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College focused rapid rehousing: Deploying an existing community model to address homelessness on campus

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that financial and housing insecurity challenges are widespread on most college campuses throughout the U.S. However, there is wide variability in how campuses address these challenges. This study reports on a three-year implementation of the *College-Focused Rapid Rehousing* pilot; an initiative in California by which universities commissioned community providers to assist students in need via a modified Rapid Rehousing (RRH) intervention. RRH is a widely implemented intervention that combines move-in assistance, short-term rental subsidies, and ongoing case management, to help individuals quickly transition into stable housing. The mixed-methods evaluation included analyses of online surveys ($n = 141$), administrative records ($n = 368$), and focus groups conducted with staff across eight campuses ($n = 35$). Survey findings indicate that CFRR programs assisted a diverse group of students with similar histories of housing insecurity. Quantitative analyses also show that most participants experienced the intervention as designed, though with some inconsistencies in how quickly some were assisted. Qualitative findings highlight contextual factors that affected the consistency of the intervention, including tight rental markets and philosophical disagreements among administrators about the intervention's scope. Despite study limitations, findings provide insights into the applicability of the RRH model on campus settings and directions for future research.

Over the past two decades, the college student population in the U.S. has diversified to include more first-generation students, students of color, and students from under-resourced socio-economic backgrounds (Broton et al., 2018). At the same time, the costs of higher education have substantially increased (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), and large public

university systems, like the California State University (CSU) system, anticipate this trend to continue (Zinshteyn, 2023). As a result, nearly one half of college students in the U.S. face regular bouts of financial precarity, leading to an inability to meet basic needs associated with food and shelter (e.g., Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Nazmi et al., 2019). Such students are susceptible to financial shortfalls when an emergency or sudden expenses arise (e.g., a rent increase or vehicle expenses), making them more likely to forgo paying for food, miss rent payments, and face eviction (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). The 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study estimates that 23% of all undergraduates in the U.S. had experienced food insecurity during the past twelve months, and 8% had experienced literal homelessness during that period (equating to approximately 1.4 million students) (Cameron et al., 2021).

Not surprisingly, students facing financial precarity, and homelessness in particular, are more likely to exhibit poorer academic performance and diminished health and well-being (Hallett et al., 2019; Patton-López et al., 2014; Tsui et al., 2011). For example, a statewide study of college students in Wisconsin found that housing insecurity was correlated with students taking fewer classes, thus extending the time to graduation, and reducing chances of graduation in 4 years by at least 10% (Broton et al., 2018). Similar research shows that housing instability is correlated with feelings of uncertainty and stress, which erodes students' ability to focus and succeed in school (Bowers & O'Neill, 2019; Kornbluh et al., 2022; Wilking et al., 2022).

Over the past decade, university and college systems have responded by implementing various initiatives to provide additional support and resources to students. These efforts have included the development of basic needs centers on campuses, emergency grant programs, food pantry programs, expanded access to counselors and social workers, as well as referral pathways to community programs associated with housing, social services, and public assistance (Hallett et al., 2019; Cady & Broton, 2020). Early studies suggest considerable variation in the types of assistance offered by different institutions, as well as how these programs have been designed and implemented (Speirs et al., 2023). In sum, assistance programs on college campuses targeting student homelessness are currently evolving but little information is known about their implementation, or about the factors that might influence how programs develop and evolve.

In this study, we present the results of an ongoing evaluation of a pilot supportive housing intervention being implemented at public universities and community colleges in California, called College Focused Rapid Rehousing (CFRR). Although the evaluation is ongoing, this current work examines how the broader Rapid Rehousing model, widely implemented

across almost every U.S. community (Burt et al., 2016), has been modified to address the different life circumstances of students managing school and other responsibilities. Understanding how this housing model can support student success, as well as documenting its shortcomings and challenges in the college context, can provide both researchers as well as policymakers with more nuanced insights into the applicability of the model across settings. Given that California is leading states in passing legislation to address basic needs in higher education, as well as the size and diversity of California's higher education system (Crutchfield et al., 2022), lessons from CFRR in California's community colleges and the CSU can likely serve as a model for CFRR nationwide.

Institutional responses to basic needs insecurity

Although research shows that administrators in higher education are aware of and concerned about student basic needs and insecurities (Dubick et al., 2016), such as lack of access to food and stable housing, this same research indicates that there is little guidance on how administrators can effectively address those needs within the context of their institutions. Moreover, many administrators and staff have attempted to innovate campus-based interventions amidst competing institutional demands associated with declining funding in public higher education and high pressure for accountability, particularly in public universities and community colleges (Kelchen, 2018). Additionally, interviews of college administrators and campus staff suggest that varied institutional strategies to address basic needs reflect different perspectives as to whether such issues are within the scope of universities and colleges (Broton et al. 2020).

