Opportunities to Improve DC's Housing Voucher Programs

February 2024

The Lab @ DC
DC Department of Human Services
DC Housing Authority

Executive Summary

In Fiscal Year 2022 and 2023, the District of Columbia significantly increased its investment in Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) and Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH) vouchers, allocating over 3,400 and 1,600 vouchers, respectively.

The process of residents being connected to vouchers and vouchers being used to access housing has been slower than hoped, with an average "time to lease up" of five to six months. As a result, about [40% of the new vouchers had been used](#) by October 2023.

To address this challenge, the DC Department of Human Services (DHS), DC Housing Authority (DCHA), and The Lab @ DC asked—how can we improve the resident experience of the PSH and TAH voucher programs? Together, our intention was to find ways that would make the quality of service better and the time to lease up faster. To ensure that resident voices were central in generating solutions, we spent several months working with and learning from residents, as well as those who support the voucher programs.

We conducted a series of focus groups, interviews, and observations of key events in the voucher process to identify challenges that residents face when applying, leasing-up, and living with a voucher. We synthesized these learnings into 6 findings.

We then held four community design sessions with over thirty stakeholders to generate solutions. Participants included residents who have or are in the process of applying for a housing voucher, case managers, landlords, and DC Government's own staff from DHS, DCHA, and The Lab. The sessions generated dozens of ideas, which our team then synthesized and prioritized into 5 opportunities.

This report details the key challenges we heard about and the community-generated solutions to address them. While the focus on this work was on PSH and TAH vouchers, many of the opportunities shared in this report would have the added benefit of supporting all of the District's voucher programs.

FINDINGS

We distilled our research learnings into six key findings (in no particular order):

1. The application process is **not user-friendly.**

2. Clients want **more information** about voucher programs.

3. The voucher programs run on **many manual processes.**

4. The voucher programs are run by many teams who are **not always in sync**.

5. **Landlords feel unsupported** by DC Government.

6. Case manager **burnout and turnover** impact care for clients.

OPPORTUNITIES

We prioritized five key areas for improving voucher utilization and resident experience with voucher programs:

1. Invest in **customer service enhancements**.

2. Strengthen **crisis intervention supports.**

3. Provide additional **experiential learning opportunities** for voucher staff and case managers.

4. Increase the **pipeline of future case managers.**

5. Provide dedicated **support to private-market housing complexes** with many voucher clients.

It is important to note that these opportunities are meant to continue and complement the work DC Government is already doing.

Project Partners

This work was a collaborative effort among The Lab @ DC, Resident Researchers, DCHA, and DHS. Each brought their unique perspective in civic design and DC's housing voucher programs.

The Lab @ DC is a design and research team in the DC Office of the City Administrator made up of Civic Design Researchers, Data Scientists, and Social Scientists. The Lab works to meet DC's most critical problems with scientific methods, civic design, and authentic partnership with District agencies and residents. The Civic Design Research team was responsible for planning and facilitating research activities. They brought expertise in resident-centered design—working to make government services more accessible for residents.

For this project, The Lab and DHS hired community members with lived experience of DC's housing voucher programs. Five **Resident Researchers** joined the discovery research efforts in a part-time capacity from May 2023 through August 2023. They shaped the research plan, co-led research activities, synthesized findings, developed and prioritized solutions. Their first-hand perspectives were invaluable throughout the project.

DC Housing Authority (DCHA) administers most of the District's housing vouchers along with DC's public housing. For voucher programs this role includes processing applications for federally and locally funded vouchers, inspecting properties, and issuing rental payments to landlords. DCHA's Housing Choice Voucher Program team participated in process mapping, discovery research, and co-design sessions. They brought expertise in voucher administration and critical insight into the challenges and opportunity areas to improve voucher utilization rates.

DHS manages the District's locally funded housing vouchers—PSH and TAH. This includes supporting the matching process that connects residents to vouchers, supporting residents during the lease-up process, and providing dedicated case management to clients. DHS's Permanent Supportive Housing team participated in process mapping, discovery research, and co-design sessions. They helped connect the team to PSH providers and the DHS Landlord Advisory Board to recruit participants for research activities and co-design sessions. They brought expertise in how residents are matched to vouchers and critical insight into the challenges and opportunity areas to improve voucher utilization rates.

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Background

The District follows a [Housing First approach](#), which "prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, thus ending their homelessness and serving as a platform from which they can pursue personal goals and improve their quality of life. This approach is guided by the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before attending to anything less critical, such as getting a job, budgeting properly, or attending to substance use issues." This is the foundation for The District's voucher programs.

Approximately 20,000 District households receive housing assistance through the District's various voucher programs. A housing voucher is a government subsidy that helps low-income individuals and families afford housing expenses.

About a third of the District's vouchers are [Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)](#) and [Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH)](#) vouchers. While DHS manages the services associated with PSH and TAH, the DC Housing Authority, community-based organizations, and landlords play key roles in a resident's experience of the programs. DCHA handles eligibility determinations, relocation requests, and recertification paperwork. DCHA also approves requests for tenancy, conducts apartment inspections, determines reasonable rents, and makes rental payments to landlords. Over [20 community-based organizations](#) are contracted by DHS to provide case management services to PSH participants.

DC'S LOCALLY FUNDED VOUCHERS

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)

- **Who is it for:** Individuals and families who have repeated episodes of homelessness who require intensive support to stay stably housed

What it provides:

- Life-long rental assistance

- Intensive case management support, twice-a-month contact

- Connections to community resources including behavioral health and substance abuse services

Targeted Affordable Housing (TAH)

- **Who is it for:** Individuals and families who may already be connected to community resources but require a longer-term subsidy to prevent homelessness, either due to disability, age, or other socio-economic factors.

What it provides:

- Life-long rental assistance

- Case management support, quarterly home visits

- Connections to community resources including behavioral health and substance abuse services

Both programs support: low-income individuals and families experiencing or at risk of experiencing chronic homelessness due to a chronic disabling condition.

Assigned case managers meet with residents at least twice a month, for PSH, and at least quarterly for TAH. Vouchers can be unit-based, associated with a property, or tenant-based, meaning that they are used in the private housing market to rent any apartment that meets inspection and rent reasonableness standards. Some of PSH's vouchers are unit-based, while all TAH vouchers are tenant-based.

