came to support the value of barring acquaintances from the facility to reduce potential drug selling and theft, residents felt that exceptions should be made for family members, with some stating that their family's presence would motivate them to reach their work and housing goals. Staff felt that the presence of family members on the campus would pose a potential liability, particularly given the presence of dogs in the motel. They proposed a compromise, as part of their efforts to provide additional recreational activities, by allowing residents to invite one family member to special events such as Thanksgiving dinner and a Christmas party.

Residents expressed concern about their inability to knock on each other's doors within the motel, particularly when they lived on different floors of the complex. Although staff characterized this regulation as a safety precaution, it made communication between residents difficult. To overcome this, first-floor residents would sometimes stand in the parking lot and shout the names of their friends on the second floor to get them to open their door and speak to them.

Program Services

Food

The program provided residents with three meals per day, with accommodations made for dietary restrictions. The staff prepared most of the food in a modest kitchen in the motel's office. Once prepared, they placed the food on a table in the facility's former registration area for residents to take back to their rooms whenever they pleased.

Residents were generally satisfied with the food quality, though many noted it lacked variety or contained too much salt. For residents with high blood pressure and other medical issues, the high level of sodium posed a health issue. They would skip meals or purchase food on their own rather than risk their health. A resident with complex food

allergies noted that she was unable to eat most of the food on offer. Since she could not prepare meals in her room, she reported losing weight since she arrived at the motel. Residents said they had brought this issue to the staff's attention, but that the staff were initially slow to address it.

Case Management and Service Coordination

When participants moved into the motel, the intake staff told them that they would not provide extensive case management right away, to give residents time to settle into the facility. However, the program manager was on leave during this period, which delayed case management services by several additional weeks. While a few residents described becoming impatient to receive case management, most tended to be sympathetic to these initial delays: "I'm being patient. I mean, they've done everything they've said so far (that) they're going to do. So I figure, trust them."

> "On the street, you're always in fight or flight mode and there's always an emergency… And you can't have nothing because you got to live out of a backpack. You can't have any paperwork. It is just impossible. So, I'd given up on ever getting out."

The staff described case management as consisting of linking participants to health and social services to help them achieve their goals. The staff coordinated services with local health, housing, and social service providers. The staff considered the coordination of housing services to be central to the program's mission. As many residents lacked the necessary documents to become eligible for housing programs, during the first program year, much of the case managers' focus was on helping residents obtain their social security cards, state IDs, verification of homelessness necessary for the Coordinated Entry process, and other relevant documents. While many were proactive in obtaining these documents, staff perceived others as being less motivated. As a staff person put it, "Sometimes they make the effort, and then they don't follow through, and we have to stay on them. And I don't like to do that because it's hard for me because I don't like to smother someone or make them feel like they're being forced to do something." To increase motivation, the program offered residents a $50 gift card once they became "document-ready." As of this writing, all but one resident has obtained the necessary documents to be considered for housing.

As a low-barrier non-congregate shelter, the program incorporated best practices around overdose prevention and resident well-being. For example, the staff had a protocol to check on residents who used drugs, in case they required treatment with naloxone (which can reverse an overdose) or other medical care. There have been no deaths at the site, and we are unaware of any overdoses requiring ambulances.

The program's case management linked residents to existing community services. To enhance service provision, staff from a local Federally Qualified Health Center with deep expertise in homelessness (Lifelong Medical Care) visited the site weekly to provide health services and coordinate linkages to health. In addition, a program providing supplies to reduce harm, including naloxone and condoms, visited the site weekly. Another organization came periodically with donated dog food. Once connected to healthcare, residents were able to get to their appointments using the MediCal transportation benefit, which provides access to public transit, taxis, ride shares, or van transport. To further improve access, at the time of this interim report the staff was discussing increasing the presence of on-site services.

Residents discussed the role of increased access to healthcare on their well-being. They attributed their improved access both to the connections to care facilitated by program staff and due to the newfound stability in their housing situation. In one instance, a participant received brain surgery due to a life-threatening condition. As her partner noted, "If we hadn't been in (the motel), they would not have done the surgery. Because you can't be on the street and they won't give you surgery…Being in here was a real blessing. Because as soon as we got in here, we were able to get her medical appointments and scheduled the surgery, and then she just had it."