Few states require campuses to address student basic needs, which also accounts for the substantial variation in approaches. For example, until recently, most of these institutional efforts focused primarily on food insecurity (Cady & Broton, 2020) although few campus-based programs directly addressed housing insecurity (Hallett et al., 2019). And even among campuses that currently provide some emergency housing assistance, most are short-term and one-time interventions, such as the provision of motel vouchers, or temporary access to on- or off-campus emergency housing (Crutchfield et al., 2022).

The state of California has recently taken several steps to better institutionalize campus-based interventions for students with basic needs insecurity (see Crutchfield et al., 2022 for an overview of this recent history). Of most relevance to this study, in 2019, the California State Legislature allocated $19 million in funding each fiscal year for community colleges and public universities across the state to develop and implement a College-

Focused Rapid Rehousing program for students experiencing homelessness (Assembly Bill 74). Under this new funding initiative, public universities in California were incentivized to establish new partnerships with agencies in the community that already provide a particular type of housing intervention called Rapid Rehousing.

College-Focused Rapid Rehousing

The College-Focused Rapid Rehousing (CFRR) model is based on a broader homeless intervention model called Rapid Rehousing (RRH), which is funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and implemented in almost every community in the U.S. The core components of the RRH model include helping unhoused individuals identify and secure housing quickly, providing them a time-limited subsidy for rental and move-in assistance (typically 6–9 months, though sometimes as long as 16 months), and supporting them with ongoing case management to help them remain stably housed over time (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015). A central goal of the RRH model is to reduce the length of time a person experiences homelessness and to quickly transition them directly into permanent housing (Cunningham & Batko, 2018). Evaluations of the model have found mixed results relative to similar types of housing interventions, such as transitional housing or emergency housing grants (Byrne et al., 2023); nonetheless, RRH continues to be seen as a cost-effective community strategy to reduce the time that households experience homelessness (HUD, 2016; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022).

California was one of the first states to widely adapt RRH for college settings (John Burton Advocates for Youth, n.d.) and in 2020 began funding what has been termed *College-Focused Rapid Rehousing* (CFRR) programs within its three public systems of higher education (California Community College, California State University, and the University of California systems). This modified RRH initiative includes four general components: (1) partnerships between campus-based basic needs centers and external housing providers in the community, (2) student outreach and referrals by campus-based centers to community providers, (3) rental assistance/subsidies for students while in the program, and (4) monthly case management to help housed students stay engaged with their education and attain stability so that they can live independently after the program (John Burton Advocates for Youth, n.d., for an overview see Crutchfield et al., 2022).

Funding for CFRR was administered at the system level and disbursed to and implemented by individual campuses. Although campuses were required to contract with external Community-Based Organizations (CBO)

to provide students with housing assistance similar to the RRH model, campuses were also provided considerable latitude in how they implemented some aspects of the CFRR model during the pilot year (2020–2021). Early reporting of CFRR, for example, has highlighted considerable differences in how each campus identified and referred students for housing assistance as well as how some campuses established explicit academic criteria for students to remain eligible for assistance (Crutchfield et al., 2022). Relatedly, the proportion of students placed in different types of housing (e.g., single room studios, two-bedroom apartments, shared rooms in a house) also varied substantially across campuses.

Given the resulting and diverse ways the CFRR model has been deployed across California, and the growing interest in assessing the impacts of these housing interventions on college campuses, the current study explores the specific ways that CFRR programs have varied from the RRH model and across settings. Leveraging conventional metrics used by researchers to assess the implementation of the RRH model (e.g., HUD benchmarks for the number of days between referral and housing placement), the current study is guided by three research questions:

1. How consistently was the CFRR pilot deployed across campuses?
2. How rapidly and consistently was assistance provided to students in need?
3. What contextual factors, on campus and in the community, affected implementation?

Methods

To assess the implementation of the CFRR model, this analysis draws from a three-year multi-method evaluation of the intervention being piloted across eight (8) public universities in California. The ongoing evaluation began in August 2020 and is currently tracking 368 students who were served by these eight programs through August 2023. Evaluation data includes: longitudinal surveys deployed at different intervals, administrative and academic records maintained by eight campus programs and universities, as well as focus groups conducted with students, campus administrators, and program staff. Although a forthcoming analysis will assess various outcomes of the intervention, such as academic success and housing security, the current study focuses on the implementation of the intervention process itself.

