Latinx Homelessness in Philadelphia:

Rates of Services Use, Perceived Barriers and Assets, and Potential Opportunities for Leveraging City Reform Efforts to Address Service Gaps

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Executive Summary

In this report we examine the differential use of homeless services by the Latinx population compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the City of Philadelphia from several perspectives. First, we undertake a systematic, empirical examination to confirm the existence of such a "Latinx paradox" among Philadelphia homeless services. In doing so, we analyze service utilization data to document the extent to which race and ethnic groups, stratified by age and sex, are served by emergency shelter, transitional housing and street outreach programs, after adjusting for poverty status. Second, we seek to better understand possible dynamics that might contribute to such a paradox through conducting focus groups with service providers, clients and city agency and nonprofit staff. Lastly, we consider recent efforts to address homelessness through improved evidence-based practices, in both a national and local context, and consider how these efforts could better assist Latinx adults and families facing imminent homelessness in resolving or avoiding homelessness in the near future.

Part 1: Differential Rates of Homeless Services Use

This analysis used American Community Survey (ACS) and City of Philadelphia data to document the degree to which people of Latinx ethnicity had lower levels of homeless services use than non-Latinx people of White and Black race. Generally, Latinx had levels of homelessness that were roughly comparable to Whites, despite Whites having less than half the level of poverty, and much lower than Blacks, who had somewhat lower levels of poverty and who, in sheer numbers, comprise a largely disproportionate portion of the homeless population. A more direct way to compare these rates of homelessness is by focusing on those in poverty among these racial/ethnic groups, where the Latinx group had rates of 14.00 and 10.23 per 1,000 persons for sheltered (ES/TH) and unsheltered (HO) homelessness, respectively, compared to corresponding rates of 51.86 and 24.44 for the Black group and 21.67 and 33.94 for the White group. Finally, taking poverty, sex and age into account showed that, compared to Whites, Latinx had two-thirds the odds (AOR=0.663) and Blacks had well over twice the odds (AOR=2.616) for experiencing sheltered (ES/TH) homelessness. With regards to experiencing unsheltered homelessness (HO), Latinx had less than half the odds (0.421) while Blacks had slightly lower odds (AOR=0.926) as compared to Whites.

While these findings provide strong empirical support for the existence of racial and ethnic disparities in levels of homelessness that go beyond basic economic and demographic differences, these findings cannot provide an explanation for why Latinx were underrepresented among those receiving homeless services, or, for that matter, other disparities in service use, as these data capture neither risk and protective factors that may mediate these relationships nor differential barriers or assets that may impact service use.

Part 2: Perceptions of Barriers to Access and Community Assets

To better understand the potential roles of perceived barriers to access to homeless services and community assets that may mitigate use of city services, we convened focus groups with three sets of stakeholders who could share their experiences with City-funded homeless services:

- Latinx individuals who have experienced homelessness or housing instability
- Leadership at nonprofit social service organizations primarily serving the Latinx population
- Front-line staff at the Office of Homeless Services (OHS) access point and contracted providers of shelter, rapid rehousing, and diversion services.
- It should be noted here that there are no Latinx organizations dedicated to serving people experiencing homelessness as a core part of their mission.

Findings suggest several explanations for the Latinx paradox in homelessness:

- systemic barriers and negative perceptions of homeless services that dissuade Latinx Philadelphians from seeking city-funded services; and
- informal and formal community assets that provide a network of assistance and relief that buffer those experiencing imminent homelessness from becoming homeless;

The most significant and consistently identified need was to enhance the presence of Spanish-speaking staff at City access points as well as in contracted shelters. Stakeholders, including those working for the City, agreed on the need to recruit additional Spanish-speaking staff at the service representative level, social work level, and supervisor level. Given the dire shortage of Latinx candidates for these positions on the City's Civil Service eligibility list, OHS, like other City agencies has struggled to fill civil service positions. OHS has responded by adding Bi-Lingual Mobile Assessors who go out into the community to perform prevention and housing assessments.

Finally, we saw a need to increase awareness of OHS services among Latinxs through outreach efforts that include stronger ties between the City and the network of Latinx-focused nonprofits. OHS outlined recent steps it is taking to strengthen its presence in the

Latinx community, including an expanded contract with Congreso de Latinos Unidos, to provide homelessness prevention services to households facing housing instability, and rapid rehousing for those leaving shelter. Due to the City's engagement with community leaders, OHS also has also received interest in proposals for its Home4Good program from Latinx providers.

Part 3: Leveraging National and Local Homelessness Program Reforms

Since the release of *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* (US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015), communities throughout the US have been working to align their efforts to address homelessness with the evidence-based approaches outlined in the federal plan. One major theme is to transition shelter systems to crisis response systems that prevent homelessness when possible and return people quickly to housing in the community.

The Philadelphia Continuum of Care, in its 2018 strategic plan, *Roadmap to Homes*, lists as its first goal "Make Homelessness Rare: Prevent homelessness to the greatest extent possible." This tactic represents an opportunity to deploy additional resources beyond shelter to underrepresented groups and geographic areas, like the Latinx community. By leveraging and strengthening existing community-based resources, rather than centralizing services in Center City, OHS can enable those facing imminent homelessness to avoid the shelter system entirely through services that are conveniently located, in a language and cultural setting in which people may feel more comfortable.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has likewise urged communities to create systems of "coordinated entry" that standardize a strengths-based approach to client needs assessments, and that link people to homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing as an alternative or supplement to emergency shelter. The Office of Homeless Services has improved and streamlined its assessment process in accordance with HUD guidance. In particular, the City's new coordinated assessment process has been designed such that assessment for OHS services can be conducted with bilingual mobile assessors. Individuals facing street homelessness or imminent homelessness can now be assessed for OHS prevention, diversion, and shelter services in their own neighborhood and language (Office of Homeless Services, 2018a).

As federal homelessness policy continues to seek opportunities to prevent homelessness whenever possible, the opportunity for improved access to services beyond the traditional emergency shelter system should enable greater opportunities to serve the needs of people in Latinx communities face with homelessness. The City of Philadelphia's existing housing counseling and tenancy preservation services run through agencies other than OHS could be further directed in support of these objectives.