In Fiscal Year 2022, the District dedicated funds for more than 3,400 PSH and TAH vouchers—the largest-ever investment in the program in a single year. Then in Fiscal Year 2023, the District funded an additional 1,600 vouchers, further adding to the growth of the programs. In prior years, 200 to 300 new vouchers were typically funded annually. This increase slowed down the processing time. On average, it takes a resident five to six months from being matched with a voucher to moving into an apartment—referred to as "time to lease up."

As of October 2023, about 40% of the 5,000 new vouchers had been used to lease up.

The substantial growth of FY22 and FY23 meant that the District's system—built to handle a few hundred new vouchers—was now being stretched to process ten times that amount. This increase slowed down the processing time.

Many of these challenges are not unique to the District of Columbia. Some are inherent to the housing voucher program model, especially in urban environments with tight housing markets where it is common to struggle with utilization given limited landlord engagement or interest, bureaucratic hurdles to using the voucher, and limited affordable housing inventory.

DC GOVERNMENT'S ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS

DC Government is deeply committed to continuing to improve the PSH and TAH voucher programs, and there are several efforts underway–some that started during this project and some which were underway long before.

Department of Human Services has:

- Launched **Operation Make Movement** in February 2023, which allowed interested applicants to fill out their voucher application in advance of PSH case manager assignment. The change in process has meant that applicants can move more quickly to an eligibility determination on their voucher application.

- Launched the **Central Unit Repository** in November 2023 to assist clients in their housing search. The Repository aggregates listings of available units that meet the voucher program's rent reasonable standards.

- Created the **Peer Case Management Institute** to train current and former voucher clients to become case managers for the voucher programs. DHS anticipates launching the Institute with its first cohort in Spring 2024.

- Published and continues to maintain a **public-facing dashboard** to track voucher utilization rates.

- Began hosting **monthly tours of DHS facilities** for staff to gain a broader understanding of the services the agency offers DC residents. Site visits have included DHS Service Centers, Virginia Williams Family Resource Center, and shelters.

DC Housing Authority has:

- Completed a comprehensive review and **update of their Administrative Plan** in 2023, which included changes to how the waiting list is managed, as well as the selection and prioritization process for client benefits.

- Began **accepting self-certification** for housing voucher applicants in the Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP), which has allowed applicants who are unable to provide documents like a photo ID or birth certificate to attest to things like their name, date of birth, social security number, income, or relationship to other household members. This policy has allowed applications to move forward more quickly.

- **Launched a Participant Portal**–Rent Café– in 2023. Like the existing Landlord Portal, which allows landlords to send documents and communicate with DCHA, Rent Café allows clients to view their records in DCHA's system and will soon allow for voucher clients to process recertification paperwork.

- **Launched customer solutions centers** to allow clients and landlords to connect with voucher staff in-person to address individual needs.

Department of Behavioral Health has:

- Implemented a new funding model for Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) as of September 2023. ACT provides high risk, vulnerable clients—some of whom are utilizing housing vouchers—with ongoing, dedicated, and intensive community-based services. This new reimbursement model gives providers the ability to deliver services in a more flexible, dynamic, and person-centered manner while maintaining the intensity and frequency of services that the ACT model requires. DBH hopes this change will result in better care to consumers, enhance the sustainability of providers, and ensure that ACT is delivered with the greatest fidelity.

Voucher Application Re-Design

The DC Housing Authority, Department of Human Services, and The Lab @ DC re-designed the voucher application in 2023. The new application was launched and rolled-out to all DHS providers on February 1, 2024. You can follow The Lab @ DC's website for updates on this work.

Discovery
We went line-by-line through the 40 pages of forms that make up the voucher application with the DC Housing Authority's legal and voucher teams. We shadowed residents and case managers filling out the forms, as well as DC Government staff processing the forms. We considered local and federal rules and regulations.

Prototyping & Testing
With an understanding of both resident and government needs, we then redesigned the application. This redesign uses plain language and reduces duplicative questions. It is visually accessible for those with low vision, and it guides users with tips and explainers.

Methodology

Our goal for this project was to learn from, and work with, residents using voucher programs, the case managers who support them, the landlords & property managers who house them, and the frontline DC Government staff who operate the program.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES THAT INFORMED OUR WORK

We intentionally centered lived experience from voucher clients, case managers, landlords, and frontline DC Government staff, at every stage of the project. Recognizing that the experience of homelessness can be traumatizing, we aimed to be sensitive and responsive to participants throughout the project process.

HIRING RESIDENT RESEARCHERS

One way we centered resident voices in this work was by hiring five Resident Researchers—community members who have a housing voucher—to join the project team. Each of the Resident Researchers lives in DC and has been in a voucher program for between two and twenty years. The lived experience of Resident Researchers helped contextualize the information gathered through discovery research and helped shape the solutions ultimately outlined in this report.

Operationally, Resident Researchers joined us in leading interviews with stakeholders, shadowed aspects of the voucher process, and participated in co-design sessions. DHS funded the positions and The Lab handled recruitment and management.

Resident Researchers collaborated with us to decide:
- whose voices we needed to capture during our research
- what was the best way to engage them
- what questions we should ask government staff, landlords, community advocates, and residents;
- how to interpret what we heard
- what actions DC Government could take to make the voucher process better

PROCESS AND JOURNEY MAPPING

To ensure we—DCHA, DHS, and The Lab—shared a baseline understanding of how District Government processes voucher applications, we came together to develop a series of process maps. These maps outline the granular steps taken from the moment a resident expresses a need for permanent supportive housing to the moment a resident successfully leases a home with a voucher. They allowed us to have a full view of the internal process of service delivery. With Resident Researchers, we also created a journey map of the same process from the client perspective. Together, these maps helped us identify some of the pain points in the process experienced by both residents and DC Government staff.

DISCOVERY RESEARCH & SOLUTION GENERATION

Based on our mapping work and the priorities identified by Resident Researchers, we shaped our research plan to explore these questions:

- How might we improve *communication and coordination* throughout the process for residents, landlords, and case managers?

- How might we improve the *application process* to reduce errors and confusion?

- How might we ensure that *case management* meets client needs?

With an understanding of our learning questions, we selected and conducted the following research methods:

- 7 **focus groups** with individual and family clients, landlords, and case managers;

- 7 **interviews** with DHS & DCHA program staff that support DC's housing voucher programs; and

- 7 **observations** of key events in the voucher application process, such as an overview of the matching process, and a case manager and client filling out an application.

