

A Blueprint for Opportunity: A Look Back at HUD's Regional Housing Mobility Program

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In an age of widening income inequality, advocates and policymakers are striving to design policies that can extend ladders to better lives for all. This includes exploring new policies that address the geographic distribution of opportunity and its underlying legacy of segregation—the architecture of our shared social resources. Investment in open and meaningful housing choices yield returns as successive generations grow enabled to pursue educational attainment, better health, and more dynamic job skills.

As we seek to innovate, it is well worth taking a look into the past. Several decades ago, housing policymakers drew up a regionalist blueprint for opportunity called the Regional Housing Mobility Program (RHMP). This particular model of resource architecture, too soon consigned to the archives of fair housing history, was a short object lesson in the untapped potential of regional voucher administration.

As the RHMP example shows, civil rights practitioners have long recognized the value of regional strategies, including in the distribution of and access to affordable housing. Historically and today, boundary lines among jurisdictions have been misused as tools of exclusion. Based long ago on principles of civic access and choice in services, such boundaries can instead

splinter metropolitan regions in ways that bar vulnerable populations from exactly those assets. This has been a formula for unequal access to social and economic capital. In concrete terms, local fragmentation can spell unequal access to a region's benefits and burdens—in schools, basic municipal services, environmental quality,

The value of regional strategies.

and other respects. Taking the long view, such fault lines perpetuate socioeconomic hardship across generations.

In housing, education and other areas, regional policies offer a pragmatic step toward addressing many of these problems. Although direct federal involvement in state and local governance has constraints, federal programs can provide incentives that counteract the temptation to hoard resources within jurisdiction lines. This includes access to housing across high-opportunity areas of metro regions. Regional housing policy is also driven by the Fair Housing Act's mandate that they and their grantees affirmatively further fair housing (AFFH). A long-standing—and long unfulfilled—directive of civil rights law, the AFFH provision can also guide housing program design toward greater efficiency. For example, cross-jurisdictional policies in the administration of housing vouchers should help families more easily pursue employment or education throughout a metro area, while also facilitating cooperation among housing authorities in voucher administration.

RHMP was intended to achieve both those goals. It piloted a voucher program redesign that incentivized the voluntary participation of PHAs in

expanding choices for the families they served. At that time of RHMP's rollout in 1979, HUD policymakers were viewing the Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) program through a cautiously optimistic lens. Section 8 was a young initiative with potential to redress the severe patterns of segregation perpetuated by other government housing programs, as contemporaneous HUD data had revealed. For example, as data collected by HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research and its Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity in 1977-78 had shown:

the first major conclusion of this study is that families receiving assistance in the ten metropolitan areas studied were concentrated in a relatively small number of minority-occupied census tracts, and were headed primarily by minority persons....With regard to location patterns in the ten central cities [studied], most of the subsidized rental housing available through project-oriented programs instituted before Section 8 was located in minority census tracts....The locational patterns of projects built under the Public Housing Program were responsible for a large share of HUD family housing being located in minority-concentrated areas. (Robert Gray & Steven Tursky, "Location and Racial/Ethnic Occupancy," in *Housing Desegregation and Federal Policy*, John Goering, ed. (UNC Press 1986), at 249-250.)

Section 8

Over a decade after the Fair Housing Act's enactment, Section 8 presented an antidote to the segregative public housing policies of the past –

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in theory, even if the new program was not living up to its potential in practice. While allowing that Section 8 was “fundamentally different” from other programs, the above study noted “variation regarding the degree to which the Section 8 program has begun to alleviate the scarcity of subsidized housing located outside of minority-concentrated census tracts.” Gray & Tursky at 250.

Examining Section 8 in more detail, Trudy McFall, then Director of HUD’s Office of Planning, identified a number of barriers to mobility that arose in the program’s operation. As McFall noted, despite aspects of the Section 8 regulations encouraging PHAs to provide for interjurisdictional mobility, political resistance across jurisdictional lines meant that in practice vouchers use tended to be confined within municipalities. (Trudy McFall, “Voluntary Agreements among PHAs can Increase Low-Income Housing Choices,” *Journal of Housing*, May 1981 at 251.) An alternative solution—the regional housing authority—had successfully expanded choice in the few areas where it was politically feasible, most notably in Minneapolis-St. Paul, but remained rare.

Expanding Choice

Despite such caveats about Section 8 in operation, policymakers on both federal and local levels believed that the program was underused as a lever to expand choice. Many local administrators were believers in the end goal of deconcentrating poverty and promoting integration, and supportive of the notion of regional cooperation. However, institutional inertia and concern over initial costs presented a significant hurdle to widespread change. Further motivation was needed. In particular, an incentive-based program would provide the impetus for PHAs to look beyond their immersion in the daily accounting of program administration and test new methods for regionwide housing choice.

Acknowledging the limitations the existing landscape presented, McFall and others at HUD sought to show that local PHAs could work within the program while expanding choice. They engineered RHMP as an initiative that would have “as its major focus demonstrating ways PHAs can act cooperatively to provide greater opportunities for low-income persons to move within a region without regard to municipal boundaries.” (McFall at 252.) The program was seeded with \$2 million, and regional planning agencies in large metros were invited to apply for grants in the form of technical assistance funds. (Id.) RHMP funded two main aspects of mobility programming: first, the development of Section 8 clearinghouse programs, and second, the provision of mobility

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counseling and information about housing options. (Id.) The clearinghouses were to encompass both older center cities and better-resourced suburbs, and moves were unrestricted throughout those areas. The complementary counseling services were required to “emphasize particularly housing opportunities in suburban or nonconcentrated city neighborhoods,” in order to correct for information gaps. (Id. at 253.) In this way, the program aimed to facilitate unrestricted but informed choice by voucher holders. This meant the demonstration could serve a dual purpose during its trial: Acknowledging public debate around the actual desires of potential movers, McFall noted that “one major function of this program, in addition to creating new administrative models, is to determine [through the collection of data] where low-income persons actually do move when they are given the opportunity for interjurisdictional mobility.” (Id. at 252.) Agencies were required to in-

clude fair housing and civil rights groups in the planning and evaluation of the programs, and were permitted to contract with other entities as needed. (Id.)