Introduction

Prior homelessness research has noted the existence of a "Latinx Paradox," whereby Latinx persons are underrepresented among the homeless population relative to their representation among the population in poverty. Baker (1996) first identified this phenomenon, and studies have subsequently reported similar results in El Paso (Castañeda, Klassen & Smith 2014) and Los Angeles (Conroy & Heer 2003; Chinchilla 2019), and across multiple communities (Olivet et al., 2018; Khadduri et al., 2018). However, the one nationwide study that compares rates of homelessness across different racial and ethnic groups, the Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress (Henry et al., 2018) found the rate of Latinx representation in the estimated homeless population to be roughly equal to their representation in the overall US population.

A recent article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called attention to this Latinx paradox in Philadelphia (Terruso & Restrepo 2019):

> Latinos make up nearly 15 percent of Philadelphia's population and form its poorest minority group — 38 percent live in poverty, according to census data. But step inside a city homeless shelter and there are few Latinos. Nationally, and in Philadelphia, they represent a small fraction of people in shelters.

The most common explanations in the research literature for the underrepresentation of Latinx households in homelessness are that either they experience less homelessness than other racial or ethnic groups (have fewer risk and more protective factors), or that when they do experience homelessness they do so "outside traditional homeless spaces" (Conroy & Heer 2003, 530) and are thus more hidden from service providers and researchers (have barriers to access services). As part of the latter explanation, informal family or community supports are often viewed as supplanting more formal homeless and related services, and potentially mitigating the expression of homelessness in formal systems of care. Researchers have also noted that the presence of language barriers and concerns about punitive immigration enforcement may contribute to a reluctance to engage with formal services (Chinchilla 2019).

In this report, we examine the differential use of homeless services by the Latinx population in the City of Philadelphia from several perspectives. First, we undertake a systematic, empirical examination to confirm the existence of such a "Latinx paradox" among Philadelphia homeless services. In doing so, we analyze service utilization data to document the extent to which different race and ethnic groups, stratified by age and sex, are served by emergency shelter, transitional housing and street outreach programs, after adjusting for poverty status. Second, we seek to better understand possible dynamics that might contribute to such a paradox through focus groups with service providers, clients and City agency staff, regarding perceived barriers to access to services and community assets that may help avert housing loss. Lastly, we consider recent efforts to address homelessness through improved evidence-based practices, in both national and local

contexts, and consider how these efforts could better assist Latinx adults and families facing imminent homelessness avoid or resolve their homelessness.

Part 1: Differential Rates of Homeless Services Use

In this section, we take a closer look at data collected by two City of Philadelphia agencies: the Office of Homeless Services (OHS) and the Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services (DBHIDS), to more systematically evaluate the existence of a Latinx paradox, and more specifically the degree to which Latinx persons are being served at rates comparable to their representation among the population in poverty. The methods used here are based upon a 1999 study (Culhane & Metraux 1999) that found significant underrepresentation of persons of Latinx ethnicity in Philadelphia's publicly funded emergency shelter system. However, because of a lack of access to inter-decennial Census data at the time, that study could not control for differential poverty rates by ethnicity, and so was unable to estimate the degree to which the observed effect was attributable to differences in poverty rates.

Data and Measures

Administrative databases provide the basis for comprehensive datasets of all persons who either stayed in the municipally-funded emergency shelter and transitional housing (ES/TH) system or who received homeless outreach (HO) services at any point in 2018. This provides a means for compiling one-year prevalence groups for large portions of both the sheltered (ES/TH) and the unsheltered (HO) homeless populations.

Data for ES/TH services were collected by OHS; and data on HO contacts came from DBHIDS. Each person who, in 2018, stayed for at least one night in ES/TH or had at least one HO contact will have one record (unduplicated) in one or both of the respective datasets. The datasets were not combined, thus it was not possible to unduplicate across the sets.

We received these two datasets aggregated by race/ethnicity, sex, and age at time of stay. Black race (non-Latinx), White race (non-Latinx) and Latinx ethnicity (any race) represent mutually exclusive categories. Due to the very small percentages of other racial and ethnic groups among those receiving homeless services, only persons in the Black, White, and Latinx categories were retained for this analysis. Sex categories are limited to male and female, as there were insufficient numbers in other sex categories to produce meaningful results. Age was grouped into seven categories: under 18, 18-24, 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; and over 65. When demographic cells (combinations of race/ethnicity, sex, and age) contained less than ten individuals, the number of persons in that cell was suppressed and only partial data on demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity and sex, but not age) were available.

To compare ES/TH and HO services use across racial/ethnic groups, this analysis used data on the overall Philadelphia population and those in this population with household income

under the poverty guidelines as the basis for calculating proportions of demographic subgroups who have experienced either sheltered or unsheltered homelessness in 2018 as measured by touching these systems. These population data were drawn from the American Community Survey (ACS) of the US Census Bureau, based upon data collected over the five-year period 2011-2015. Proportions were created with service-using populations (ES/TH and HO) as denominators, and overall and poverty populations as the numerators.

Casting sheltered and unsheltered populations as proportions of the poverty population controls for the impact of poverty on these comparisons. This is important for two reasons. First, poverty can be assumed to be ubiquitous among the homeless population, with all homeless persons receiving insufficient income to consistently put them over the poverty income guidelines. Second, there are large disparities in the poverty rates for the three racial/ethnic groups examined here. In Philadelphia in 2016, the poverty rate was 38 percent for Latinxs, 31 percent for Blacks, and 15 percent for Whites (US Census data as reported in Pew 2018). Thus, comparing rates of homelessness among those in poverty among the racial/ethnic groups of interest produces rates for only those at short-term risk of becoming homeless.

After reporting comparative proportions by race/ethnicity, sex and age for overall and poverty populations, logistic regression models were fitted. These models contain the same demographic variables that were just described. The results express the risk of homelessness as adjusted odds ratios (AOR). This permits a comparison of odds for receiving homeless services (ES/TH and HO) for each racial/ethnic group taking these demographic factors into account. The AORs thereby provide a means by which to compare the extent of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness by the three racial/ethnic groups relative to each other.