Once we completed our research activities, we **synthesized our findings.** Using notes from all activities, we looked for themes on common challenges. These themes became the foundation for a set of "how might we" questions. For example, "how might we be more responsive to a client's needs when they change?" and, "how might we ensure that residents, case managers, landlords, and DC Government are on the same page about a client's application status?"

Using these "how might we" questions we facilitated four **community co-design sessions**, where residents, case managers, landlords, and DC Government staff addressed these questions. These sessions generated dozens of ideas.

SOLUTION PRIORITIZATION

After the co-design sessions, our team synthesized and prioritized the ideas that we thought had the most promising impact. We then shared these ideas through a survey with all the stakeholders we had collaborated with across our research and co-design activities to gather their input and suggestions for additional considerations. We then presented the prioritized solutions to District Government leadership.

① Intake

Actions / Steps
- resident goes to Virginia William
- completes VI-SPDAT
- Applys for PEP-V
- transitions to PEP-V location (1 year)
- assigned a case manager via lottery
- matched to PSH or PSH+ TAH
- Months & word of mouth they are mismatch
- Files complaint
- gets moved to PSH search

Challenges / Pain points
- VI-SPDAT is self reported - may not capture whole picture
- small changes in case manager at PEP-V
- PEP-V town halls poor miscommunication # of voucher
- unsure if they can have an extension
- no choice in housing case manager / CBO
- mismatched

Emotions
- really confused
- frustrating
- potentially triggered b/c of trauma

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② Application

Actions / Steps
- fill out application w/ case manager
- case manager refers person to DMV to obtain documents
- obtains documents
- continue to try to complete application
- case manager submits application + waitlist
- app approval a case manager notifies

Challenges / Pain points
- no ID/ birth certificate of SSI
- no ID for ID
- expired ID
- immigrant applicants may not be able to obtain docs
- doesn't ask for accommodation during application
- household for many not entire family size not captured

Emotions
- Excited
- defeated, frustrated
- hopeful for an move

(bottom printed cards)
- VI-SPDAT data entered in HMIS
- Families obtain FRSP, singles live in temp. housing
- Regular weekly/monthly CAHP meetings are held to decide who can be matched
- Family is informed by CM they are "matched" aka – given the opportunity to apply for a voucher
- ...ent and ...manager PSH out ...ication fr...ether
- DHS reviews (Program Manager, PSH/TAH, HSP)
- DCHA Eligibility Specialist (ECOD) reviews
- ECOD checks household income
- ECOD updates application status to approved

(Second board)

Communication & lack of transparency
- PEP-V town halls poor mis-communicate # of voucher
- unsure if they can have an extension
- Lack of communication on app progress
- no communication to client is really happening
- don't know status of SD application (security deposit)
- building management fees not reflected
- none of this is communicated
- dont know who to ask for status
- BMCs are not transparent private landlords are
- Voucher amount is not provided - could not be enough

I don't have documents
- Process in getting documents
- no ID/ birth certificate of SSI
- no for ID
- or expired ID
- Immigrant applicants may not be able to obtain docs
- Need to google if if landlord accepts voucher

Application process doesn't capture completed/correct info, mistakes
- VI-SPDAT is self reported - may not capture whole picture
- doesn't ask for accommodation during application
- household for many not entire family size not captured
- ...was not reported cannot look for unit that accessible
- amount does not reflect ADA accomodation
- mismatched
- didnt know to request
- word of Mouth they are mismatched

Process & supports are difficult to access
- Not having a phone to contact agency
- Transportation
- Reading level of application is high

Process delays and waiting
- landlord not responsive to schedule inspection
- Long Process
- previous evic/ credit check prevents approval
- client request reasonable accommodation from DCHA
- signs contract w/ DHS + DCHA
- ...it is a long application
- ...s for DCHA inspection to be scheduled
- Inspection fails → tenant requests get fix rescinduled
- if DCHA/DHS doesn't pay, landlord can only sue tenant, tying they paid ...applies to ERAP
- wait for SD support

Case management doesn't meet client needs
- No choice in housing case manager / CBO
- several changes in case manager at PEP-V

Difficult... good...
- Inspectors don't look at things that matter to resident
- Voucher amounts △ based on neighborhood
- ...apts...

Chall...
- need to furnish apt.

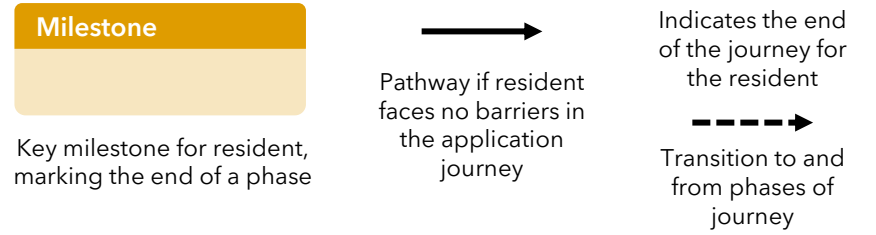# Resident journey to become housed with a voucher

With DHS staff, DCHA staff, and Resident Researcher input we mapped the steps a resident takes from expressing a need for housing to moving into a home with a locally funded voucher. Note that this process varies depending on a household's needs and differs for federally funded vouchers.

STAKEHOLDERS

Four major groups of stakeholders are listed in different colors. When relevant, the text will highlight a subgroup within the stakeholder.
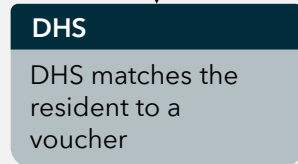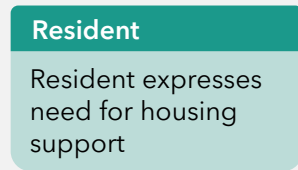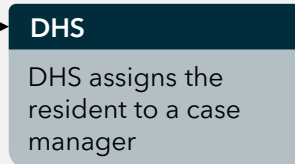
Resident

Case Manager

DC Government

Landlord

LEGEND

Milestone

Key milestone for resident, marking the end of a phase

Pathway if resident faces no barriers in the application journey

Transition to and from phases of journey

End

Indicates the end of the journey for the resident

1. APPLICATION

STARTING POINT

Resident
Resident expresses need for housing support

DHS
DHS matches the resident to a voucher

* Being "matched" means a voucher is available and tentatively set aside for a resident