The multi-method design of the evaluation enhances the validity of evaluation research by integrating (i.e., triangulating) the comparative advantages of distinct modes of inquiry (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In this

study, the quantitative analyses of surveys and administrative data allow the researchers to objectively assess the implementation of CFRR via explicit metrics and benchmarks commonly used in the evaluation of RRH programs, which are elaborated below. Quantitative analyses also allow the researchers to systematically measure how consistently the CFRR intervention was deployed across students as well as across different campuses (i.e., research questions 1 and 2, listed above). To complement these findings, qualitative analyses of focus groups conducted with program and campus staff provide insight into the specific contextual factors that may have contributed to these differences across settings (i.e., research questions 3). This inductive form of inquiry helps researchers contextualize quantitative findings and identify relevant factors implicated in the implementation of an intervention that may have been unknown at the onset of the evaluation (Patton, 2014). Below we elaborate on the specific data sources and analytical procedures used in this exploratory multi-method study. It should be noted that the evaluation research design, and the subsequent reuse of data for academic publication, was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) under an expedited review in 2021 at the sponsoring university (IRB# 20-21-144).

Administrative data

Eight (8) university campuses provided the research team with administrative data on a total of 365 students who have been housed by CFRR between August 2020 and August 2023. After removing identifying, and potentially identifying data elements (e.g., name and email address), the research team retained a finalized dataset including information on students' first day of contact with a program for assistance, the date on which they were moved into housing, and if available, the date in which they exited the program either due to graduation from school, from the program, or another reason. The research team used these dates to compute two measures of implementation for the evaluation: (a) the number of days between when students were referred to housing and when they were ultimately housed in the community (i.e., time to housing); and (b) the total number of months consecutively housed (i.e., time in housing). These computations align with conventional evaluation measures used in large-scale evaluations of the Rapid Rehousing intervention (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015) and assess two central implementation benchmarks established a priori by administrators at the onset of the pilot, including (a) rapid rehousing within four weeks of referral, and (b) consistent support for one to two semesters.

Due to inconsistent record keeping across campuses, as well as the fact that many students were still housed at the time of this analysis, complete entry dates were only available for 323 students, and exit dates available for 192 students who have exited the program at the time of this writing (either due to no longer needing the program, graduation, or other reason).

Online surveys

The research team used email addresses included in the initial administrative dataset to send anonymized online surveys to students ($N = 365$) who had been housed in the last three academic years. Email invitations were deployed via the web-based platform Qualtrics, which automatically collected and anonymized responses. Data collection occurred during three recruitment periods during the second year of the evaluation (May 2022, November 2022, and June 2023) to capture the ongoing enrollment of students in these programs. Students were incentivized with $50, then later $100, online gift cards to complete the 20–25-minute surveys, resulting in a response rate of 39% ($n = 141$). The doubling of the incentive offered during the second year of the evaluation moderately raised the response rate by approximately 22%.

The survey instrument included several questions about students' backgrounds (e.g., year in school, major) and demographics (e.g., gender, race, age). The survey also asked students a broad range of questions associated with implementation (e.g., frequency of contact with case managers) as well as presumed outcome measures (time spent studying self-efficacy measures), the latter of which will be collected in subsequent longitudinal surveys and included in a forthcoming analysis of the intervention's impact on students. For this analysis, the research team focused on survey questions about demographics, students' prior experience with housing insecurity, and their perception of case management support (e.g., frequency of contact with case managers). Table 1 below summarizes the six survey items used to generate the housing insecurity index analyzed in this study, which was modified from recent evaluations of similar basic needs interventions (see Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). For case management services, survey participants were asked "In a typical month, how often were you meeting/communicating with your case manager?" Response categories included 11 intervals of frequency (where 0 = "Less than once a month" and 10 = "Ten times a month").

Focus groups with administrators and staff

To contextualize findings from the above quantitative data, and in particular to gain insight into the challenges of implementing CFRR, researchers

Table 1. Survey items assessing housing insecurity.

While a student at a university or community college, have you ever experienced any of the following?
(Indicate *Yes, No, or Don't Know,* for all the apply)
Experienced an increase in rent or mortgage that made it difficult to pay?
Did not pay or underpaid your rent or mortgage?
Moved two times or more in the same year?
Moved in with other people, even for a little while, because of financial problems?
Lived with others beyond the expected capacity of the house or apartment?
Lacked a safe, regular, and adequate nighttime place to stay and sleep?[a]

[a]This can include couch-surfing in other people's homes for temporary sleeping arrangements, single-occupancy-facilities, homeless shelters, campgrounds,motels, vehicles, and living on the street.

facilitated seven (7) 90-minute focus groups in Spring 2022, with 24 university administrators and 15 Community-Based Organization (CBO) staff across the eight campuses piloting the CFRR program. Focus groups were selected over interviews as an efficient means to elicit rich data and perspectives through group interactions that might be otherwise unattainable (Patton, 2014). Researchers facilitated separate focus groups online (viaZoom) for CBO direct-services staff, CBO leadership (e.g., Executive Directors of CBOs), college campus case managers/coordinators, and college campus leadership (e.g., campus associate vice presidents).