Results

Table 1 presents the numbers for overall and poverty populations from ACS, for persons using ES/TH from OHS, and from HO services from DBHIDS. Each of these four populations is broken down by racial/ethnic, sex, and age group categories. Key findings when comparing the racial/ethnic groups across this table include:

- In the general population, the Latinx group was less than half as large as the White group, but among the poverty population the Latinx group outnumbered the White group.
- The Latinx group was 14.9 percent and 23.5 percent of the general and poverty populations, respectively, but 9.1 percent and 10.3 percent of the ES/TH and HO populations, respectively.
- The raw population sizes for ES/TH and HO populations were substantially higher for the White group than for the Latinx group.
- Black was the largest racial/ethnic group in all four populations shown, and was particularly overrepresented among the ES/TH population, comprising over three-quarters (77.7 percent) of this population. In terms of raw numbers, this means that

10,143 people in the shelter system were Black, compared to a combined total of 2,909 people who were White or Hispanic.

- White was the only group that had more people access HO services than ES/TH services.

Table 1 – Philadelphia Population Size, by Race/Ethnicity, Sex and Age Group

	Philadelphia Population (2011-2015)		Philadelphia Poverty Population (2011-2015)		Emergency Shelter/Transitional Housing Population (2018)		Outreach Services Population (2018)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total Population	1,372,808	100	359,760	100	13,052	100	8,348	100
Race/Ethnicity								
Latinx	204,012	14.9	84,496	23.5	1,183	9.1	864	10.3
Black	632,951	46.1	195,598	54.4	10,143	77.7	4,780	57.3
White	535,845	39.0	79,666	22.1	1,726	13.2	2,704	32.4
Sex								
Male	646,415	47.1	160,249	44.5	7,433	56.9	5,829	69.8
Female	726,393	52.9	199,511	55.5	5,829	44.7	2,519	30.2
Age Groups								
0-5	112,033	8.2	42,059	11.7	1,554	11.9	22	0.3
6-17	194,494	14.2	73,508	20.4	1,632	12.5	-	0.0
18-24	143,792	10.5	53,180	14.8	1,134	8.7	322	3.9
24-34	242,042	17.6	52,351	14.6	2,439	18.7	1,429	17.1
35-44	169,681	12.4	35,931	10.0	1,967	15.1	1,616	19.4
45-54	176,386	12.8	39,846	11.1	2,126	16.3	1,764	21.1
55-64	159,962	11.7	33,700	9.4	1,634	12.5	1,392	16.7
65+	174,418	12.7	29,185	8.1	441	3.4	429	5.1

Notes: 1) All Philadelphia populations include only those in the three largest racial/ethnic groups, as the homeless numbers (emergency shelter/transitional housing and outreach services) for the other groups were too small for analysis.
2) Philadelphia overall and poverty population numbers come from the American Community Survey; emergency shelter/transitional housing numbers provided by the City of Philadelphia Office of Homeless Services, and outreach services numbers provided by the City of Philadelphia Office of Behavioral Health and disAbility Services.
3) Percentages in the age categories for the homeless data do not add up to 100 due to missing data.
4) Numbers for White and Black races do not include those with Latinx ethnicity; numbers for Latinx are inclusive of all (including unknown and multiracial) race.

The sex and age group breakdowns varied somewhat across the four populations, with, for example, both homeless groups being majority male sex, while female sex were the majority in the overall and poverty populations. The age distributions in the two homeless populations also differed, as the ES/TH population included both families (comprised mainly of single female heads of household and young children) and single adults, but the HO population was almost exclusively comprised of single adults. Thus, the age distribution

for both homeless populations differed from each other, and differed from the age distributions in the overall and poverty populations.

Tables 2 (for ES/TH) and 3 (for HO) show these populations as proportions of the overall and poverty populations, broken down by race/ethnicity, sex and age. The rate of ES/TH in the overall population was 9.51, and in the poverty population was 36.28. For HO, the corresponding rates were lower, at 6.08 (overall population) and 23.20 (poverty population). The rates are the number of people homeless (either in the ES/TH group or in the HO group) per 1,000 persons.

Table 2 – Comparative Rates (per 1,000) of 2018 Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing Use among the Philadelphia Population (overall and poverty)

	Black		Latinx		White		Total Population	
	Overall	Poverty	Overall	Poverty	Overall	Poverty	Overall	Poverty
Women	13.14	41.34	4.08	9.14	2.27	14.62	7.74	28.16
0-5	23.89	56.40	4.88	8.86	2.66	16.61	13.56	35.52
6-17	13.47	32.41	3.53	6.77	1.04	5.86	8.35	21.94
18-24	15.82	44.42	4.35	9.08	1.47	3.99	9.35	24.52
25-34	21.84	70.82	5.28	12.71	2.48	17.65	10.49	42.56
35-44	13.26	45.62	5.45	13.72	4.88	41.82	9.02	36.82
45-54	10.33	37.00	2.70	7.22	3.24	26.27	6.89	29.33
55-64	7.65	28.44	2.00	5.50	1.97	15.41	4.77	21.91
65+	1.70	7.36	0.00	0.00	0.77	5.89	1.15	6.09
Men	19.55	65.55	7.56	19.85	4.22	46.92	11.50	46.38
0-5	24.47	58.73	5.63	10.88	2.61	16.96	14.17	38.37
6-17	13.56	31.83	3.92	7.89	1.00	6.39	8.43	22.46
18-24	10.18	31.02	4.28	9.87	1.55	4.33	6.33	17.70
25-34	19.63	88.00	7.84	30.02	3.46	26.00	9.63	52.52
35-44	22.12	106.03	11.95	38.83	7.98	85.73	14.40	82.00
45-54	28.34	100.15	13.51	47.35	7.38	61.74	17.84	82.63
55-64	29.84	116.33	11.07	35.58	5.96	45.13	16.79	82.98
65+	8.81	51.78	5.29	17.87	1.65	18.78	4.65	34.89
Totals	16.02	51.86	5.80	14.00	3.22	21.67	9.51	36.28
0-5	24.18	57.59	5.26	9.85	2.63	16.79	13.87	36.95
6-17	13.51	32.11	3.73	7.33	1.02	6.11	8.39	22.20
18-24	13.15	38.34	4.31	9.46	1.51	4.15	7.89	21.32
25-34	20.86	77.07	6.54	19.27	2.97	21.71	10.08	46.59
35-44	17.13	67.19	8.63	24.43	6.50	62.27	11.59	54.74
45-54	18.27	65.05	7.93	23.97	5.34	43.98	12.05	53.36
55-64	17.03	64.56	6.25	18.41	3.89	29.96	10.21	48.49
65+	4.30	20.24	2.26	7.04	1.13	10.04	2.53	15.11