DHS
DHS assigns the resident to a case manager

Case Manager
Resident
Resident & Case Manager complete application and gather required supporting documents

Finds Errors

DHS
DHS reviews the application

Finds Errors

DCHA
DCHA reviews the application

Approved

Denied

Milestone
Resident
Attends voucher briefing and signs voucher document
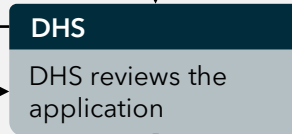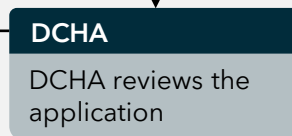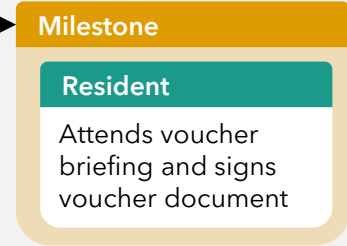
* Client at this point has 90 days to find a unit

End

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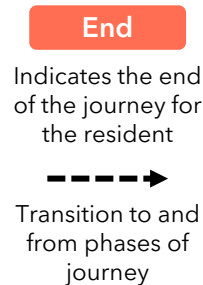
| Resident | DC Government |
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2. APPLICATION SEARCH

Case Manager
Resident
Resident tours private market units, and case manager supports them in finding units to apply to

Resident
Resident applies to landlord for unit and pays application fee

Case Manager
Case manager gives landlord RFTA packet to complete

* The RFTA packet is an application for the landlord to DCHA

Case Manager
Resident
Case manager has the resident fill out resident portions of the RFTA packet

Case Manager
Case manager sends RFTA to DHS for review

Milestone
DCHA
Deems the unit ready for inspection

Landlord
Landlord reviews application

Landlord
Completes RFTA packet with supporting documentation and submits to case manager

DHS
Reviews the RFTA

DHS
Shares packet with DCHA

DCHA
Checks the unit's rent reasonableness

Case Manager
Case manager returns RFTA to landlord for correction

Approved by landlord

Complete

Incomplete

Denied by landlord

Complete

Incomplete

Rent reasonable

Not rent reasonable

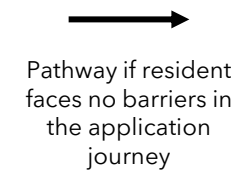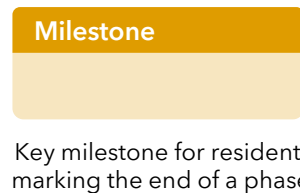# Resident journey to become housed with a voucher

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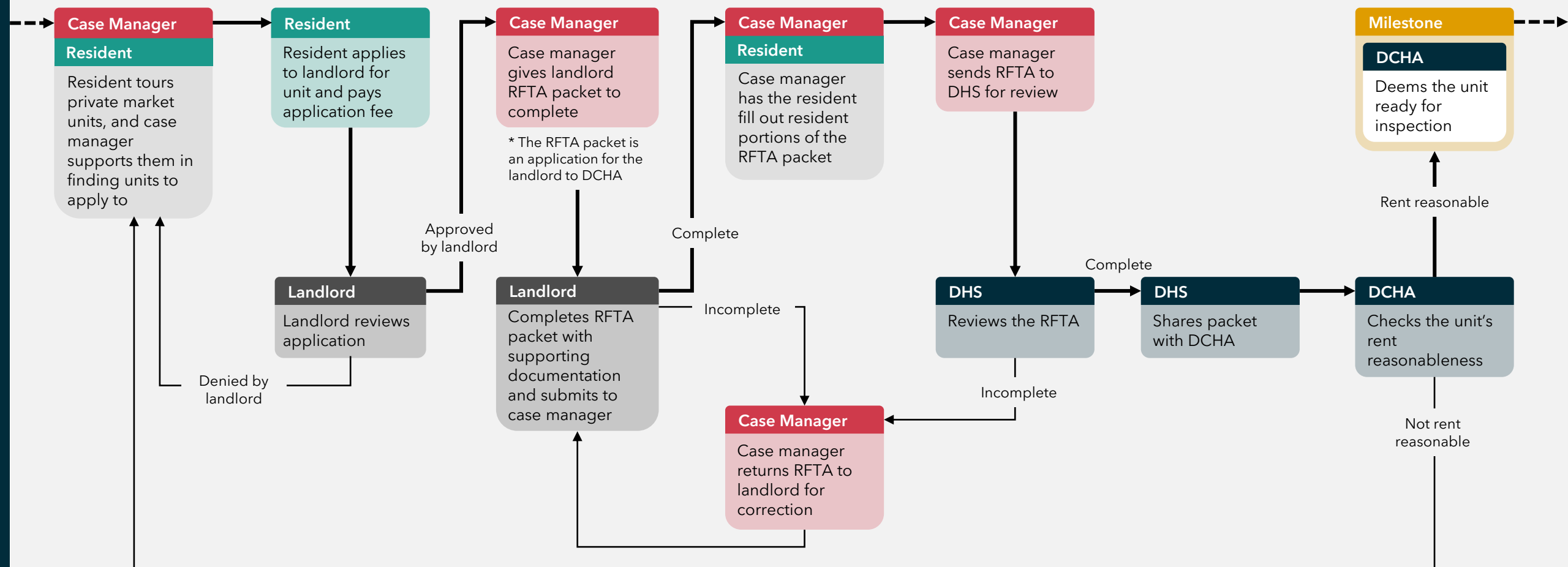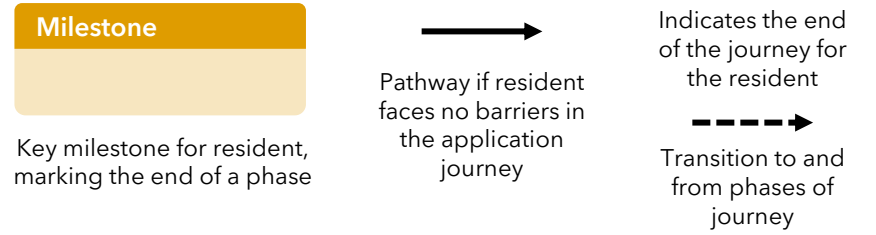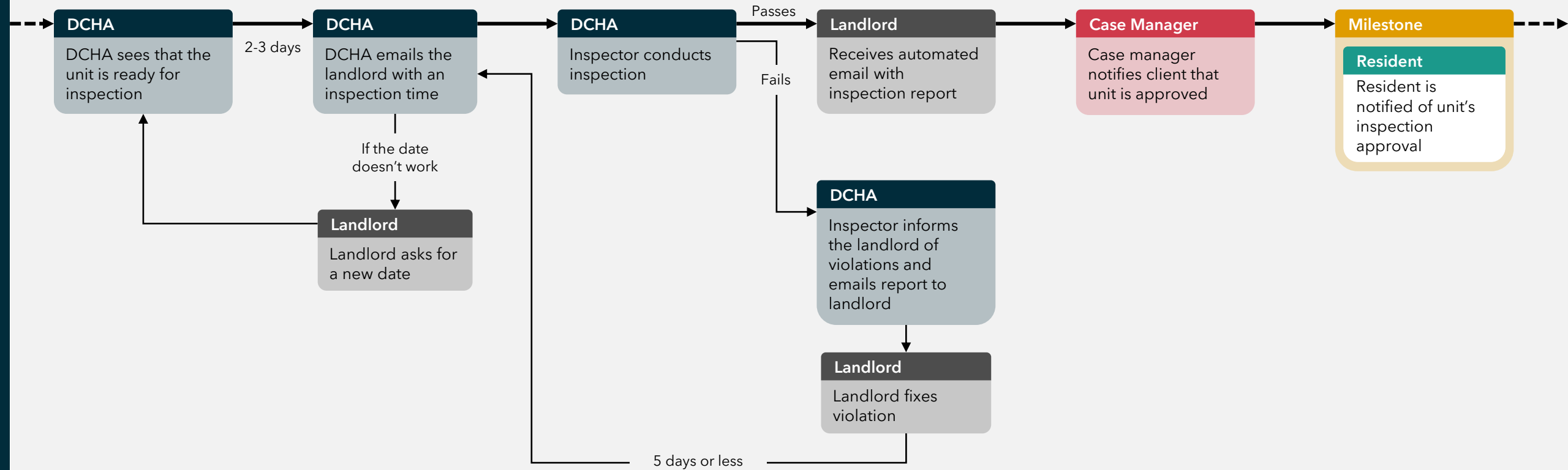
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Case Manager	Landlord