Housing Navigation and Housing Outcomes

Case managers connected residents to local organizations that provided housing navigation. Housing navigation involves a suite of activities (including helping clients become "document-ready" and helping them apply for benefits, as well as helping with the housing search and engaging landlords). Program staff stated that the quality of the housing navigation that clients received varied widely. While some housing navigators maintained communication with their clients and submitted paperwork in a timely fashion, others did not do so. In response, on-site case managers took on some of these responsibilities. Many participants from Tier 1 had received a housing assessment as part of their enrollment into the Coordinated Entry System[2] prior to moving to the site. To date, eight people of the initial 34 clients in the primary non-congregate shelter have moved on to permanent housing from the motel site: two veterans received housing through VA programs, and two couples moved into subsidized housing with services. Two other individuals obtained subsidized housing through programs that prioritized people experiencing homelessness. Nine people moved to other sites in Berkeley. At the time of this writing, we do not have housing-outcome data for these individuals.

[2] The Coordinated Entry System (CES) is a network that aligns regional homeless services to connect people experiencing or at risk of homelessness to appropriate services and housing interventions to secure permanent and stable housing.

Negative Exits

As a low-barrier facility, participants could be expelled from the program only if they engaged in acts of violence or if their activities caused police to arrive at the motel with a search warrant, since the program bars law enforcement from entering the premises otherwise. To date, four residents have been asked to leave the program: one due to domestic violence concerns and another for violating the visitor policy by bringing an off-site guest into their room. The remaining two were dismissed due to separate theft-related incidents that had occurred off-site. These cases resulted in a warrant, which left the staff with no alternative but to allow the police to enter the facility to arrest the suspects. Program staff emphasized that these individuals remain eligible for case management services, especially since, in some instances, their romantic partners still reside in the motel.

New Arrivals

The program admitted eight new participants from encampments into the units vacated by residents who moved into permanent housing or were otherwise exited.

Conclusion

The program resolved the longstanding Second Street encampment using a model that paired vehicle buyback with low-barrier non-congregate shelter with wraparound services—an approach that promoted voluntary engagement and brought most residents indoors. Together, these components offered residents a long-term respite from living outdoors, the opportunity to exchange their (often inoperable) oversized vehicles for savings, and a path to housing stability. The vast majority of eligible encampment residents accepted one or both aspects of the program. Despite occasional missteps, the program has met its primary goal. Most residents approved of the program, because it offered them the opportunity to move beyond a state of survival—providing the scaffolding to help them plan for their future. At the time of this interim report, the former site of the Second Street encampment remains clear of inhabited vehicles and tents.

Appendix: Research Methods

Data Collection

We used four overlapping forms of data collection.

Ethnography: A hallmark of qualitative research; ethnography consists of in-depth observation within specific communities to understand the subjective experience of people residing in those settings. To date, we have engaged in approximately 100 hours of ethnographic data collection at the encampment and the motel, in addition to observing relevant meetings and events between residents, city officials, and Dorothy Day House personnel. We took extensive field notes after every observational session.

In-Depth Interviews: To date, we have carried out 32 semi-structured interviews with encampment residents, housing advocates, and Dorothy Day staff members. We initially interviewed 20 residents and subsequently followed six of these participants with interviews every two to three months. Residents received a $30 debit card for participating in each interview.

Document Review: We reviewed news reports, current and historical photographs, meeting agendas, and other materials about the encampment and the vehicle buyback and housing program.

Review of Program Metrics: With assistance from the City and the shelter operator, we reconstructed the numbers of people who were offered and accepted (or rejected) the vehicle buyback and shelter placement, the number of people who exited the shelter, and the number of people placed in housing.

Analysis

In qualitative research, analysis typically occurs throughout the research process. We use the Dedoose (version 10.0.59) software platform to code and analyze the data. We created a single coding manual for the observational, interview, and document data. We employed an interpretivist codebook approach to our thematic analysis, by using a structured coding manual to organize and categorize the data and then applying these coded materials to extrapolate themes.