Table 3 – Comparative Rates (per 1,000) of 2018 Homeless Outreach (HO) Services Use among the Philadelphia Population (overall and poverty)

	Black		Latinx		White		Total	
	Overall	Poverty	Overall	Poverty	Overall	Poverty	Overall	Poverty
Women	4.18	13.15	1.97	4.42	3.13	20.14	3.47	12.63
0-5	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
6-17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
18-24	2.86	8.03	1.55	3.24	1.47	3.99	2.20	5.77
25-34	5.26	17.05	2.78	6.68	3.99	28.36	4.31	17.49
35-44	6.01	20.68	4.09	10.29	5.85	50.19	5.65	23.07
45-54	6.11	21.88	2.88	7.70	4.47	36.24	5.14	21.89
55-64	5.88	21.87	2.00	5.50	2.46	19.21	4.10	18.86
65+	1.83	7.72	0.00	0.00	0.73	5.60	1.17	6.19
Men	11.67	39.13	6.56	17.21	7.07	49.93	9.02	36.37
0-5	0.78	1.87	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.39	1.05
6-17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
18-24	2.73	8.33	1.50	3.46	2.05	5.73	2.28	6.38
25-34	10.24	45.89	7.11	27.24	6.07	45.70	7.65	41.71
35-44	15.47	74.16	12.10	39.31	12.73	136.80	13.74	78.28
45-54	21.29	75.25	14.85	52.05	9.08	75.89	15.45	71.55
55-64	24.41	95.14	9.55	30.70	5.87	44.47	14.25	70.44
65+	7.07	41.56	5.51	18.62	2.47	28.17	4.45	33.36
Totals	7.55	24.44	4.24	10.23	5.05	33.94	6.08	23.20
0-5	0.40	0.95	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.20	0.52
6-17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
18-24	2.80	8.17	1.53	3.35	1.75	4.82	2.24	6.05
25-34	7.46	27.55	4.91	14.47	5.03	36.78	5.90	27.30
35-44	10.14	39.77	8.01	22.67	9.44	90.53	9.52	44.98
45-54	12.80	45.58	8.68	26.22	6.81	56.04	10.00	44.27
55-64	13.71	51.98	5.54	16.32	4.10	31.58	8.70	41.31
65+	3.73	17.53	2.36	7.33	1.45	12.86	2.46	14.70

Figure 1 illustrates graphically the comparative rates of sheltered homelessness, as captured in the ES/TH population, for the three racial/ethnic groups (also presented numerically in Table 2). For both overall and poverty, Black rates (16.02 and 51.86) were by far the highest. For the Latinx group, while the overall rate edged out the White overall rate (5.80 to 3.22), after taking poverty into account the White rate (21.67) was substantially higher than the Latinx rate (14.00).

Figure 1 – Rates (per 1,000) of Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing (ES/TH) Use by Race/Ethnicity

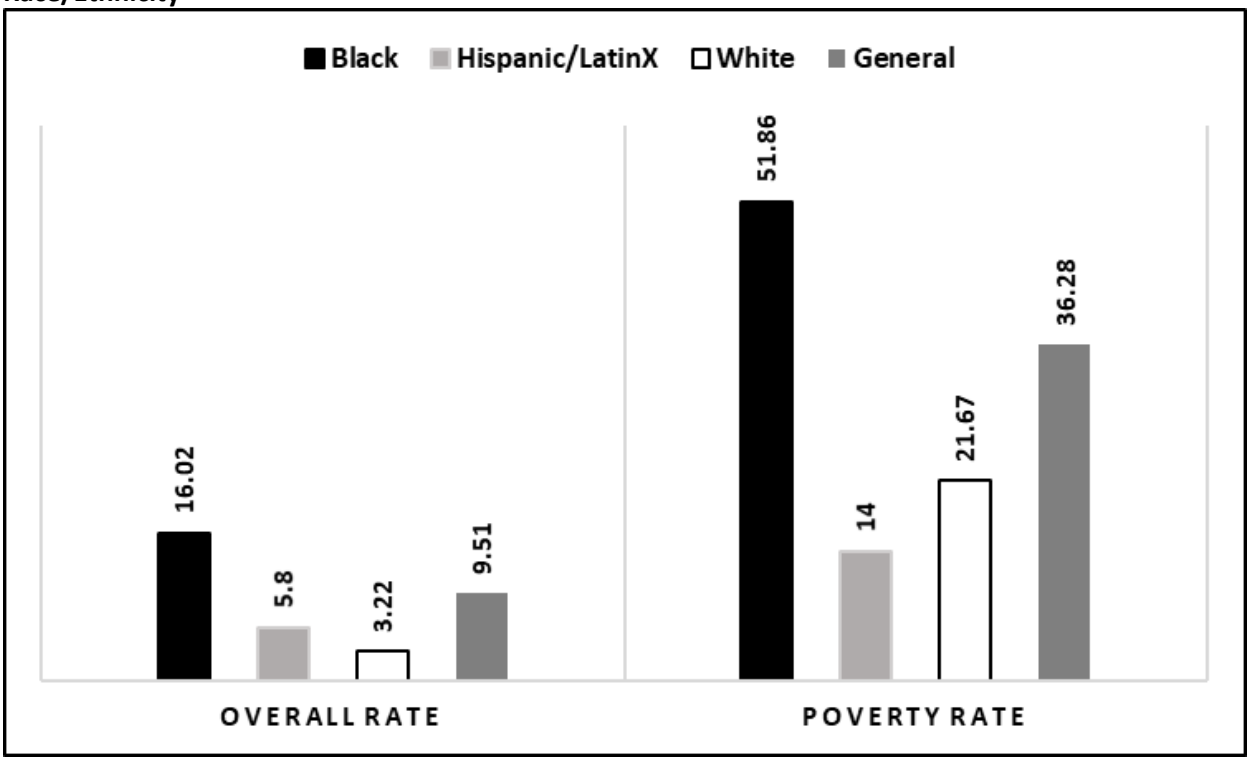

Figure 2 – Rates (per 1,000) of Homeless Outreach Services (HO) Use by Race/Ethnicity