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→ Pathway if resident faces no barriers in the application journey

End
Indicates the end of the journey for the resident

- - -→ Transition to and from phases of journey

3. INSPECTION

DCHA
DCHA sees that the unit is ready for inspection

2-3 days

DCHA
DCHA emails the landlord with an inspection time

If the date doesn't work

Landlord
Landlord asks for a new date

DCHA
Inspector conducts inspection

Passes

Fails

Landlord
Receives automated email with inspection report

DCHA
Inspector informs the landlord of violations and emails report to landlord

Landlord
Landlord fixes violation

5 days or less

Case Manager
Case manager notifies client that unit is approved

Milestone

Resident
Resident is notified of unit's inspection approval

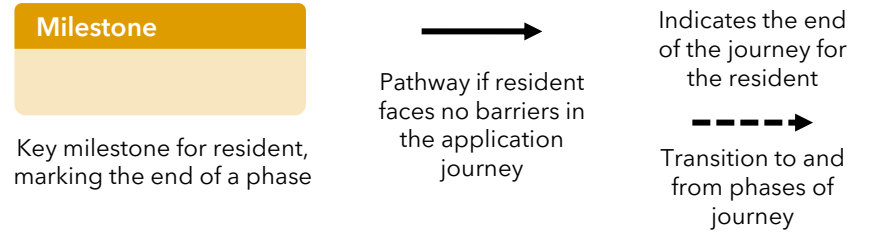# Resident journey to become housed with a voucher

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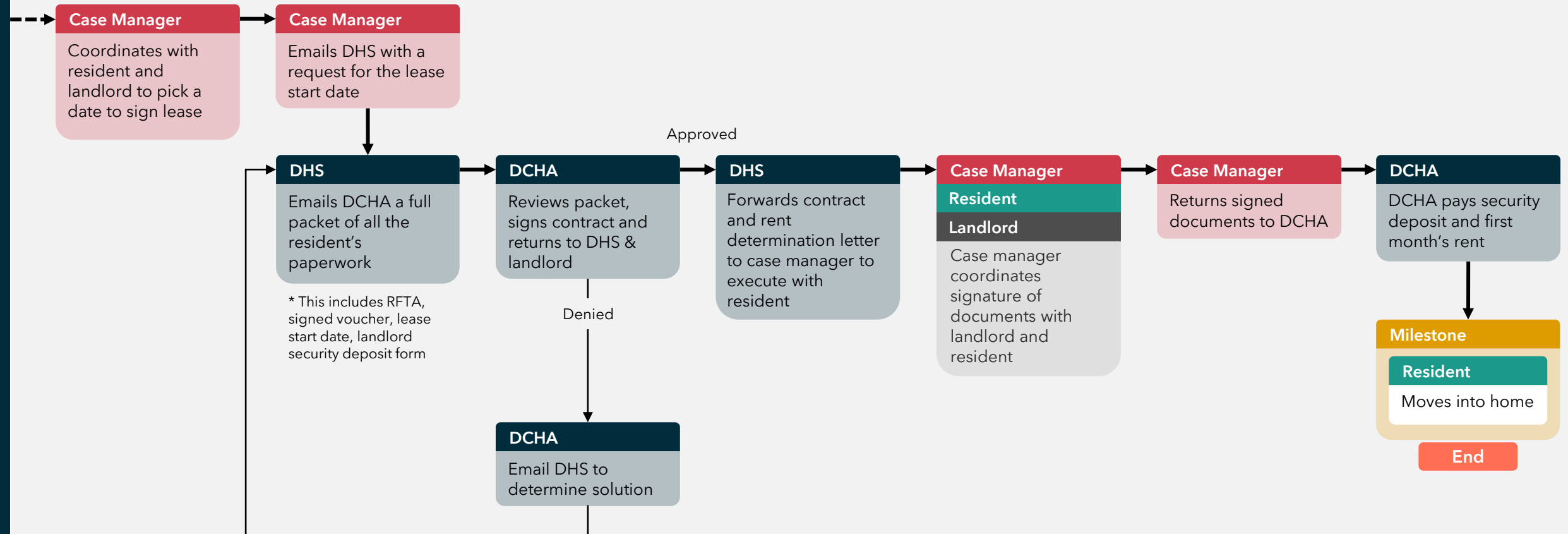
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4. LEASE UP