The three key objectives of focus groups included: (1) Identify contextual factors that affected the implementation of CFRR programs, (2) Identify how campus and CBO partners envisioned and modified the CFRR model over time, and (3) Identify staff perceptions regarding successes and challenges of the pilot effort. Accordingly, the research team developed and deployed a semi-structured discussion guide to elicit discussions around these three areas of interest. Open-ended prompts included discussion questions such as: "How has the campus and community climate and culture affected the development of your rapid rehousing program?" "What challenges and barriers occur in the *implementation* of rapid rehousing?" "What successes have been achieved in the implementation of rapid rehousing?" Focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed.

The research team used a multi-staged qualitative analysis process similar to a ground theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). This iterative method of analysis included: (a) identifying specific sections of focus group transcripts in which respondents discussed one of the three areas of interest described above, (b) inductively generating a list of open codes to describe the key semantic characteristics of these sections of text, (c) organizing and refining codes by broader emergent themes, and (d) applying the themes back to the data to ensure that the constructs were accurate and specific to the experiences of staff. Throughout this iterative process, the research team continually met to assess the reliability of the themes through a collaborative, consensus-agreement approach (Patton, 2014). To further enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, the research team

also shared preliminary reports of the analysis with campus and CBO partners. A debriefing with individuals who participated in focus groups allowed for an external validity check of the findings presented in this study.

Results

Quantitative analyses

Quantitative analyses of survey and administrative data revealed that CFRR programs assisted a diverse group of students who nonetheless shared similar histories of housing insecurity. Most CFRR participants also experienced the intervention as generally envisioned by administrators, though some inconsistencies were also revealed, as reported below.

Demographic composition of CFRR students

As the demographic summaries in Table 2 highlight, students who participated in CFRR were ethnically diverse, with the largest percentage of students identifying as Hispanic/Latino (39%), followed by those identifying as White (25%) and Black/African American (18%). For gender, students surveyed were more likely to identify as female (60%) than male (31%), and some identified as gender non-conforming (6%). Most students were in their mid-twenties ($M = 27.1$, $SD = 8.8$) though a substantial proportion (21%) were older than 30. Generally, there was little demographic variation across the eight campus programs, with the exception that survey participants from campuses in southern California were more likely to identify as Hispanic/Latino students than those going to school in the northern part of the state, $X^2(7, N = 141) = 20.30$, $p = .005$. A corresponding higher proportion of students in northern campuses identified as White compared to students in the southern part of the state, $X^2(7, N = 141) = 15.86$, $p = .026$. Participant age and gender did not vary by campus; $F(7,140) = 1.30$, $p = .257$, and $X^2(7, N = 141) = 6.50$, $p = .482$, respectively.

When asked about relevant life experiences and circumstances, most students (74%) identified themselves as the first in their family to attend college. A large proportion (60%) of students also reported transferring to their current university after first attending a community college. A third of students (35%) self-reported a disability and a similar proportion (27%) indicated that English is their second language. Finally, about one in six students (16%) identified as a current or former foster youth.

When asked about recent experiences associated with housing insecurity, students commonly reported temporarily moving in with others due to financial problems (78%), with most of these students (68%) moving

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of CFRR survey participants ($n = 141$).

	n	%
Race[a]		
Hispanic /Latino(x)	55	39.0
White	35	24.8
Black or African American	26	18.4
Asian or Asian American	19	13.5
American Indian	4	2.8
Middle Eastern	5	3.5
Multiracial	9	6.4
Prefer not to say	5	3.5
Gender Identity		
Female	84	59.6
Male	44	31.2
Non-Conforming	8	5.7
Prefer Not to say	5	3.5
Life Situations		
First Generation	104	73.8
Transfer Student	84	59.6
Student w/Disability	49	34.8
English 2nd Language	38	27.0
Former Foster Youth	22	15.6
Parent	18	12.8

Survey participants were sampled across eight campus programs.
[a]Racial-ethnic categories were not mutually exclusive in the survey; because participants could indicate multiple identities, each category was measured as a dichotomous variable.

multiple times in the same year. Notably, the majority (66%) reported at least one episode of homelessness when they lacked a safe, regular, and adequate nighttime place to stay and sleep. Overall, 93% of students indicated at least one of these experiences since becoming a college student. This high level of housing insecurity among survey participants did not vary significantly across campuses, X^2 (7, $N = 141$) $= 2.72$, $p = .909$.