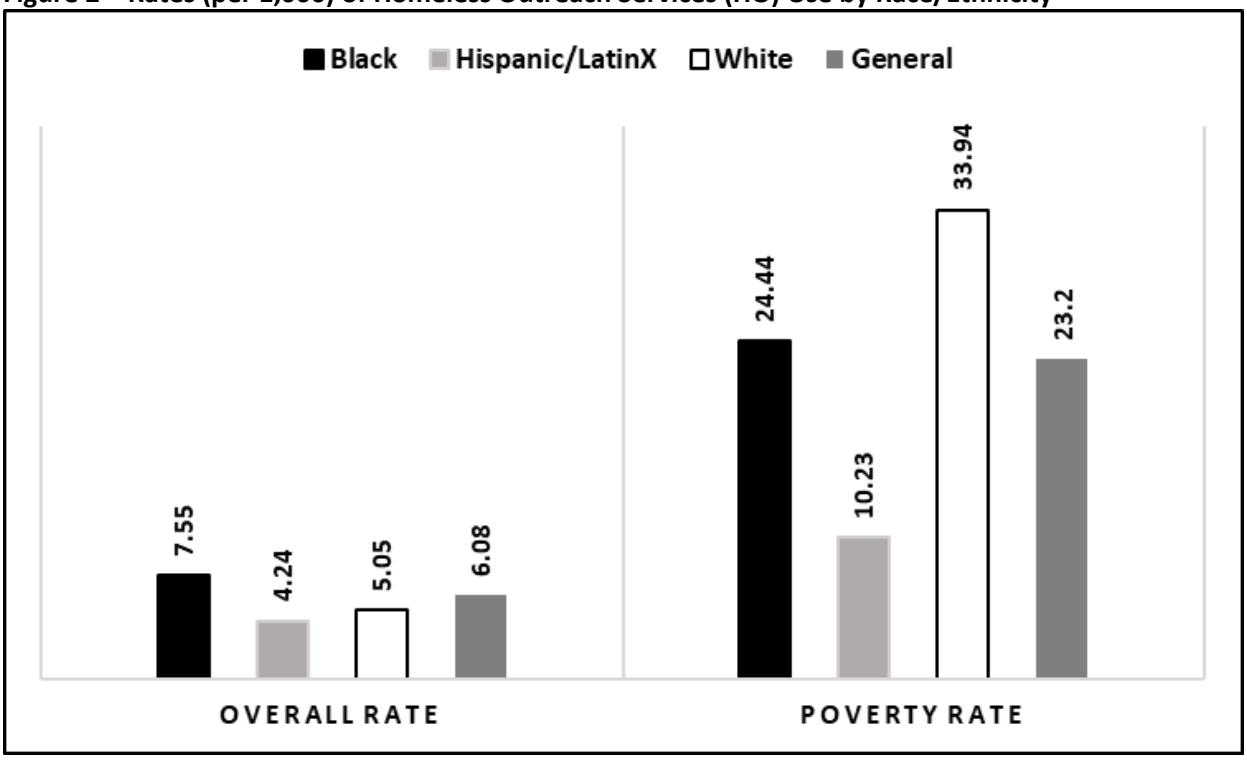

Figure 2 shows graphically the corresponding results for the HO services (shown numerically on Table 3) for the three racial/ethnic groups. Here the Latinx group had the lowest rates among both overall and poverty populations, 4.24 and 10.23 respectively. While the Black group still had the highest rate among the overall population (7.55), this rate was less than half that of the group's ES/TH rate (16.02). The White group, in contrast, had higher HO than ES/TH rates (5.05 compared to 3.22), and had the highest rate of all the racial/ethnic groups (33.94; compared to 24.44 for the Black group and 10.23 for the Latinx group).

The differences across the three racial/ethnic groups stayed consistent across specific sex/age breakdowns. Specifically, the individual sex/age cells held to a pattern where, among the ES/TH population, the Latinx rates for the overall population exceeded the White rate, but the White rates became substantially higher than the Latinx rates when taking poverty into account. For the HO subpopulations, Hispanics had the lowest rates of homelessness regardless of taking poverty into consideration. Blacks, with lower levels of poverty than Hispanics, had the highest rates of homelessness overall, although White rates either exceeded or were like Black rates when looking at rates among poverty populations.

Noteworthy also among the findings are the different age patterns related to homelessness among men and women. Men, who experience homelessness mainly as single adults, had rates that were highest in middle age up to age 65. Women, in contrast, were not so often homeless as individuals and had the highest rates during their childbearing and early parenting years. These rates were most pronounced among those who were poor and Black, and much lower for those who were poor and Hispanic.

Finally, results from two logistic regression models, reported in Table 4, provides one statistic (AORs) to compare risk for homelessness among those the three different ethnic groups living under poverty income guidelines that controls for sex and age. In the sheltered homelessness (ES/TH) model, poor Hispanics had a significantly lower AOR compared to poor Whites (0.663), while Blacks had a significantly higher AOR (2.616). In the unsheltered model, compared to Whites the AOR for Blacks (0.926) was roughly equal substantively (but significantly different) compared to Whites, while the AOR for Hispanics (0.421) was substantially (and significantly) lower.

Table 4 – Results for Logistic Regression Models Estimating Odds Associated with Demographic Characteristics of Receiving Sheltered (ES/TH) and Unsheltered (HO) Services Among Philadelphia Poverty Population.