Case Manager

Coordinates with resident and landlord to pick a date to sign lease

Case Manager

Emails DHS with a request for the lease start date

DHS

Emails DCHA a full packet of all the resident's paperwork

* This includes RFTA, signed voucher, lease start date, landlord security deposit form

DCHA

Reviews packet, signs contract and returns to DHS & landlord

Denied

DCHA

Email DHS to determine solution

Approved

DHS

Forwards contract and rent determination letter to case manager to execute with resident

Case Manager
Resident
Landlord

Case manager coordinates signature of documents with landlord and resident

Case Manager

Returns signed documents to DCHA

DCHA

DCHA pays security deposit and first month's rent

Milestone

Resident

Moves into home

End

"I love that landlords, voucher holders and case managers attended together. That's the way you build community and success."

— Co-design participant feedback

Findings

Throughout our research, we identified several challenges facing DC's housing voucher programs. ranging from a cumbersome application process, insufficient programmatic information, coordination issues among program teams, landlord support concerns, and case manager burnout.

We distilled our research learnings into six key findings (in no particular order):

1. The application process is **not user-friendly.**
2. Clients want **more information** about voucher programs.
3. The voucher programs run on **many manual processes.**
4. The voucher programs are run by many teams who are **not always in sync**.
5. **Landlords feel unsupported** by DC Government.
6. Case manager **burnout and turnover** impact care for clients.

The research team synthesizing findings across interviews, focus groups, and observations

The application process is not user friendly.

The process of filling out a voucher application for clients and case managers contains many challenges and frustrations. This reality often can lead to mistakes and mistakes lead to applications being sent back for correction, drawing out the determination timeline.

REDUNDANT QUESTIONS

The current packet is comprised of many discrete forms from several entities (i.e. DHS, DCHA, and HUD). The packet was not designed as a cohesive application and as local regulations have changed over the years, minor adjustments have been made to the packet to reach compliance.

While the packet satisfies regulations, it does not produce an easy user-experience. This means applicants are asked to share the same information multiple times across pages (e.g. applicant name is asked over ten times), and there are no universal submission instructions that link the pages together.

> **" "I have to enter the same information 15 different times. If I make one mistake, it gets kicked back."**
> **- Case Manager**

PAPER-BASED APPLICATION

The current packet is paper-based. While paper forms are not inherently bad, they cannot offer real-time guidance like digital forms can. This setup means that simple application errors, like missed questions, cannot be caught on the spot; skip logic cannot be used to guide users to relevant questions based on their needs.

Navigating the paper form can therefore take longer and can increase the chance a client answers questions not required of them. While offering a paper application option is necessary to ensure accessibility, clients would also benefit from having a digital application option.

MULTIPLE APPROVERS

DC's voucher system has "solved" for frequent application mistakes by creating a lengthy review chain with four reviewers. Typically, a case manager, the case manager's supervisor, the PSH or TAH monitors at DHS, and the HSP team at DHS. After these four reviewers it reaches the DCHA specialist who makes an eligibility determination. This sequence can prolong the approval process, increase the chance that an application gets lost in the approval chain, and can introduce uncertainty in the review process.

Additionally, case managers expressed frustration with inconsistent application reviews. They shared that some reviewers in the approval chain interpret application requirements differently. While an application may move forward one week, an identical application may be sent back for corrections the next week, depending on who reviews. The inconsistency also means that case managers may be unclear about how to fix the errors. This back and forth can lead to longer processing times. To avoid any returned applications, case managers tend to over-include information from clients.

> **"There is no uniformity in criteria for review across DCHA and DHS. This leads to a lot of kickbacks of applications."**
> **- Case Manager**

LANGUAGE ACCESS

Applicants whose primary language is not English face an extra layer of challenges. While there is a version of the application in Spanish, case managers may not be aware that it exists. When working with non-English clients, some case managers have found they must either utilize the Language Access phone line for a translator or serve as the translator themselves. This setup typically means that the case manager or the translator relays the question in the client's language, they listen to the client's response, and then translate the response into English to write it down on the form. This process not only takes more time, but it also relies heavily on the translator's interpretation.

If the translator is not well versed in the housing voucher programs, their translations may lack the necessary nuance for clients to understand and respond appropriately. As a result, translations can vary from one translator to the next. Furthermore, there are terms that do not always easily translate for clients. For example, we heard from a Spanish-speaking case manager that "ethnicity" is difficult to explain to Spanish-speaking clients because it's not a familiar concept.

"For someone who English is not their first language...it's not a matter of literally translating. You have to be able to understand their emotions, their cultures, their particular lives."

- Case Manager

Clients want more information about voucher programs.

The District provides many voucher programs, each with numerous steps and action items for clients to act on. Clients want more information throughout the process so they can make informed decisions.

VOUCHER TYPES

DC has at least six different types of housing vouchers. Vouchers vary by funding source, where they can be used, which government agency makes referrals for them, what they provide in rental support and case management, and how to apply. Residents tend to learn about housing vouchers through word of mouth from friends and family, community organizations, and various DC Government agencies. While many clients seem to gather the basics, there is inconsistent information, confusion, and misunderstandings. Case managers shared that applicants seeking a voucher can be uncertain about the steps to secure one, how long it would take, and what factors might disqualify them.

Additionally, some clients struggle to name the type of voucher they have. Applicants may also not be sure of the supports that come with their voucher such as case management, nor understand the rules that govern their voucher type. For example, we heard in a focus group that it was not until one client tried to move outside of DC with her voucher that she learned that her move was not permitted because she holds a locally-funded voucher.

> "I know I have a TAH voucher, but what that means vs. Section 8 or PSH, I don't really understand the difference."
> - Client

INTAKE ASSESSMENT

When taking the intake assessment for the locally-funded PSH voucher program, residents may not understand how to choose a case management provider. There are over 20 providers for the PSH voucher program. Case management is partially funded through Medicaid, which requires that DHS administer an intake assessment and offer the client a choice of which provider they would like to work with. Per the Medicaid rules, DHS is not allowed to influence the client's decision. It is common for many clients, however, to ask DHS something like, "who should I choose?" Without more information about the provider's areas of expertise, location, or unique services, clients may struggle to pick a provider who could best serve their needs.