Finally, survey participants were also asked about the frequency of contact with their case manager. Participants reported an average of three contacts a month with their case managers ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 2.43$), with most participants (80%) reporting between 1 and 6 contacts per month. In contrast, 12% of participants reported seeing their case manager "less than once a month," which was below the CFRR benchmark threshold that case managers meet with each student at least once per month. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) of participants' contacts with case managers indicated no statistical differences across campuses, $F(7,141) = .72$, $p = .656$.

Length of time housed

Analysis of administrative records indicates that CFRR students who have exited the program ($n = 191$) were consecutively housed in an apartment or house for an average of eleven months ($M = 10.6$, $SD = 7.1$), or the equivalent of a little over two academic semesters. Although this length of

housing was longer than the anticipated five to nine months assumed by administrators, this computed measure of time housed showed considerable variation across students. A quarter of students were housed for fewer than five months, while the top quartile were housed for over 15 consecutive months (and some students housed for nearly 30 months).

To assess whether this high level of variability in the time that students were housed reflected differences between the eight campus programs, as well as whether time in housing varied significantly across the three years of implementation (e.g., the academic year in which the student was housed), we conducted a 2×2 ANOVA with campus location as a factor (with 8 levels for each campus) and cohort year as another factor (with 3 levels for each year). The results indicated no significant difference in time housed by campus, $F(7,181) = 1.31$, $p = .250.$, although the academic year in which students were housed did show significant differences, $F(2,181) = 7.56$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .097$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that students housed during the 2020–2021 academic year ($M = 11.96$, $SD = 6.97$) were housed for significantly longer periods than students housed in 2021–2022 ($M = 8.16$, $SD = 6.43$) and those housed 2022–2023 ($M = 7.12$, $SD = 4.10$). As we elaborate in the Discussion section, the difference in the first year of implementation likely reflects the broader context of the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on housing markets.

Length of transition time to housing

The computed measure for the number of days between when CFRR students were referred to housing by campus staff and when they were housed by a community provider indicates an average transitional period of 39.39 d ($SD = 29.12$). This transition time showed a high level of variation across the 323 students for whom data were available. A quarter of students were housed within 15 d of a referral, while the top quartile (75th percentile) waited between 55 and 120 d (the equivalent of approximately two to four months). Fewer than half of CFRR students (49%) were housed within the 30-day range that some administrators had anticipated as a benchmark for their programs.

A 2×2 ANOVA, with academic year as a factor (with 3 levels) and campus as another factor (with 8 levels), indicated that the length of time to be housed did not significantly change over the three years of the pilot, $F(2,313) = 1.54$, $p = .216$. However, results indicated significant differences in transition time across campuses, $F(7,313) = 3.51$, $p<.05.$, partial $\eta^2=.073$. Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the two campuses with the lowest transition times ($M = 24.3$ d, $SD = 18.0$
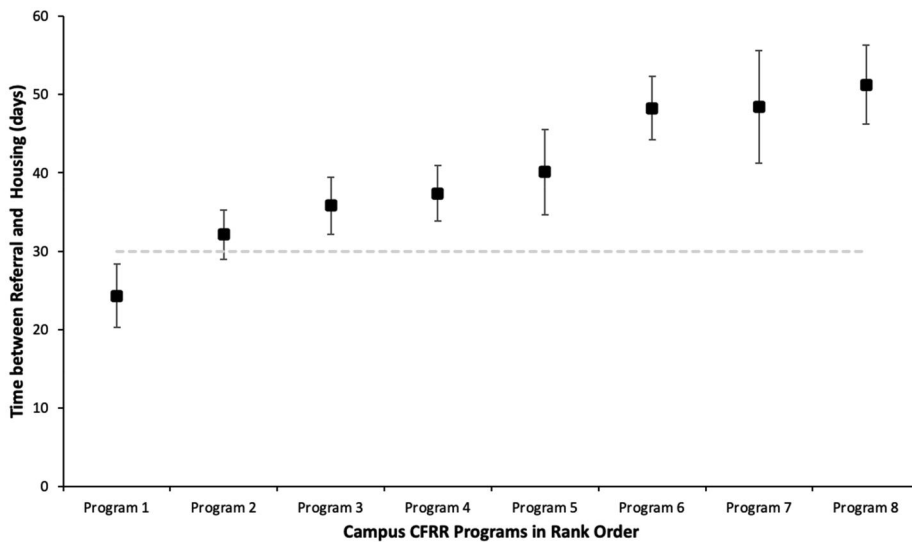
Figure 1. Transition time to place students in housing across 8 campus CFRR programs ($n = 323$). Error terms represent the standard errors for each mean. The dashed line represents the 30-day transition benchmark used to assess rapid rehousing programs.

and $M = 31.6$ d, $SD = 23.90$, respectively) were significantly faster placing students in housing than the lowest ranked campus ($M = 51.3$ d, $SD = 33.34$). Figure 1 shows the average transition time to housing across the eight CFRR campus programs (in rank order) as well as provides a reference line for the 30-day benchmark. As the figure shows, the first-ranked program was the only one that housed students within this benchmark on average.