	Sheltered (ES/TH)				Unsheltered (HO)		
	AOR	**Lower CI**	**Upper CI**		**AOR**	**Lower CI**	**Upper CI**
Race/Ethnicity							
Latinx	0.663	0.614	0.715		0.421	0.386	0.458
Black	2.616	2.482	2.758		0.926	0.877	0.978
White		(reference)				(reference)	
Sex							
Female	0.554	0.534	0.574		0.311	0.295	0.328
Male		(reference)				(reference)	
Age							
0-5	0.611	0.570	0.654		n/a		
6-17	0.338	0.316	0.362		n/a		
18-24	0.374	0.347	0.403		0.113	0.1	0.127
25-34	0.894	0.840	0.951		0.561	0.521	0.604
35-44		(reference)				(reference)	
45-54	0.854	0.801	0.910		0.864	0.805	0.926
55-64	0.799	0.746	0.855		0.796	0.739	0.858
65+	0.268	0.241	0.297		0.313	0.281	0.349
N	359,760				244,193		

Notes:
1) Population (N) reflects total Philadelphia population of White, Black and Latinx persons in households with income below poverty income guidelines. N's differ across models as persons in 0-5 and 6-17 age groups were not included in the unsheltered model. There were insufficient services use by these age groups for valid values in the unsheltered model.
2) p-value for all covariates is p<.001, except for "Black" in the unsheltered model (p<.01).
3) AOR – Adjusted odds ratio; CI – Confidence interval

Discussion

This analysis used ACS and City of Philadelphia data to support findings, reported in the Philadelphia-area media, that people of Latinx ethnicity had lower levels of homelessness than non-Latinx people of White and Black race. Generally, Latinx had levels of homelessness that were roughly comparable to Whites, despite Whites having less than half the level of poverty, and much lower than Blacks, who had somewhat lower levels of poverty. A more direct way to compare these rates of homelessness is by focusing on those in poverty among these racial/ethnic groups, where the Latinx group had rates of 14.00 and 10.23 for sheltered (ES/TH) and unsheltered (HO) homelessness, respectively, compared to corresponding rates of 51.86 and 24.44 for the Black group and 21.67 and 33.94 for the White group. Finally, taking poverty, sex and age into account showed that, compared to Whites, Latinx had two-thirds the odds (AOR=0.663) and Blacks had well over twice the odds (AOR=2.616) for experiencing sheltered (ES/TH) homelessness, and that

Latinx had less than half the odds (0.421) while Blacks had slightly lower odds (AOR=0.926) for experiencing unsheltered (HO) homelessness than Whites.

While these findings provide strong empirical support to the existence of racial and ethnic disparities in levels of homelessness that go beyond basic economic and demographic differences, these findings cannot provide an explanation for why Latinx were underrepresented among those receiving homeless services, or, for that matter, why Blacks (non Latinx) were overrepresented among the homeless services-using populations, and why more Whites use services for unsheltered homeless (HO) than for sheltered homeless (ES/TH). The data for this analysis were not able to capture a variety of risk and protective factors that may mediate these relationships, nor could they account for differential barriers to access to services that may account for the different rates reported here.

Some data limitations also warrant mention here. Neither the ES/TH or HO datasets have comprehensive coverage of the sheltered and unsheltered homeless populations, respectively. Their coverage, however, is broad enough so that including those who were not counted would unlikely have substantially impacted the large differences found here. Similarly, the ACS population data (2011-15) pre-date the homeless data (2018) by several years, but there is nothing to indicate that more updated ACS numbers would lead to substantially different findings.

Finally, neither the ES/TH nor the HO datasets capture those among the homeless population who use no services, including those who "couch surf" in precarious, crowded living situations with family or friends. If there were an overrepresentation of Latinx among this subpopulation, it may explain the "Latinx paradox" found here. If so, it would then lead to the question of how housing and services, such as those examined here or other homelessness prevention services could best address the housing needs of poor Latinx households. This will be considered in Part 3 of this report.

Part 2: Perceptions of Barriers to Access and Community Assets

To better understand the potential role of perceived barriers to accessing homeless services, we convened focus groups with three sets of stakeholders who could share their experiences with City-managed services:

- Latinx individuals who have experienced literal or imminent homelessness
- Leadership at nonprofit social service organizations primarily serving the Latinx population
- Front-line staff at the Office of Homeless Services (OHS) and contracted providers of shelter, rapid rehousing, and prevention assistance services.

Methods

In total, we conducted four focus groups to obtain representation from each of the three groups; two groups of front-line staff and one group for each of the others. Focus groups with front-line staff and agency leadership were conducted in English, while the session

with clients was conducted in Spanish and translated into English. In total 23 people participated in focus groups. Questions for clients focused on their experiences facing homelessness and, for those who availed themselves of OHS services, their experience with the agency and its vendors. The focus group with OHS and provider front-line and supervisory staff focused on their experiences working with Latinx individuals, their own experiences in those agencies, and their perceptions of system barriers and facilitators for Latinx households. Questions for agency leadership sought to understand their relationship with OHS, the range of homelessness and other social services that they provide, and how they understood their clients' experiences facing homelessness or imminent homelessness.

All focus groups were recorded, with the research team taking contemporaneous notes for context, and then taking subsequent notes based on recordings. Following these focus groups, the research team met with OHS and Office of Data Management leadership to review preliminary findings and to better understand City efforts that may explain or help to address focus group findings.

Results

We identified several themes that were consistent within each stakeholder community and across the focus groups. We divided them into two broad groups: "Inside the homeless service system" and "Outside the homeless service system." The former refers to circumstances and phenomena in systems operated or managed by the Office of Homeless Services - including shelters, shelter intake, diversion, prevention facilities, and rapid rehousing operators - and how they impact broader perceptions and use of those services by the Latinx community. "Outside the homeless service system" refers to exogenous cultural and community factors that, based on data from the focus groups, are perceived as potential contributing factors to lower rates of services use among the Latinx community.

Inside the Homeless Service System

Language Barriers

The most prevalent comment from all three stakeholder groups was that Spanish-speaking Latinx clients are faced with a significant language barrier to receiving services by OHS and its providers. This appeared to be a consistent complaint across the homeless service spectrum.

