

Home Safe Interim Evaluation: Key Findings

Executive Summary

This brief on the Home Safe program summarizes key findings from the UCSF Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative's (BHHI) interim evaluation of the program. It includes a brief description of the program, an overview of the evaluation's design, and an assessment of the Governor's 2021-22 budget proposal to expand Home Safe eligibility.

Program Description

In California, county Adult Protective Services (APS) agencies investigate reports of abuse, neglect or self-neglect, and exploitation inflicted on seniors and non-senior dependent adults. Home Safe programs operated by county APS agencies assist clients who are at imminent risk of homelessness by offering a range of potential services, including eviction prevention, landlord mediation, short-term financial assistance, and intensive case management.

The California Legislature created Home Safe in 2018 and allocated \$15 million from the General Fund for county APS agencies to start their own Home Safe programs, with a 1:1 county match. Currently, APS agencies in 25 counties operate Home Safe programs with the support of these grants. In addition to administering the \$15 million in grants, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) provides regular technical assistance to participating counties.

Proposed Expansion

Over the next two years, the Governor's proposed budget would allocate an additional \$200 million in grants to county Home Safe programs. Additionally, it reduces the county match requirement by 75%. The Governor proposes to expand eligibility for Home Safe to include seniors and dependent adults who are not current APS clients but have an imminent health or safety risk that puts them at risk for homelessness.

Evaluation Design

CDSS requested that UCSF BHHI conduct an evaluation of the Home Safe program, to be completed in December 2021. In May 2021, BHHI completed a mid-point evaluation, the basis for this memo. Both the mid-point evaluation and the final evaluation rely on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. The data utilized in our evaluation are as follows:

Quantitative Data. We used data from the Home Safe workbook, which included data on client demographics, risk of homelessness, Home Safe interventions, and housing outcomes, for the quantitative evaluation. Additionally, we distributed a confidential online questionnaire to each Home Safe county to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on APS staffing and other Home Safe related service providers or vendors.

Qualitative Data. BHHI conducted in-depth interviews with APS staff in all 25 Home Safe counties.

Methodological Limitations. Two factors prevent us from drawing robust conclusions on how Home Safe enrollment affects housing outcomes for clients at risk of homelessness. First, we did not have access to a counterfactual, to compare those who did or did not receive Home Safe services. Second, there was extensive missing data for housing at enrollment, program exit, and six-month housing outcomes, with the six-month follow-up having the most missing data. As a result, we interpret the findings cautiously.

Key Findings

Although BHHI's final evaluation of the Home Safe program is forthcoming, the interim evaluation has revealed several key insights regarding Home Safe that may be useful to policymakers.

Home Safe Led to Improved Systems Integration. By tasking APS agencies with providing homelessness-related services, Home Safe gave them the opportunity establish collaborative relationships with other institutions that provide supportive services, advocacy, and housing for people experiencing homelessness. Because systems fragmentation is a major obstacle to the coordination and effective allocation of housing services, bringing APS into alignment with other social service providers should be considered a significant accomplishment of Home Safe.

Housing Shortage Hinders Program Effectiveness. APS social workers, supervisors and administrators reported that their biggest challenge was the lack of access to affordable housing in their communities. High housing costs constrained the options of APS housing navigators and their contractors and reduced the efficacy of short-term rental subsidies, suggesting that supply constraints are a significant barrier to the success of social services programs aimed at reducing and preventing homelessness.

Flexibility of Home Safe Funds is Key to its Successes. APS staff embraced the flexibility with which programs could spend Home Safe funds. Because homelessness is multi-causal and the challenges of each homeless or housing insecure individual are unique, social service programs for that population may be more successful when case managers are able to tailor how they use funding to the specific needs of their clients.

Equity Concerns. The proportion of Black clients enrolled in Home Safe (11.3%) is higher than the proportion of California residents who are Black (6.5%), but significantly lower than the proportion Californians experiencing homelessness who are Black (approximately 40%). Considering the high risk of homelessness within the Black/African American population, there should be focused attention on ensuring that Black/African American individuals who would benefit from Home Safe services have access to them.

Commonly Used Risk Assessment Tool is of Limited Usefulness. All but one of the county APS agencies participating in Home Safe used the PR-VI-SPDAT, a common assessment and prioritization tool, to assess a potential client's risk of homelessness prior to enrollment in the Home Safe program. However, many APS staff did not rely on this instrument to determine who the program served, in part because it does not accurately distinguish between those who are at a low and high risk of homelessness. Though staff generally agreed with the need for a standardized instrument, the PR-VI-SPDAT did not suit the program's needs.

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Early Results Suggest Home Safe Helped Some Clients Avoid Homelessness. Despite significant data limitations, BHHI found evidence suggesting that Home Safe was able to stabilize clients who would have otherwise become homeless. Based on proportions of clients who experienced homelessness during the intervention period, we feel confident that the program served high risk clients. Staff interviews demonstrated multiple examples of extremely high-risk clients who were housed due to the Home Safe intervention. In the absence of the program, it is likely many of those individuals would not have been able to secure stable housing.

Proposed Expansion Brings Potential Benefits. Because Home Safe programs only serve existing APS clients, they must reject a large pool of individuals who could potentially benefit from the program but who are currently ineligible. This includes many individuals who may be homeless or at risk of homelessness due to health and safety risks, but do not have a substantiated APS report. By expanding Home Safe eligibility to include those whose vulnerabilities are leading to a housing crisis—as opposed to only current APS clients—the state can reach more housing insecure individuals who may not otherwise receive housing assistance.