Qualitative findings

Qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts with campus administrators and CBO staff revealed three implementation challenges, including staff turn-over undermining program consistency, housing affordability slowing programs' search for housing units, and navigating role conflicts and conflicting philosophies. Despite these challenges, campus administrators and CBO staff also spoke of successes, such as overcoming challenges through a coordinated response. Below, we describe the four themes in detail.

Staff turn-over undermining program consistency

Multiple campus administrators reported that staff turnover at their partner CBO agency was a key source of disruption for their CFRR programs. Frequent turnover of case managers, particularly in CBOs, disrupted the continuation of services as well as communication that, according to some

administrators, undermined program consistency. As one campus administrator shared,

> Staff turnover of the community organizations has been significant. I would say that's probably the number one problem. And that's due to lack of high levels of compensation for that [type of social service] work, and the high workload. The community workload from the high impact of homelessness in the community is affecting our ability to serve our students because these folks are maxed out.

Another administrator similarly discussed that the turnover in their CBO partner agency resulted in work being shifted back to campus staff, particularly case management responsibilities that had been assumed would be the domain of the CBO. Accordingly, the frequent turnover of CBO staff "ended up putting so much weight on our [campus] coordinator," who often had to balance doing student outreach and managing referrals, while also providing case management services to students housed by the CBO.

CBO staff also discussed that turnover challenges also emerged on the college side of the program, which contributed to confusion about who was managing referrals from campus to their program, when to engage with students, and when the housing search could start. As one CBO staff member reflected, "When the [campus] coordinator left, I felt like, where do I *go*? What do I *do*? Where do I *begin*? Because again, this is a new program. I felt lost." Overall, staff turnover was framed as a main and persistent stressor for many CFRR programs.

Housing affordability slowing the search for housing

Both college administrators and CBO staff discussed the difficulties of finding students housing in tight rental markets, which often contributed to the extended transition times to housing that some students experienced, consistent with the quantitative findings. Identifying quality and affordable housing for students near enough to college campuses, in particular, was challenging for many programs. As one CBO staff described,

> When we're working with (students), we're trying to house [them] in a close proximity to campus, where rents are high and vacancy is low, so that became an issue. We do have some partnerships [with landlords] right near the campus now, which we were able to secure. But securing units for corporate leases [e.g., master leasing] by the campus was challenging for us.

Another CBO shared that the lack of affordable housing in their community resulted in less-than-ideal apartment options that were sometimes in poor condition. "We end up with really poorly kept properties because of needing to find the most affordable housing available to us … there's constant sewer issues or septic issues, or there's mold in the wall."

Focus group participants also discussed that the conditions of the housing market in California prolonged the time that some students remained in the CFRR program; that it was sometimes equally difficult, and prolonged, to find affordable housing for students when it was time to help them transition out of the program. Both CBO and college campus staff cited challenges of identifying housing options that students could realistically afford on their own after subsidies ended. As one campus staff member shared,

> There's been some times where [we] would put some students in units that are costing like over $1,500 to $1,700 a month for a single student that is having maybe a federal work-study check only. They're completely reliant on those subsidies. Then when it comes time to wean off of those subsidies; they're not able to really support themselves.

Overall, CBO and campus staff expressed concerns around the ability to find safe, quality housing for students close enough to campus that would also be affordable for students to transition into upon exit from CFRR. Moreover, this also contributed to some programs placing students in shared housing arrangements, such as either putting students together in a roommate situation or placing them in rented houses with other students which the CBO had master-leased. This created difficulties in terms of roommate conflicts, which sometimes also contributed to extended times in the program.

Navigating role and philosophical conflicts

Campus and CBO staff often evoked very different philosophies of service provision, which highlighted contrasting views about the eligibility and goals of the CFRR program. A key source of tension was how campus and CBO staff defined homelessness differently, leading to confusion as to whether CFRR programs were meant to help students at risk of homelessness or those already experiencing literal homelessness. CBO staff often commented that campus staff defined homelessness too narrowly, ultimately excluding students who could benefit from the program. In contrast, campus staff sometimes cited concerns that CBOs were at times trying to address student situations that were beyond the scope of the intervention.