While all materials that guide an applicant for OHS-contracted services have recently been made available in both English and Spanish, staff and clients both noted that the until recently they were available only in English, leaving Spanish-speaking individuals unsure of fundamental aspects of navigating OHS homeless services. There are often no Spanish-speaking individuals on duty at OHS's intake facilities or contracted shelters and there are no Spanish-speaking clinical caseworkers on staff in the Emergency Assistance Unit, although two supervisors at OHS-facilities who participated in our focus groups do speak Spanish. They, and others, remarked that the few individuals who do speak Spanish are often recruited to translate for Spanish-speaking clients and applicants on an ad hoc basis. While this is a resourceful effort to meet an immediate need, staff noted that it sometimes meant being pulled away from their primary responsibilities.

All City departments are required to have Language Access Plans in place. Those who serve the public typically utilize telephonic interpretation such as Language Line, a phone-based translation service. Respondents expressed frustration with the service. Most notably, they complained of delays caused by the time to go through phone prompts and then translate; quite often they seek other solutions. These include translations through Spanish speaking janitorial staff, calling off-duty Spanish speaking case managers, and as a last resort, a clients' children. One bilingual shelter staff member reported receiving phone calls on more than half of his days off with a request to translate. In addition, the lack of an on-site human presence to provide services in Spanish also had the effect of making Latinx clients feel unwelcome and less cared for than their English-speaking counterparts.

Staff and clients alike cited instances in which these language barriers carried consequences beyond making Latinx clients feel less welcome than others. Staff were perceived as demeaning to Spanish-speaking clients when they failed to understand them and, on one occasion, a miscommunication was reported to have nearly led to a termination of services until Spanish-speaking staff could translate for the client. In other instances, a supervisor noted that she would find clients working from inaccurately translated instructions, adding confusion and time to an already stressful process.

City staff and leadership both noted difficulty in hiring bilingual staff, despite posting positions specifically seeking bi-lingual staff and attempting to recruit through the network of Latinx focused social service providers. .

Cultural Barriers

Staff and nonprofit leaders also noted that they perceived a lack of cultural sensitivity towards Latinx clients, which may also dissuade people from seeking OHS services. For example, a Latinx client may avoid making eye contact as a sign of respect, but a caseworker may see this as a sign of disrespect. More broadly, staff and nonprofit executives noted that Spanish-speaking clients who had been living in a predominantly Spanish-speaking community found themselves sleeping in shelters in predominantly white or black communities and were being served cafeteria food to which they were unaccustomed.

Geographic Barriers

Another issue mentioned by clients, staff, and nonprofit leaders was the geographic inaccessibility of intake centers and most of the city's shelters relative to neighborhoods with high concentrations of Latinx people. While one agency located in a largely Latinx area has operated prevention and rapid rehousing services for more than 10 years, the visibility of information about homeless services is minimal. Some nonprofit leaders pointed to this as one reason for a lack of awareness of homeless services among their constituents. Some clients were unaware of programs that provide free or discounted transportation for low-income individuals facing housing and health crises, making travel particularly challenging for those lacking other means of transportation. In addition, none of the City's shelters are located in predominantly Latinx communities.

Outside the Homeless Service System

Systemic Disconnects

We also received comments on phenomena that appeared to have little connection to homeless services but could meaningfully impact the ability and likelihood of Latinx Philadelphians to seek its services. One, alluded to earlier, is a lack of access to information about homeless services and how to obtain them, particularly pronounced for Latinx individuals who are not within the homeless service system and do not possess the network connections to access information about them. As one Latinx nonprofit leader put it, "only people within the system know about [the programs]. People outside the system are not educated on it, and the programs already have long waiting lists."

Cultural Assets

Focus group participants also identified two cultural aspects that could impact homelessness services use. First, some noted a general sense that Latinxs find pride in self-sufficiency and thus, are reluctant to look for help. Some would engage in couch surfing with the help of friends and families, and those who lack the support of a friend or family member oftentimes stay in the streets rather than seek assistance. That was the case with some of the clients interviewed, and as one mentioned, he would rather "sleep under a bridge" than go to a shelter.

Second, nonprofit leaders and staff highlighted the value of strong institutions and networks present in Philadelphia's Latinx enclaves. A sense of solidarity was cited among Latinx community members, and this is reflected in the opportunities to double up with friends or family and ask for support from community organizations. One Latinx organization leader highlighted the impact of Latinx community churches, the Latinx individual's tendency to seek support from churches, and the role priests and other church leaders play in the community as psychologists or social workers.

Highly Marginalized Populations

The focus group members also shared their perspectives on particularly vulnerable population groups, particularly undocumented immigrant and LGBTQ communities. Undocumented immigrants experiencing homelessness fear deportation when dealing with government agencies, and therefore often avoid seeking services. According to an organization leader of the immigrant community: "10 men live in a one-bedroom apartment. It won't even occur to them to walk into a government office because there is this fear of 'if I walk into a government agency are they going to not refer me to a diversion program but to ICE or another law enforcement agency.' Even if that's an unfounded fear, it is a fear nonetheless." Moreover, it was reported that some Latinx-focused nonprofits eschew OHS contracts over fears that providing personal identifying information to a government entity could, at some point, lead to deportation for undocumented clients.

A representative of the Latinx LGBTQ+ community expressed concerns regarding lesbian women being placed with straight women, gay men being placed with straight men, and a hostile environment unwelcoming towards trans people. While these may reflect concerns of the LGBTQ+ community more broadly, there are particular issues exacerbated by being

Latinx. According to the trans woman, "As a white, affirming transwoman, you have people that are for some reason more affirming to them or even white passing. If I were white passing, someone would definitely be more affirming to me."

Discussion

Findings suggest a dual set of explanations for Latinx paradox in homelessness: systemic barriers and negative perceptions of homeless services that dissuade Latinx Philadelphians from seeking city-funded services, while informal and formal community assets provide a network of assistance and relief for those experiencing homelessness or imminent homelessness. In addition to illuminating explanations for the "Latinx Paradox," our focus groups and conversation with the City on steps being taken to improve the homeless service experiences of Latinx Philadelphians; to leverage community assets as a means for changing perceptions; and to seek ways in which they can continue to improve.