> "Appropriateness of case manager or social worker matching is important. Some clients need case management only, some have mental health needs, some have physical barriers, and some want to be independent."
> - DC Government Staff

Recognizing this, DHS gathered descriptions from providers of their services so clients would have something to reference in their decision-making process. To ensure all clients feel resourced, DHS will consider how clients access this information during the intake process.

The voucher programs run on many manual processes.

LITTLE TO NO AUTOMATED COMMUNICATIONS

Rather than automated and direct communications between DCHA and the client, case updates run between two databases and the case management provider. For example, for a client to learn they have been approved for a voucher, DCHA must update two databases—their own and DHS's with the same information. Then, the case management provider needs to check the DHS database for the status update, before they can then notify the client. While updates via case manager may serve some clients best, others may prefer direct communication from DCHA for expediency.

> **"Communication is a constant issue. We don't know what's going on once a document has been submitted and there's radio silence. You don't know who to contact. You don't know who to talk to. You can't get any answers from anyone. [The application] bounces back for a while... maybe it disappears for a month."**
>
> **- Case Manager**

DESIRE FOR ONLINE ACCOUNTS

Case managers and clients expressed frustration about not having access to status updates on their case—where their initial application is, the status of a unit inspection, processing a relocation request, or any other need for support. In focus groups, many residents and case managers asked for an online account to be able to log-in and view updates.

Without this access, many clients, case managers, and landlords have routinely found themselves calling the DCHA helpline and waiting on hold. Many expressed that they do not know who to contact to address their question or need. Recently, DCHA rolled out a landlord portal as well as a client portal. While there is more to do to make these systems robust, it's a step in the right direction towards automated updates.

> **"If there is a breakdown in the process, you really don't know who to call...you just see the same status in the portal over and over again."**
>
> **- Landlord**

The voucher programs are run by many teams who are not always in sync.

To secure a PSH or TAH voucher, a client will interact with their case management provider, DHS, DCHA, and their property management company. With a system of this size, it is inevitable that teams may lack exposure to one another. For example, DHS and DCHA staff who process voucher paperwork may only have a vague sense of what a case manager does to support a client searching for a unit, and vice versa. Without a more comprehensive view of the process, one team may assume the other is handling a step when they are not. When the client is the only one who sees the entire service process, from beginning to end, it is almost sure to produce gaps in client-centered service.

> **"DC core providers and DHS - neither one of them knows what the other is doing."**
>
> **- Client**

These challenges can surface when a client already using a voucher goes through a life change that impacts their housing needs—for example, having a child, taking in a grandparent, or encountering a health issue. Clients told us that they are not always sure who to go to—case manager, DHS, or DCHA—to communicate these changes, which sometimes means one or more entities is left out of the loop.

Potentially making things more challenging is when the client is also receiving case management support from other District programs, such as Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) services or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) from DHS. While case management can be quite beneficial, having multiple case managers can become harder to navigate for the client.

> **"It's difficult to work with a different agency and rely on one another to serve clients. It makes the process convoluted and unnecessarily complicated. It confuses residents and leaves them frustrated. Our system doesn't communicate with other agencies well."**
>
> **- DC Government Staff**

Landlords feel unsupported by DC Government.

CUMBERSOME PROCESSES

Like voucher clients, landlords are required to complete application paperwork—the Request for Tenancy Approval (RFTA) packet. Landlords often find the paperwork confusing and may become additionally confused by the different versions of the RFTA packet—one for Rapid Rehousing, one for Family Re-Housing Stabilization and one for PSH and TAH vouchers. In the case of PSH and TAH, the paper-based packet travels from landlord to case manager to DHS to DCHA. Multiple reviewers add time to the process and introduce opportunities for paperwork to get lost. Several landlords shared that they felt the review timelines were lengthy, and that each day spent waiting for approval meant a day of uncollected rent for them.

> 66 **"We have landlords who we are trying to recruit to be of service to our families, but we make it cumbersome for them... it's a lot of paperwork."**
> — **DC Government Staff**

CHANGING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Landlords find the evolving DCHA policies and DC legislation to be everchanging, unclear, and challenging to stay on top of. Landlords spoke about feeling beat down and fatigued by the changes to rent reasonableness standards, as well as rent freezes and eviction moratoriums during COVID. Another landlord mentioned a lack of clarity and communication as changes— big and small—are made.

LITTLE SUPPORT FOR CRISIS SITUATIONS

DC's housing first model means that some residents using vouchers are not yet stable in some areas of their lives and may need support with issues such as substance use, trauma, or mental health. PSH clients receive dedicated case management, but at times, this may not be enough for someone in crisis. While the vast majority of clients are stable, a crisis at home can put both a client's and their neighbors' safety at risk. Landlords shared that they are unsure how to best support their tenants in these moments.

> 66 **"I feel unsupported in addressing problems that arise with tenants who may be more likely to have mental health crises or substance abuse challenges that impact their neighbors."**
> — **Landlord**

Case manager burnout and turnover impact care for clients.

Like other jurisdictions across the United States, DC currently faces a shortage of case managers. This shortage results in higher caseloads for current voucher case managers. High caseloads, coupled with emotional stress significantly contribute to case manager burnout. Case managers emphasized the inherently demanding nature of the work and feeling overwhelmed by regularly having to triage staff shortages and provide crisis management for clients. They noted challenges in maintaining regular client visits when they were filling staffing gaps. They told us this inconsistency can hinder their ability to provide the quality attention and care they desire to offer clients and makes it harder to build client trust. From the client side, it can lead to frustration when case managers don't have the capacity to establish meaningful connections.

> "Currently I'm working four different positions for my employer, which is just insane... I can't do it. I'm racing from one fire to the next."
> — Case Manager

> "The caseworkers I got kept leaving, but when I got the right case worker - that is when everything started working.
> — Client

Opportunities

Guided by these findings, clients, case managers, landlords, and DC Government staff developed a series of ideas during four community design sessions.