Within the parameters stated above, RHMP allowed for ample flexibility when it came to the nuts and bolts of program design. While rigorous in its promotion of interjurisdictional choice, the demonstration’s guidance was sufficiently loose to accommodate the different needs and priorities of the enrolled metropolitan regions. The clearinghouses, for example, were structured in various ways that included the direct referral of clients among PHAs; the pooling of vouchers for use throughout participating communities; or the transferring of vouchers among PHAs. Additional program features included landlord outreach, applicant counseling, and administrative fixes, in particular adjustments to fair market rents. (Id. at 255.)

Initial Success

The policymakers who created RHMP had the satisfaction of watching its initial successes. This included the enrollment of 17 metropolitan regions through the competitive application process, with 14 participating as voucher clearinghouses. In her summary of the effort, McFall found that while the clearinghouses took some time and administrative effort to establish, the increased burden on PHAs was not excessive, and they remained willing participants. Other barriers remained to be addressed, in particular the distribution of affordable units throughout the housing market in patterns that would facilitate meaningful choice. Yet in the early 1980s the program was finding its footing, with voucher clients beginning to exercise their right to interjurisdictional moves. Unfortunately, RHMP would not be funded past the few years of its demonstration stage—a lapse that McFall attributes to shifting policies back within the Beltway, as federal support for housing initiatives waned.

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ties fighting each other for limited resources, rather than form the sorts of cross-racial coalitions that Cashin seeks to promote. I suspect that race-coded, dog-whistle politics will be as effective an agent for racial divisiveness in the competition for socioeconomic affirmative action benefits as it has been in the competition for other societal benefits. Accordingly, there is a danger that the supposed race neutrality of socioeconomic affirmative action will simply end up masking subtle forms of embedded racial discrimination.

I agree with Professor Cashin's view that cross-racial coalitions are desirable. However, I do not think that healthy cross-racial coalitions are likely to result from suppressing the salience of race. The racial reconciliation and cross-racial coalitions that formed during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s were produced by intense race-consciousness, not by a commitment to color-blindness. I think the reason racial attitudes have changed since then is because the Supreme Court has made it fashionable to resent racial minorities again. If the Court changed its constitutional rhetoric to be as sensitive to the problem of racial subordination as it was during the civil rights era, I think the culture might change its views about race in a way that once again emphasized racial justice over racial resentment. If you think I am naïve, please remember that the racial animosity preceding the Civil Rights Movement was more intense than the racial animosity that exists now. If we could move from that old animosity to the old Civil Rights Movement, we should also be able to move from the current animosity to a new Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, by acquiescing in use of the term "affirmative action," and the characterization of affirmative action as consisting of "racial preferences," we seem to be relinquishing the moral high ground to the proponents of discrimination, who would like to make effective remedies

seem illegitimate. What we are talking about should not be called affirmative action, but rather should be called an effort to remedy ongoing embedded racial discrimination. We should try to control the meaning of the concept so that it is once again viewed as legitimate, just, and a moral imperative.

Lyndon Johnson originally viewed "affirmative action" as a term that entailed conscious efforts to combat ongoing racial discrimination. The term was eventually commandeered as a divisive racial symbol by those who wished to exploit a tacit but widely-shared sense of white entitlement to societal resources. The Supreme Court's anti-affirmative action decisions have also deprived Johnson's affirmative action of the moral clarity it initially possessed, by characterizing efforts to remedy subtle but deeply embedded forms of "societal discrimi-

The problem with race-neutral remedies.

nation" as illegitimate and unconstitutional efforts to grant racial preferences to minorities. Different decisions and different rhetoric by the Supreme Court might have precluded the current affirmative action backlash. And perhaps different decisions by a future Supreme Court with greater racial sensitivity would restore legitimacy and moral clarity to race-conscious discrimination remedies.

I agree with Professor Cashin that—in the current political climate, with the current Supreme Court—race-conscious efforts to end discrimination are not likely to meet with much success. That is unfortunate. But by continuing to press for them, perhaps we can at least remind people that the ongoing problem of racial discrimination is real, and that those who favor socioeconomic affirmative action are offering them a moderate rather than a radical remedy for that discrimination. □

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HUD's withdrawal of support for the RHMP demonstration meant the potential for interjurisdictional choice in voucher use remained largely unexplored. In the intervening years, the body of evidence documenting the benefits of expanded housing mobility has grown, and regional pilots (such as those in operation in Baltimore, Dallas and Chicago) have sustained interest in program designs that facilitate choice throughout metro areas. Daily concerns over short-term costs and regional politics understandably can distract from efforts to innovate. It is worth remembering how reforms can thrive, as they did during the RHMP's short tenure, when they are shown to be sound policy for an equitable end. □

New Website on Housing Mobility

We are pleased to announce the launch of a new collaborative website, www.housingmobility.org, which includes video, audio and photos of families participating in regional housing mobility programs from across the country, and a resource library with the latest social science research, legal advocacy, best practices, and policy analysis in this growing field. Initial co-sponsors of the website include PRRAC, Housing Choice Partners (Chicago), ACLU of Maryland (Baltimore), the Inclusive Communities Project (Dallas), and the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change. Website development was supported by a grant from the Maryland-based Fund for Change.