The most significant and consistently identified need was to enhance the presence of Spanish-speaking staff at OHS intake centers and facilities as well as in contracted shelters. Stakeholders, including those working for the City, agreed on the need to hire Spanish-speaking staff at the different levels of the OHS and its contracted organizations, which include the service representative level, social work level, and supervisor level. Respondents also suggested ways of reducing cultural insensitivities and the potential for discrimination that impact the reputation of OHS and its services within the Latinx community, including hiring more Latinx staff and developing a cultural competency training curriculum.

OHS, in our discussion of findings, highlighted its efforts to reduce the language and barriers discussed in focus groups. They included, first and foremost, ongoing efforts to hire Spanish speaking social workers and supervisors, including expanding efforts to tap into the networks of Latinx-focused social service providers. The agency is also emphasizing the importance of Spanish-speaking staff in its hiring for new "mobile assessors" who can perform intake and assessment services in the community rather than in OHS's centralized intake centers. OHS secured funding for these bilingual mobile assessors in 2018 and is working to place them at a nonprofit within the Latinx community. In addition, OHS has recently simplified its written forms and instructions for those seeking services and has ensured that Spanish versions are available at all service sites.

Finally, we saw a need to increase awareness of homeless services among Latinxs through outreach efforts that include stronger ties between the City and the network of Latinx-focused nonprofits. Importantly, there are no organizations based in the Latinx community dedicated primarily to homelessness services. OHS, like most government agencies, offers social services through contracted vendors, and increasing the presence of OHS services in Latinx-heavy populations requires greater participation by local community-based organizations.

OHS outlined recent steps it is taking to strengthen its presence in the Latinx community. Beyond the addition of two mobile assessors, OHS has contracted with Congreso de Latinos Unidos, a large nonprofit in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood, to provide homelessness prevention services to households facing homelessness and rapid rehousing

for those leaving shelter. In addition, OHS leadership now meets with representatives from Latinx-focused nonprofits on a regular basis to ensure that local needs are being recognized and to ensure that social service organizations are aware of OHS funding opportunities and other chances to increase their impact.

Limitations of the focus group portion of this study present opportunities for additional research. First, focus groups were conducted largely with a small group of clients of Puerto Rican descent or representatives of organizations serving primarily Puerto Rican populations. While Puerto Ricans represent the majority of Latinx Philadelphians, they are certainly not the only ones and their experiences are unlikely to represent other Spanish-speaking populations in Philadelphia. In particular, Puerto Ricans are US citizens and therefore have access to some public benefits that are not available to immigrants. Second, the focus groups with clients and nonprofit leadership only included representation from the Latinx community in North Philadelphia, which may limit generalizability to other Latinx communities throughout the City. Third, we had limited representation from marginalized groups within the Latinx community. In particular, our focus groups included one self-identified member of the LGBTQ+ population and no undocumented immigrants. Both groups could face additional challenges to obtaining appropriate services than those included in our focus groups.

Part 3: Leveraging National and Local Homelessness Program Reforms

Since the release of *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness* (US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2015), communities throughout the US have been working to align their efforts to address homelessness with the evidence-based approaches outlined in the federal plan. Foremost among these has been a fundamental shift away from an emphasis on temporary housing, including both shelter and transitional housing, and toward more community-based prevention and rapid rehousing programs.

Research on homelessness has increasingly focused on the factors that underlie housing instability, including evictions, substandard housing conditions, housing crowding, and crises that trigger homelessness spells, including job losses, injuries, illnesses, domestic violence, and other events that can result in sudden drops in income. The expansion of homelessness prevention and rapid rehousing programs has been designed to mitigate the impact of these underlying conditions and to address more directly and immediately the crises that precipitate homelessness episodes. The City of Philadelphia has likewise begun to reorient its approach to homelessness, as outlined in its new strategic plan (Office of Homeless Services, 2018b).

The OHS, in its 2018 strategic plan, *Roadmap to Homes*, lists as its first goal "Make Homelessness Rare: Prevent homelessness to the greatest extent possible." This tactic represents an opportunity to deploy additional resources to underrepresented groups and geographic areas, like the Latinx community, who may be hesitant to travel outside of their neighborhood or, because of concerns of language, cultural sensitivity, or, for immigrant groups, immigration status, have largely avoided city-run services. By leveraging and strengthening existing community-based resources, rather than centralizing services in

Center City, OHS can enable those facing imminent homelessness to avoid the shelter system entirely through services that are conveniently located, and in a language and cultural setting in which they feel more comfortable.

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development has likewise urged a shift in direction by its local grantees in how it addresses homelessness, with a specific focus on improved assessment of clients and quicker referral to appropriate interventions, rather than lengthy shelter stays. As part of this effort, HUD has urged communities to create systems of "coordinated entry" that standardize a strengths-based approach to client needs assessments, and that link clients to prevention and rapid rehousing as an alternative or supplement to emergency shelter.

The Office of Homeless Services has improved and streamlined its assessment process in accordance with HUD guidance. In particular, the City's new coordinated assessment process has been designed such that assessment for OHS services can be conducted on a more distributed basis. In addition, the advent of community-based bilingual mobile assessors means that individuals facing street homelessness or households with severe housing instability can now be assessed for OHS diversion and shelter services in their own neighborhood and language (Office of Homeless Services, 2018a). Beyond reducing structural barriers to entry like language and geographic hurdles, clients are likely to feel more comfortable with the care and guidance they can receive from culturally sensitive providers at a point in their lives of significant anxiety, instability, and perhaps trauma.

As federal homelessness policy continues to become more focused on community-based prevention and early intervention services, the opportunity for improved access to services beyond the traditional emergency shelter system should enable greater opportunities to serve the needs of people in Latinx communities faced with housing instability and homelessness. The research evidence has shown that these interventions are able to serve more people for lower costs per household than traditional shelter, thereby expanding the number of people who can be served, while more directly addressing the life circumstances they face. This promising shift in priorities, and the increasing federal resources that have been committed to this change in approaches could create new opportunities to serve many more adults, youth and families facing housing crises, including populations who have not been accessing traditional homeless services. State and local funding could further accelerate these potential advances by directing more resources to address the needs of tenants facing eviction, housing crowding and substandard housing conditions. The City of Philadelphia's existing housing counseling and tenancy preservation services could be further directed in support of these objectives, resulting in a greater alignment of resources and purposes.

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