Together, Resident Researchers, DCHA, DHS, and The Lab discussed and prioritized these ideas. Included here is a list of what we see as the key areas for improving voucher utilization and resident experience with voucher programs:

1. Invest in **customer service enhancements**.

2. Strengthen **crisis intervention supports.**

3. Provide additional **experiential learning opportunities** for voucher staff and case managers.

4. Increase the **pipeline of future case managers.**

5. Provide dedicated **support to private-market housing complexes** with many voucher clients.

It is important to note that these opportunities are meant to continue and complement the work DC Government is already doing.

Participant worksheets from co-design sessions

A few notes about these opportunity areas:

- Some ideas are not new. The fact that these ideas have been raised by internal and external stakeholders strengthens the argument that they are worth further attention.

- The opportunities listed are high level. There are many actionable solutions in each.

- We recognize that focusing on just one opportunity will not address all the challenges identified. At the same time, attention on one opportunity may help address more than one challenge.

Invest in customer service enhancements.

REDESIGN THE APPLICATION FORM AND PROCESS

This could look like:

- Redesigning the application form to be user-friendly and ultimately work toward a digital application process.

- Developing an operations manual that case management providers, DHS staff, and DCHA staff can reference as a single source of truth on application requirements

- Creating a template that standardizes how errors are marked so it is easy for case managers to follow what needs to be fixed and how to fix it.

- Implementing digital solutions that allow for applications to be securely submitted and tracked. Once the new application is ready to roll-out, run trainings for all staff to ensure a seamless transition.

BUILD A LOGGED-IN EXPERIENCE

Update the DCHA website to allow for a robust logged-in experience that can streamline customer service interactions. Such a tool could allow clients to securely submit applications and supporting documents, track status updates, update their information, manage communication preferences, and submit questions. It could also allow for case managers and landlords to view up-to-date and synced information about a client's case.

CREATE INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS

To address the common questions clients, case managers, and landlords have about voucher programs, develop plain language materials in multiple languages for the DCHA website and other relevant outlets. These materials could include descriptions of the types of vouchers offered in the District, FAQs, as well as user-friendly guides on how to navigate common scenarios like applying for the first time, adding a child to your voucher, moving with your voucher, and recertifying. We hope that proactively addressing questions will save time for clients and build transparency into the program.

CREATE A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN THAT INCLUDES AUTOMATED STATUS UPDATES

To guide clients through key voucher moments—application, relocation, and recertification—develop a plan that details the types of communications (e.g. email, text) that a client should receive, when they should receive it, and what it should say (e.g. approval letters and inspection updates). Build these communication moments into a customer relationship management (CRM) system to streamline and automate the communications. This will save staff time on manual actions and better ensure consistent communications from one client to the next.

Strengthen crisis intervention supports.

To better assist clients who require intensive support in times of behavioral health crisis, we could explore ways to enhance service delivery for both the DC Department of Behavioral Health's Community Response Team (CRT) and Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) program. Enhancements might be additional funding, new staff recruitment strategies, and/or changes to how services are delivered.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TEAM

CRT is currently available to all DC residents 24/7 for emergency calls that do not warrant a police response. Trained staff—typically a behavioral health worker and a peer—are deployed to the person in crisis to calm intense and escalating situations, and then find short and long-term solutions to address underlying client needs. At current staffing levels, voucher recipients, case managers, and landlords can experience more than an hour-long wait time for CRT, which make it a less effective option in a moment of crisis that requires a quick response. DBH is actively working to fully staff CRT roles.

A possible avenue is the DC Department of Behavioral Health's Peer Specialist Certificate Program, which trains self-identified consumers of behavioral health services. DBH is also looking at creating strategic outpost locations so that teams can stay dispersed across the city, rather than deploying from one central base that may or may not be close to the call for service.

This could possibly reduce wait times for all residents and make CRT a viable option for residents, case managers, and landlords.

ASSERTIVE COMMUNITY TREATMENT

ACT provides ongoing, dedicated, and intensive community-based services to adults with serious and persistent mental illnesses. ACT teams are multidisciplinary practitioners assigned to a client to help them address a wide variety of life needs (e.g. social support, therapy, medication, employment, housing, legal needs). ACT teams are available 24/7—a far more intensive degree of care than traditional PSH case management. Currently, demand for ACT teams outpaces supply. Adding more staff would allow for all voucher clients who need it, to receive an ACT team. This support could help meet the needs of the individual, while also supporting their neighbors with a more stable living environment.

Provide experiential learning opportunities for voucher staff and case managers

To build knowledge and greater respect for one another's roles, we could diversify ongoing experiential learning opportunities for DC Government staff and case managers. This could involve site visits to places like Virginia Williams or site-based voucher housing complexes—something DHS already offers staff—shadowing opportunities, and resource fairs on community benefits. These opportunities would ideally provide a more holistic and person-centered understanding of voucher programs for staff and case managers, making them better informed to support clients. Additionally, it could encourage staff to identify places for process improvement, build relationships with counterparts, and enhance empathy for the residents they serve.

OPPORTUNITY 4:

Increase the pipeline of future case managers

To combat case manager burnout and turnover, a case management internship program could expand the pipeline of candidates to staff these roles. A possible avenue is the DC Department of Behavioral Health's Peer Specialist Certificate Program, which trains self-identified consumers of behavioral health services who can support other individuals diagnosed with a mental illness and/or substance use disorder. Trainees could include current and former voucher clients who share the lived experience of housing instability. DHS case management providers could host interns for a period of hands-on experience in the hopes that an internship would be a direct step towards a case manager role.

OPPORTUNITY 5:

Provide dedicated support to private-market housing complexes with many voucher clients

To address client instability in some private-market housing complexes with high rates of voucher clients, we could consider assigning dedicated case managers. Being onsite could help case managers get to know the residents while making help more accessible for clients. This idea would be complementary to the Interagency Council on Homelessness' proposal of a new PSH model, "PSH Plus" and provide a productive alternative to eviction.

Next Steps

Together, DCHA, DHS, and the Lab have decided to focus our immediate efforts on **improving customer service** and **voucher utilization**.

Specifically, this will look like:

- Rolling out a **redesigned DCHA voucher application,** which launched on February 1st, 2024.

- Introducing and piloting complementary **process improvements** to ensure a smoother submission and review process.

- Developing and distributing **communication materials** about the voucher process and types of vouchers written from the resident perspective (e.g. FAQs, timelines/instructions, plain language explanations).

For updates on this work, follow [The Lab @ DC](#).