A similar source of disagreement emerged as to whether program eligibility should also be based on an academic threshold (e.g., maintaining a 2.0 grade point average). Some CBO staff described situations in which students lost eligibility due to their low academic performance, which in their view undermined the purpose of CFRR to assist students in need. In stark contrast, one campus administrator discussed the importance of CFRR focusing on academically motivated students:

We need to make sure that they're a dedicated student invested in their education. It would be great to give out housing to everyone, but that's not the role of the higher ed housing program. The role of the higher ed housing program is to make sure that we have students who are invested in their educational goals, they have an ed plan set up.

CBO and campus staff also expressed different perspectives on their respective roles and responsibilities in implementing CFRR. As one CBO staff member described,

It has been a big learning curve for [college campus] and I feel like has been a lot of educating the campus partners with what our role *is*, what our role *is notonly* working with our students at the campus level, but also in the community.

Some campuses initially delineated case management duties in which campus staff would presumably address the educational needs of students, while CBO case managers would prioritize housing, financial, and well-being needs. However, some students had issues that were not easily delineated, and case management roles sometimes became confused. One campus staff member spoke about the challenges of defining who provided what kind of case management,

I think [there is] a misunderstanding of what *our role is* in the program and what their *case managers role* is. I think it's really clear to us that *our role* is to: identify the students, check their eligibility, support their academic infrastructure; and then *their role* is solely to: find housing, case manage, subsidized rent, and all that kind of stuff because we're a free-market model.

Multiple staff members at CBOs described points at which students would communicate with a case manager on campus but not at the CBO, or vice versa, which meant that not all parties were aware of student needs. This became particularly difficult when some students presented with more severe and complex mental health needs than campus staff and CBOs had anticipated at the inception of the program. Focus group discussions touched upon the lack of clarity about who was responsible for assessing students' mental health needs, as well as what resources existed for these students either on campus or in the community. Some campus administrators expressed the view that attending to severe mental health needs was "out of our scope of practice," though they also acknowledged that "we don't want to turn students away who are experiencing those things." However, campus staff were sometimes confused that CBO staff, experienced with RRH, were also not equipped to assist students with significant mental health challenges.

Overcoming challenges through a coordinated response

Despite the challenges of implementing a new program, and new partnerships, focus group discussions also highlighted successful strategies that

emerged over time to mitigate these difficulties. These strategies were often about new program practices that markedly improved the collaboration between campus and CBO staff in the delivery of services. In particular, some CBO staff noted that campus programs gradually developed better referral processes that became generally superior to the typical way students are assisted in the community. One staff member explained,

> The *plus side* of working with the university is: it's very direct. As soon as a student needs some help, we can address it immediately. … [in the community] you have to go through this whole intermediate process and there's a gatekeeper and clients could be stuck in the county queue for months to years.

Another staff member at a college campus felt similarly about the smooth referral process,

> We've also been getting a lot of really good feedback from our students. That from the time that we submit the intake into [the CBO], they're getting outreached within 24–48 hours …

Focus group discussions also highlighted improvements in more consistent and frequent communication between campus and CBO staff over time. Some participants discussed the evolution of regularly scheduled meetings in which both CBO and campus staff would meet and work together in the same location on specific days of the week. As one staff CBO explained,

> We are on-campus in an office area two or three days a week. I think that's been very successful so that we are accessible to [campus staff] and we're able to work together with them when they're screening the students to be able to see and help out there. We're in the same office as them. That's been helpful.

Similarly, some staff also described the increased use of "case conferencing," in which staff from both the campus and CBO met together to share updates on students and strategize on needs collaboratively. In sum, campus administrators and CBO staff both identified ways that CFRR had become more of a collaborative endeavor between university and community partners than had been the case at its inception

Summary

This exploratory study of CFRR was guided by three research questions relating to the consistency of program implementation across campuses, how quickly assistance was provided, and the contextual factors that impact implementation. Findings indicate that CFRR programs were implemented consistently in several areas. All programs assisted students reporting similar experiences of housing insecurity, and a similar proportion of participants at each campus represented groups known to be at risk for financial precarity,

such as first-generation college students. The majority of students also reported consistent monthly support from case managers, as envisioned for the CFRR model. Additionally, although the length of time in housing varied widely across individual participants, it did not vary significantly across programs. However, results indicate the majority of students were not rapidly housed within the 30-day benchmark established for the CFRR model, and this was true of all programs except one. The transition time from referral to housing placement varied widely across participants, and it also varied significantly across campuses. Qualitative results suggest that staff turnover may partially explain the inconsistent time to housing placement across programs. Finally, the qualitative data also suggest program and community factors influencing implementation, such as differing ideas about CBO and campus roles, the degree of coordination and collaboration between campus and CBO staff, and the lack of affordable housing in the community.

Discussion

The implementation findings of the CFRR pilot discussed above have important implications for both researchers and policymakers. Before discussing these implications and directions for future research, we note some limitations of the current study.

Limitations

This study has three general limitations to note. First, it is unclear how representative the survey sample ($n = 141$) is to the overall student population that participated in CFRR ($N = 365$), given that students self-selected to participate in the online survey and were not randomly selected. Accordingly, some survey results may not be generalizable; for example, our reported finding that students recalled frequent monthly contact with their case manager could reflect a selection bias in which the most connected students in the program were more likely to complete the survey. Second, and similarly, quantitative results from the analysis of administrative data could have also been impacted by nonrandom bias in the missing data entry errors that were observed in over 10% of student records. It is also likely that the staff turnover identified in the focus groups also impacts the quality of data collection and record keeping. Third, the results of our qualitative analysis of focus group transcripts were based on a thematic synthesis that emphasized commonalities in the situations and challenges faced by programs as a whole (as opposed to identifying specific situations that may have been impactful at just one or two campuses). As such, the three implementation themes discussed above could exclude specific challenges that individual administrators may have felt were more impactful on their campuses.

Implications and directions for future research

Despite the limitations noted above, this early implementation evaluation of a unique housing intervention for college students contributes to the scholarly literature, which has thus far focused on evaluations of traditional Rapid ReHousing models (see Byrne et al., 2023 for a review). More importantly, the findings discussed above can practically inform the implementation of ongoing and new CFRR programs, and help to refine policy to best serve vulnerable student populations, in the midst of a nationwide affordable housing shortage. Throughout the following discussion, we also note opportunities for future research.

Although CFRR implementation across campuses was consistent in some areas, we found wide variability in how rapidly students were housed and for how long. Some students were supported in housing for just a few months, while others were housed for over two and a half years. This high variability at the student level could reflect different levels of student needs being addressed by the intervention, with some students needing more assistance over time and others needing less. This would be consistent with focus groups discussions that alluded to some students exhibiting mental health needs that were beyond the capacity of campus or CBO staff. In contrast, other discussions implied situations in which students waited too long to transition out of the program. Future research should explore in more depth how participant characteristics relate to the level of need and in turn, the appropriate length of the housing intervention. Similarly, practitioners and policymakers could consider whether specific student situations are better suited for the CFRR intervention than others. In other words, some student circumstances are likely well addressed with the CFRR model of time-limited rental subsidies and monthly case management support. In contrast, other students may need more comprehensive assistance (such as those offered at a permanent supportive housing program). Others, still, may need substantially less (such as access to a one-time emergency grant). Further research is needed to directly assess which student situations benefit most from interventions like CFRR.

Importantly, future research should also explore if student experiences with CFRR varied by racial-ethnic identities of students. Due to data limitations, we could not assess whether variation in time spent in housing, or the time it took to be housed, were significantly different across racial groups, or more broadly whether the intervention was implemented equitably across all students. Given the salient role that societal and racial inequities play in the occurrence of financial precarity on college campuses, it is critical that future evaluations of interventions like CFRR directly assess the potential of disparate program experiences among participants.

Although the discussion thus far has focused on variation across participants, and tailoring interventions to individual participant needs, our findings also highlight how contextual factors on campuses and in the community likely affected the implementation of CFRR. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly shaped the rollout of the CFRR pilot, particularly during the first years of its implementation between 2020 and 2021. Our findings that participants during the pilot's first year were housed significantly longer than in subsequent years likely also reflected the decreasing availability of low-income rental units in many markets during the height of the pandemic, particularly when eviction moratoriums were established (HUD, 2023). As focus group participants discussed, transition plans for students ready to exit CFRR were often undermined and delayed by the lack of affordable housing options for students in the community. More generally, focus group discussions strongly suggest that the level of housing affordability in the community significantly moderates how quickly and effectively interventions like CFRR can assist individuals in establishing housing security over time. In short, the CFRR intervention operates and is entangled within a broader context of societal, economic, and policy factors that underpin housing insecurity on college campuses.

In sum, as an early-stage evaluation of a new and innovative program to address student homelessness on college campuses, this study provides insight into the complexity, promise, and limits, of CFRR. The campus-community partnership brings with it an interplay of participant, program, and community level factors that influence program implementation and, likely, student outcomes. Further research is needed to tease out these factors and clarify how institutions of higher education and community programs can best assist students facing financial and housing precarity—A growing problem on most college campuses today.

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Data availability statement

The survey data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [AB]. The administrative data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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